

**The Revolution's Echoes:  
Music and Political Culture in Conakry, Guinea**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis is an ethnographic study of music and authoritarianism in Conakry, Guinea. Representations in the scholarly and popular literature often emphasize African music as a site for resistance and oppositional politics, while musicians who support the state are seen as tools of propaganda. In this thesis, I examine instead the choices and subjectivities of musicians who sing for an authoritarian state. As I show, musicians in Conakry, across genres and generations, rarely express dissent and overwhelmingly adopt cautious and conservative positions towards the state. I describe these stances as operating within a politics of silence that has emerged over the past half-century of authoritarian rule in Guinea, deriving from norms of ambiguity and secrecy in Mande culture. I begin in Chapter One by considering the foundational moment of the Guinean Cultural Revolution to examine how music became intertwined with a political culture of control under the regime of Guinea's first president Sékou Touré. In Chapters Two, Three and Four I then investigate the legacy of the Revolution in shaping musical practice in Conakry today. My analysis is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2009, following a military coup d'état. I use the particular circumstances of the post-coup moment in 2009 as a lens through which to understand the ongoing legacy of authoritarianism on Conakry's musical and political landscape. I consider the afterlife of musical nationalism as musicians from the Revolution seek to find a place in the post-nationalist state; anxieties about praise-singing and music professionalization that have sharpened since the Revolution's end; and the politics of youth music as young people negotiate between ideals of protest and the quiet accommodation of power. As I argue, silence is a form of agency for musicians in Conakry as they attempt to negotiate the complexities of life in an authoritarian state.

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## CD Track List

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8. Alseny, Bill de Sam Alpha Wess, 'Manguè Woulefalè' (2009, Makasound)

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## Introduction

‘Bienvenue à Conakry!’ a man exclaims to me at the airport in Guinea’s capital city. A bureaucrat in a Nehru-jacket scans my passport, while a soldier with a gun leans casually against his desk. Once outside, the city’s sounds and sights come racing back to me – taxi drivers in battered cars, women in heels and stiff, shiny robes; the call to prayer from a mosque’s loud-speaker, hip-hop and sung poetry over the radio; tin shacks, markets, construction; a military road-block, a woman nursing a baby. Welcome to Conakry!

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between popular music and politics in postcolonial Conakry. Guinea’s capital is a city of two million residents, occupying a narrow, congested peninsula on the West African coast. On this small piece of land, in 1958 the Guinean nation was born. At that time, the country’s first leader, Ahmed Sékou Touré, argued successfully for full independence from France. Through the 1960s and 1970s Touré oversaw a period known as the Guinean Cultural Revolution, in which he brutally eliminated political opposition and entrenched his rule. At the same time, he created an elaborate system of state-sponsored music in which he generously supported those musicians who met his approval. In return, musicians created new forms of popular music that celebrated, and shaped, the Revolution. It is this interaction between music and politics that I explore here.

I had originally planned to research ongoing reception of nationalist music from the Touré era – the period known locally as the Revolution. As I was preparing to travel to Conakry for fieldwork, however, a coup d’état took place in Guinea in December

2008. With the death of the previous president, Lansana Conté, a military junta seized control of the country, overseeing a period of intense chaos and violence. As a result, my project quickly became overtaken by current events. In particular, I sought to understand why musicians in Conakry overwhelmingly seemed to accommodate the military junta, even as popular anger with the regime intensified.

Following contemporary cultural politics also led, however, to a new understanding of the Revolution's enduring influence in Conakry and on the city's music. As the new government sought to resurrect the cultural policies – and music – of the post-independence era, I began to see how profoundly the Touré era has shaped the musical and political landscape. This thesis thus examines the legacy of authoritarianism on popular music in Conakry, considering the ways in which musical practices intersect with a long-standing political culture of control. I consider the cultural, political and economic factors that have long led musicians in the city to accommodate a violent and repressive state, and I look at the ways in which this situation is changing in Conakry today.

### ***1. Political culture, power and voice***

This thesis is an ethnographic study of music and authoritarianism in Conakry, examining musical-political practices and subjectivities under a repressive state. Authoritarianism in postcolonial Guinea has a long history, stemming from the regime of the country's first president, Ahmed Sékou Touré. Through a twenty-six year reign, Touré installed a programme to pursue modernist reforms and entrench his absolute rule. The Revolution became a metonym for Touré's personality cult, usefully concealing the actual workings of power behind a facade of ideologically-charged symbolism and rhetoric. At the same

time, through the 1960s and 1970s, the Revolution was intertwined with a moment of musical innovation, as state-sponsored musicians experimented with new sounds and styles. Modern dance bands sang in praise of the state, recasting older forms of artistic patronage, while also creating a soundtrack for urban youth in independent Africa. As I describe in this thesis, these practices remain enormously influential in Conakry today.

The regime of Sékou Touré has at times been described as a totalitarian state (see e.g. Kaba, 1976: 202). In this thesis, however, I follow the political theorist Hannah Arendt's distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. As Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

... authority, no matter in what form, always is meant to restrict or limit freedom, but never to abolish it. Totalitarian domination, however, aims at abolishing freedom, even at eliminating human spontaneity in general, and by means at a restriction of freedom no matter how tyrannical. (1951 [2004]: 525)

While many aspects of Touré's regime could be described as totalitarian – as seeking total control over all individuals in Guinean society – other aspects were more loosely organized.<sup>1</sup> As I describe in Chapter One, popular music in Conakry provided a means for the city's population – particularly urban youth – to celebrate Guinean modernity and independence in informal and 'off-stage' settings.<sup>2</sup> Like religion, popular music both accommodated and pushed against the strictures of the regime, and was allowed to do so within certain parameters. This push-and-pull, between musicians, audiences and the

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<sup>1</sup> It should thus be noted that the two terms are somewhat overlapping. For more detailed discussion about the differences between authoritarian and totalitarian systems, see Juan J. Linz (2000) *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner. While Arendt stresses the role of state coercion in totalitarian regimes, Linz instead emphasizes the role of "an ideology, a single mass party and other mobilizational organizations, and concentrated power in an individual and his collaborators or a small group" (2000: 67). He argues that while these elements may be found separately in other nondemocratic regimes, they characterize a totalitarian system when all present.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of 'off-stage' acts is developed in James C. Scott's 1990 work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, in which he writes of the practices, actions and words that both dominant and subordinate groups undertake away from each other.

state, continues to shape musical and political culture in Conakry today, as I elaborate in the following chapters.

I use the notion of political culture here to describe not just structures and institutions, but also people's feelings, experiences and desires in relation to the exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> Like other commentators on African politics, however, I caution against understanding political culture as fixed or inevitably violent and repressive (Ferme, 2001; White, 2008). As Bob White writes in his study of dance music in Kinshasa, the question is not whether authoritarianism is grounded in African culture and tradition, but rather how one particular style of leadership becomes dominant (2008: 250). Like White, I see the study of popular music as a way to understand authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> In Conakry, music both shapes and is shaped by a political culture of control; it both amplifies and reconciles the many contradictions in the local exercise of power.

Contemporary approaches to power and its workings have been greatly influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's concept of hegemony in particular provides a model for understanding the ways in which dominated people consent to their position. As Gramsci describes, in addition to the coercive power of the state, dominant

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'political culture' has been developed by the political theorists Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) to describe public attitudes and national characteristics related to politics and governance. While this work foregrounded norms, values and attitudes, Jeffrey Olick writes that more recent approaches to the concept since the 1970s have emphasized the importance of cultural symbols and meanings, including post-structural 'practice' theories that highlight the processes through which meaning is made (2007: 302).

<sup>4</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodor Adorno also considered the links between authoritarianism and popular culture, although Adorno's work in particular was presupposed on the assumption that 'mass culture' led to political conformity. In 'On Popular Music', Adorno argues that popular music creates both rhythmical and political 'obedience' in its listeners (2002: 460), while in his later essay 'Difficulties', he contends that the "authoritarian personality" detests avant-garde music for its "deviance" and lack of conformity (ibid.: 671). In line with later critiques of Adorno's approach to popular culture, however, my aim in this thesis is to explore the ways in which popular music mediates power relations, as developed further in section three of this introduction (see e.g. Frith, 1996; Leppert, 2002).

institutions and groups in society exert power through ‘cultural hegemony’, which works as the

... spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (1971: 12)

A number of commentators have pointed out that Gramsci never offered one single definition of hegemony, as he sought to describe ever-shifting relations of power (Crehan, 2002: 101; Lears, 1985: 568). Nonetheless, hegemony has proved to be an influential idea for scholars investigating relationships of domination and consent. Raymond Williams has interpreted Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as “the whole substance of lived identities and relationships”, which comes to be seen not as the expressions of the dominant group in society but rather as “simple experience and common sense” (1977: 110). In this way, domination becomes internalized. Williams also highlights the dynamism of the concept and the spaces it allows in between, arguing that

The reality of any hegemony ... is that ... it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society ... [Thus] any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural processes must then always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony. (ibid.: 113)

In emphasizing the counter-hegemonies of dominated groups, Williams stresses that power relations are complex and changing.<sup>5</sup> Within anthropology, this idea has often

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<sup>5</sup> Sherry Ortner argues that Williams’ work undermines the possibility of resistance by reading domination as culturally-grounded and internalized (2006: 52). My own reading of Williams’ work, however, suggests

been elaborated through the notion of resistance. In the 1980s, works such as James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) and Aihwa Ong's *Spirit of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (1987) examined relations of power in which the dominated were defying their social inequality through a range of strategies. For example, Ong describes outbreaks of spirit possession in Malaysian factories as a means for female factory workers to oppose industrialization and capitalist control. Similarly, Scott describes gossip, insults and acts of "reluctant compliance" by poor farmers in rural Malaysia, as they seek ways of undermining the power of the rich (1985: 26). Studies such as these examine the 'hidden transcripts' of the dominated, "the manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript" (Scott, 1990: 136).

The notion of resistance has also been subject to critique, however. Robert Young notes that postcolonial scholars have often articulated resistance as "implicitly celebrated for its own sake" rather than for what it actually achieves (2001: 355). Moreover, the notion tends to be undefined: "Resistance has a clear function in the colonial situation, but it is not always clear in the postcolonial situation in the name of what resistance is being invoked" (ibid.). Sherry Ortner suggests that anthropological studies of resistance at times amount to a 'cultural thinning' as they ignore the in-politics of subordinated groups. Furthermore, as Ortner suggests, "[i]n a relationship of power the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power). The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about

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an active move away from deterministic concepts such as Marxist false-consciousness and superstructure, acknowledging the possibility of actual change: "Thus cultural process must not be assumed to be merely adaptive, extensive, and incorporative. Authentic breaks within and beyond it, in specific social conditions which can vary from extreme isolation to pre-revolutionary breakdowns and actual revolutionary activity, have often in fact occurred" (1977: 114).

resisting the relationship” (2006: 45). The relationship between the dominant and the dominated is therefore less clear-cut than it first appears, as both sides may find advantages to the arrangement.

As with the notion of resistance, ‘voice’ as a theoretical concept is often applied to relationships of dominance and subordination. Asking whether the subaltern can speak, for example, postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have examined how the colonial production of knowledge has prevented colonized subjects from self-representation, even amongst themselves (1988).<sup>6</sup> Building on Gramsci’s theories of power and hegemony, Spivak, Edward Said and others consider how voice and representation are used – and silenced – as a means of domination.<sup>7</sup> More recently, the postcolonial theorist Joseph Slaughter has examined the notion of voice as a metaphor in contemporary human rights law. While international human rights law originally derives from European Enlightenment thinking about the solitary and bounded individual, Slaughter argues that emphasis on voice, on one’s ability to tell one’s own story, allows a more complex understanding of social individuals:

That is, stressing the voice of the subject, positing the voice as an emblem of subjectivity, allows for a conception of human rights that does not rely upon some essential, inherent human quality. Reconceiving notions of human rights in terms of narratability offers some departure from the double bind of universalism and

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, Spivak argues that women have been excluded from both colonial and postcolonial accounts: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (1988: 28).

<sup>7</sup> Spivak, Said and Homi Bhabhi are considered the three key figures in the development of postcolonial theory, who, while drawing different emphases and influences in their work, are united by a view of culture and knowledge as instruments of power. Postcolonial theory thus “refuses to treat culture as an autonomous and politically innocent domain of social life” (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000: 5). While Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is widely regarded as the foundational work of postcolonial studies, this work has also been criticized for its emphasis on the Western production of knowledge (see e.g. Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 62). In contrast, Said’s later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, pays greater attention to non-Western sources. Here, Said is particularly interested in local affirmations and articulations of one’s own culture and history – local voice – which he calls ‘*the voyage in*’ (Said, 1993: 261; emphasis in original).

fundamentalism ... [Furthermore] As conceptions of the speaking subject change, whether over time or across cultures, so too must conceptions of human rights that guarantee the subject's ability to narrate herself. (1997: 412)

Slaughter notes that international legal instruments have evolved over time to recognize varying conceptions of the individual and society, through for example the promotion of group rights and of economic and social rights. Reading human rights as the protection of voice, Slaughter argues, allows for such dynamism: “As we better understand what a subject needs to be able to tell her story, we can evaluate entitlements and prohibitions for their effectiveness in guaranteeing the ability to self-narrate” (1997: 430).<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the study of resistance, work on voice emphasizes the consideration of subjectivity and self-representation in relationships of power. Ideological biases in favour of the dominated have often propelled resistance studies to ignore the “ambivalent complexity” of actual power relations (Ortner, 2006: 48), to assume that certain acts must constitute resistance because they are committed by the powerless. Anthropological inquiry into voice, on the other hand, allows for thicker description by foregrounding the speaking subject.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, within ethnomusicology, studies increasingly explore both the material aspects of voice and voice as a site for social identity and experience. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Slaughter's most recent work, *Human Rights, Inc.*, considers the relationship between the ‘world novel’ and international human rights law (2007). Slaughter's work is part of a growing interest in human rights within the humanities, with scholars such as Elaine Scarry (1985) examining art and culture's role in promoting, violating and increasing understanding of human rights. Similarly, within media and communications theory, scholars such as Nick Couldry are interested in voice as an integral component of human rights. Like Slaughter, Couldry defines voice as “the capacity to make, and be recognized as making, narratives about one's life” (2010: 7), a fundamental attribute of “someone's status as human” (ibid.: 100).

<sup>9</sup> Ethnographic studies, in both linguistic and socio-cultural anthropology, see voice as closely intertwined with identity, with scholars such as Charles L. Briggs and Webb Keane examining questions of collective voice as a generator of aesthetic, emotional and social power (Briggs, 1993) and the ‘clash of voices’ in moral self-formation (Keane, 2012). In a recent article on the anthropology of voice, Richard Giulianotti argues for an approach that looks beyond “vocal significations ... [to consider] the relationship of such communication to the constitution of personal and social identity within relations of power and domination” (2005: 343).

way, voice is about more than ‘telling one’s own story’, as in the work of Slaughter and others; instead, recent studies foreground vocal physicality to examine “shifting constitutions of personhood as registered in the voice” (Samuels et al., 2010: 337). In *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*, for example, Aaron Fox sees voice as embodying the ‘social poetics’ and aesthetics of everyday life in rural Texas, the “meanings running under the literal and referential surface of discourse” (2004: 29). Fox examines a range of vocal practices from speech to song to investigate how voice carries identity and ‘feeling’ not just through words but also properties such as timbre, pitch and register. Similarly, in her study of Karnatak music, Amanda Weidman considers the ways in which voice has been imagined and shaped by discourse about art and modernity (2006). Weidman suggests that ‘ideologies of voice’ in South India have led to particular aesthetics, such as the preference for ‘natural’ and female voices. Martin Stokes considers the “virtues of voice” possessed by the Turkish singer Zeki Müren (2010: 58). From the beginning of his career in the 1950s, Müren was celebrated for his clear diction and the softness and sweetness of his vocal timbre. But entangled with these properties, as Stokes argues, Müren’s voice was also seen to represent ethics and civility. Through vocal clarity and constancy, sentimentality and warmth, the singer was held to embody empathy with and consideration for others – “civic virtues” in a liberalizing state (ibid.: 63).

As these studies suggest, the socio-political aesthetics of voice is a subject of increasing interest in ethnomusicology, with scholars examining sound as well as referential meaning. Grant Olwage argues that ethnomusicology has until recently largely overlooked vocal timbre; as he argues, “we hear it – of all sonic phenomena timbre

carries the most complete information about a sound source and its location – but we have no language to describe it” (2004: 205).<sup>10</sup> Responding to this gap, Olwage examines the social history and ‘sonic identity’ of vocal timbre in South Africa, considering how nineteenth-century colonialists imagined, analysed and attempted to reform the ‘rough’, ‘coarse’ and ‘shouting’ black voice.<sup>11</sup> As he suggests, Victorian attempts to refine the black voice through choral singing were a form of musical colonialism, extending the ‘civilizing mission’ of colonial rule over African minds and bodies.<sup>12</sup>

Studies such as these cited above thus see voice not just as a metaphor for the self, but as socially mediated sound.<sup>13</sup> Building on this work, in this thesis I examine the ways in which language in Conakry, in song texts, official discourse and everyday

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Porcello argues that timbre is a particularly important feature in the sound recording process, in contrast to its relative unimportance in music scholarship:

[T]alk about popular music, especially in its sites and processes of production, is saturated with vocal descriptions and depictions of musical timbre ... [This] prominence of talk about timbre within the sound recording industry is in direct contrast to Western academic and critical discourses about music that emphasize the formal plane of music's harmonic, tonal, and rhythmic dimensions. Musicologists often characterize discussions of timbre as mere verbal imitation or impressionistic metaphor. (Feld et al, 2004: 324)

<sup>11</sup> Olwage argues that despite the efforts of Victorian voice culture, from the mid-nineteenth century to today, the timbral quality of the black South African voice has remained relatively consistent. He attributes this fact not so much to resistance but rather to the gaps in the colonial and apartheid projects. By the turn of the century,

... segregationist ideology defused any urgent need for the voice's reform that there might previously have been [and thus] the black voice was never in the thick of colonizing action ... Having no great corporeal-cultural violence perpetrated against it, we can perhaps claim that it was a voice that was never lost, has never stopped sounding. Even in a musical world so thoroughly a fact of colonialism as black choralism, there are spaces of musical action, of identity, that were not determined primarily by that encounter. (2004: 211)

<sup>12</sup> Kofi Agawu has also developed the idea of European musical colonialism in Africa, arguing that the spread of tonal harmony through the Protestant hymns of European missionaries paralleled other aspects of Europe's ‘civilizing mission’ to Africa. ‘How Europe Underdeveloped Africa’, paper delivered at Faculty of Music Research Seminar, Oxford University, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Beyond timbre and related properties, ethnomusicological inquiry into voice also considers the “‘uncanny’ nature of the recorded voice” (Stokes, 2010: 6; see also, Frith, 1996). Stokes refers to psychoanalytical approaches to the separation of voice and body in recordings. Moreover, as Martin Clayton suggests, “[l]istening to singing voices implies relationships between self and other, with the microphone and recording technology making possible a particularly intimate, if disembodied, relationship” (2008a: 4).

conversation, is marked by guardedness, contradiction and opacity; and how vocal aesthetics are shaped by notions of power and political responsibility.

My approach in this regards also builds on theoretical and ethnographic approaches to silence. Just as resistance has often been framed in opposition to domination, voice is frequently seen in opposition to silence. Much work on voice emphasizes ‘speaking out’ as the ultimate act of agency, while silence suggests coercion and censorship. Slaughter, for example, frames silence as a violation or an absence of human rights, while Spivak writes of colonized and postcolonial subjects as occupying both the margins and the “silent, silenced center” (1988: 25). The notion of silence is thus used to denote those who are un- or under-represented. Yet beyond an understanding of silence as a lack of voice and representation, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have also examined the meanings that silence conveys. As Keith Basso notes in his work on Western Apache culture, silence is often a culturally guided decision and must be interpreted as such (1970). A number of studies have looked in particular at women’s silence, building on Edwin Ardener’s discussion of ‘mutedness’. In his essays on the ‘Problem of Women’ (1975a and 1975b), Ardener argues that dominant groups define the appropriate language and means of expression, setting the expressive rules by which others find themselves bound and thus ‘muted’ or ‘inarticulate’.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Michael Herzfeld has examined the ways in which Greek women use silence as an expression of irony as well as a means of protecting themselves from social censure. While the ethnographic literature on Greece often sees women as either submissive or unnecessarily

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<sup>14</sup> Ardener stresses that ‘mutedness’ in his sense refers not simply to linguistic silence, but more broadly to the structural role of subordinate groups in relation to the dominant. As he argues, the structures of the dominant “regularly assign contending viewpoints to a non-real status; making them ‘overlooked’, ‘muted’, ‘invisible’: mere black holes in someone else’s universe” (1975b: 25).

effusive in their speech, Herzfeld explores the reasons why women may choose to say and do little in the public sphere. As he writes,

Greek village women may not only get great practical advantage from the pose of dumb subservience but may actually be enjoying a collective joke at the expense of the dominant sex. This does not appreciably better their condition – on the contrary, it confirms male prejudices – but it does afford a significantly different perspective on the exercise of domestic and communal authority. (1991: 82)

In Herzfeld's essay, silence refers to both an inarticulation and inaction that are deliberately maintained. Hélène Neveu Kringelbach makes a similar point in her work on Senegalese women's participation in *sabar* dance performance in Dakar. As she notes, women feign an "outward compliance" to norms of appropriate female behaviour, while nonetheless, participating in and playfully enjoying *sabar* parties (2007a: 251). While their behaviour during the performance transgresses social norms, "much of what goes on is never put to words" and thus the parties provide a space in which these norms can be "quietly played with" (ibid.: 267).

In studies such as these, silence, quietness and inarticulation do not simply represent the absence of words but rather form a particular response to the social circumstances, as well as a particular strategy of communication and being. Adam Jaworski suggests that we thus think of silence as a "*metaphor for communication*", one which serves a number of pragmatic and socio-cultural purposes (1997: 3; emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup>

Building on these approaches, in this thesis, I seek to elaborate ideas of social silence, quietness, caution and 'mutedness', considering them not just as a denial of voice

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<sup>15</sup> In the same volume, Maria Sifianou writes about the strategic use of silence as a form of politeness in conversational interaction, noting that the degree to which people feel "socially obliged to produce or avoid silences varies culturally, situationally and individually" (1997: 64).

but as a form of agency.<sup>16</sup> As I argue, in Conakry, the decision of musicians and others to mute their political voice, to remain silent, quiet or guarded in the face of politics, is a choice actively made in the light of prevailing cultural norms and historical circumstances. While I use the term ‘silence’ throughout this thesis, my own approach to the subject considers not just the lack of words or speech, but also expressive opacity, ambiguity and guardedness. Together, these elements form what I term a politics of silence that has long dominated musical and political culture and everyday life in Conakry. Music, official discourse and daily conversation are marked by caution and quietness, by a high degree of opacity, not just with a foreign ethnographer but even amongst friends. As I describe further below, such guardedness has roots in older cultural norms of secrecy and concealment in this part of the world. These norms were further exploited by Sékou Touré, who cultivated a climate of paranoia and suspicion in which it was often prudent to remain silent. This dynamic is changing in Conakry today as private media and the passage of time have led to a new atmosphere of public debate and discussion. Nonetheless, as I show, musicians remain extremely cautious in their lyrical practices, largely refraining from open criticism and often publicly allying themselves unswervingly in support of the state. As I argue, however, the reluctance or seeming inability to speak does not simply represent subjugation to authoritarian rule; rather such strategies form part of the creative and imaginative ways in which musicians in Conakry

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<sup>16</sup> Agency is broadly understood as the capacity to act, seen in the classic sociological distinction as existing in opposition to structure. Since the 1970s, social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu have attempted to find a synthesis between these two poles. In particular, Bourdieu’s practice theory aimed to examine the ways in which social actors interact with structures and systems. Ortner describes practice theory as the idea that “culture (in a very broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform – and usually some of each – the culture that made them” (2006: 129).

negotiate the complexities of modern political life, as I will discuss in further detail below.

## **2. *Beyond Afro-pessimism***

On a hot September afternoon in 2009, I sat wedged in a crowded taxi stuck in a typical Conakry traffic jam. The driver had long since turned off his engine and stared morosely ahead as he waited for the road to clear. Straining for space, I listened as my fellow passengers bemoaned the state of Conakry's roads, the political incompetence and lack of urban planning and the fact that the government offered no solutions or even apparent concern. As everyone voiced their anger about the intractable gridlock, seemingly a metaphor for Guinean politics, one man sighed and said, 'Ah Guinea, we're the last country in Africa.'

This statement, delivered more with resignation than bitterness, reverberated through my head for weeks. Having spent much of the previous three years researching Sékou Touré's nationalist programme – and even longer listening to the exuberant music of the period – I was aware of the high expectations that met Guinea's independence in 1958, both locally and internationally. As the second African country to achieve independence from its colonial rulers, Guinea was heralded as a leader of the continent's decolonization movement.<sup>17</sup> In early 1959, a smiling Sékou Touré appeared on the front cover of the American news magazine, *Time*, with the caption, 'Black Africa: The Dawn

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<sup>17</sup> Ghana gained its independence from Britain on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1957, at which time it changed its name from the earlier Gold Coast. Sékou Touré of Guinea maintained close relations with Ghana's first president, Kwame Anthony Nkrumah, in particular due to their shared interests in pan-Africanism. After Guinean independence, the two countries thus formed a Ghana-Guinea union, which later became the Ghana-Guinea-Mali union (Young, 2001: 241). This union is the subject of a 1962 song of the same name, by the Ghanaian high-life star E.T. Mensah.

of Self Rule'.<sup>18</sup> Yet, half a century later, the promise of the independence period has largely faded in Guinea. 'Fifty years of misery' (*cinquante ans de misère*) is a frequent comment amongst Guinean people today, referring to perceptions of political and economic failure since 1958. Friends in Conakry often dismayed that their country lags so far behind Mali and Senegal, neighbouring states that are seen to be rising as Guinea falls.<sup>19</sup> There is a prevailing sense that Guinea is not known to the outside world, that the country is missing out, that globalization and modernity are happening elsewhere, but not here.

This sense of missed opportunities is reflected in much of the broader commentary on Africa in general. Writing of the disillusionment that followed the great wave of hope triggered by African independence, for example, the cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to a condition of 'post-optimism'. Appiah's analysis centres on the second generation of African postcolonial literature. While the earlier literature, and its underlying narrative of nationalism and modernity, was fuelled by enthusiasm, subsequent political failures and violence in the newly formed states gave way to a bleaker outlook.<sup>20</sup> Writers turned against the leaders who were entrusted to modernise and develop the new nations and who instead focused their attentions on enriching themselves and entrenching their rule. Appiah thus suggests that, contrary to

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<sup>18</sup> *Time*, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1959

<sup>19</sup> While I was in the final stages of writing up this thesis in March 2012, a coup d'état took place in Mali, evoking strong parallels with Guinea's 2008 coup. As in Guinea, for example, the coup leader was an army captain, rather than a more senior officer. In Mali's case, however, the deposed president, Amadou Toumani Traoré, fled into hiding. Guinea's current president, Alpha Condé, joined in international condemnation of the coup and took an active part in regional efforts to restore democratic rule, shifting the role that Malian and Guinean leaders had held in relation to each other during my fieldwork period in 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Appiah's discussion contrasts the realism of earlier works such as Laye Camara's *L'Enfant noir* (1953) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) with the later, post-realist work of Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968). Appiah argues that realism sought to naturalize and legitimate the nationalist project, which "by 1968, had plainly failed" (1992: 150). Achebe and Ouologuem's later work thus rejects the conventions of realism as both an aesthetic and political choice.

earlier expectations, “[p]ostcoloniality has ... become a condition of pessimism” (1992: 155).

The notion of African postcolonial crisis has become hard to avoid. While Appiah describes pessimism as an act of artistic agency, most contemporary representations of Africa have focused on the political economy of failure, emphasizing the role of hegemonic forces in creating disaster.<sup>21</sup> Volumes such as *Africa in Crisis: New Challenges and Possibilities* (2002) seemingly revel in statistics of poverty, disease and war, suggesting that such problems are uniquely and inevitably African. Similarly, in *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*, the political scientist Robert H. Bates resigns himself to a continent blighted by authoritarianism and conflict. Generalizing across countries and regions, Bates paints a grim picture of 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa, one in which “Africa’s rural citizens, in search of political champions, [have] flocked about” the national elites (2008: 76). Individual subjects are altogether invisible in his analysis, as is culture, history or any local forms of knowledge. Moreover, local people form no part in finding solutions. As he writes,

Humanitarians, policymakers and scholars: Each demands to know why political order gave way to political conflict in late-century Africa. Stunned by the images and realities of political disorder, I join them in search of answers. (ibid.: 3)

As a former humanitarian worker in West Africa, I am particularly struck by this language. Through my work for the United Nations refugee agency in Guinea from 2002

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Young notes that African writers and commentators have in part contributed to this tendency. He cites the example of the Kenyan playwright and author Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who has articulated critiques of the neocolonial elite in independent Africa. Young argues, however, that while Ngugi emphasizes local forms of resistance, his accounts also reduce the possibility of African agency:

His stress on a continuing neocolonial dominance has the disadvantage of suggesting a powerlessness and passivity which underestimates what has been achieved since independence, including the independence movements themselves, perpetuating stereotypes of helplessness even while it implies sympathy, and reinforcing assumptions of western hegemony with the third world being portrayed as its homogeneous eternal victim. (2001: 48)

to 2005, I was closely connected to this paradigm, one in which solutions come from Geneva and New York rather than from local sources. Notwithstanding the sincere commitment and compassion of some of my colleagues, I came to feel that this approach was not just limited and inefficient, but ethically irresponsible. Beyond the directives of the ‘international community’, I saw that there was such a thing as local culture and understanding, that West African people have ideas about their past, present and future. In large part, this thesis thus aims to address this gap between local and foreign-led discourses and desires.

As I have described, pessimism is not a feeling unknown to Guinean people today. The challenge for the ethnographer, however, is to convey this sense without overdetermining its cause or impact. In Guinea, decades of authoritarian rule and economic crisis have not stifled the local capacity for creativity, conversation, laughter and joy. These aspects of life coexist in Conakry alongside armed soldiers, dilapidated buildings and barefoot children. Throughout my fieldwork period in 2009, as tension escalated over the military regime, everyday life continued in all its complexity. It is these everyday experiences, feelings and desires that I have sought to understand, as ordinary people in Conakry live and survive through crisis and violence.

In the recent volume, *Hard Work, Hard Times: Global Volatility and African Subjectivities*, the editors Anne-Maria Makhulu, Beth Buggenhagen and Stephen Jackson address the sense of ‘Afro-pessimism’ that has long defined scholarly and popular representations of Africa.<sup>22</sup> Rather than focusing on failed states and institutions, the

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<sup>22</sup> The term ‘Afro-pessimism’ emerged in the 1980s as a critique of the cynicism dominating representations of the continent. In response to such representations, scholars such as Richard Werbner have presented examples countering common stereotypes of African poverty, violence and corruption. Thus, in *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana*, Werbner examines Kalanga elites in Botswana

editors argue for an approach that highlights the “everyday pragmatics” and poetics of survival in hard times (2010: 5). Their work suggests a new framework for the study of Africa, one which takes “detailed account of the myriad tactics that contemporary Africans employ to carve out domains of material and existential possibility” (ibid.: 26-7). Through ethnography and thick description, the contributors examine the many and at times seemingly contradictory ways in which African people navigate their social and political worlds, as they balance their aspirations and realities. As Jackson writes in his chapter on the eastern Congo,

Neither resisting nor actively collaborating, Congolese have been obliged over the *longue durée* to collude and connive with power, forcing a smile, playing along, meanwhile vigorously pursuing other agendas. (2010: 54)

Building on this approach, I aim to explore the sense of possibility that animates the many choices and practices of musicians and audiences in Conakry. In particular, I wish to move beyond simplistic categorizations of African people as either resistance heroes or victims / agents of oppression. As Makhulu et al. argue, the social practices of African people are often deliberately polyvalent as they seek to maintain an “open stance” to the volatile world around them (2010: 8). This polyvalence must be acknowledged, even if actions sometimes run counter to liberal-progressive political sensibilities. In this thesis, I thus explore the many and sometimes contradictory ways in which Guinean people speak and act, at times distancing themselves from a violent and repressive regime, at other times actively supporting it. In presenting seemingly conflicting discourses and practices, I seek to flesh out the complex agency of Guinean people in the face of instability and

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to show how leaders strive to uphold political responsibility and the public good (2004). Moreover, Werbner seeks to foreground African voice and agency by emphasizing local public discourse – what he terms “the forum” – rather than the more common emphases on the market and the military. In contrast to his approach, however, other Africanists have defended the concept of Afro-pessimism (Rieff, 1988) or have reconceived it as ‘Afro-realism’ (Chabal, 2008).

violence. As Michael McGovern writes, if we wish to understand African people as “fully developed, three-dimensional actors, we as analysts have to take the good with the bad” (2011: 322).

Moreover, my aim is to examine such ambivalence not simply as cold, hard calculation, but also as a form of play.<sup>23</sup> Guinean people are not simply strategizing between survival and death, but rather testing the socio-political waters in imaginative ways. Thus, as I describe in the following chapters, musicians and audiences in Conakry simultaneously perform different stances as they both accommodate and push against existing structures of power. Moreover, they find pleasure in the process. As Robin Kelley argues in his study of black expressive culture in the American inner-city, social scientific studies often reduce black urban culture to a form of “compensatory behavior” (1997: 17). Black American culture is thus framed purely in reaction to racism, poverty and violence, while its aesthetics and playfulness are overlooked. Kelley argues instead that cultural tropes such as ‘the dozens’ (a form of playful insults) should be considered also as art forms, as expressions of humour and style rather than simply as coping mechanisms. Similarly, in *Real Country*, Fox writes about the ways in which working-class Texans play with song and speech, as they “delight in language for its own sake” (2004: 104). While set against a backdrop of economic insecurity and social marginality, Fox’s study foregrounds questions of style, feeling and expression to show how country music and ‘playful talk’ constitute working class identity. Through ethnographic detail, the residents of Lockhart, Texas are thus defined by their own voices, rather than by the political and economic structures around them.

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<sup>23</sup> Werbner similarly suggests such a possibility, configuring the ‘forum’ as “a process of argumentation [that] is conducted through representations, sometimes both visual and verbal, that are more or less persuasive, aesthetically more or less pleasing, even playful and fun” (2004: 204).

Within Africanist anthropology and ethnomusicology, studies have similarly considered the social poetics of pleasure in everyday life. John Blacking's work on Venda children's songs offers an early example of such a study, in which he examines genres of 'play-dances' and 'amusements' distinct from the "serious music" of adults (1967: 26). More recently, scholars show how pleasure and play are intertwined with politics, history and power. Lindiwe Dovey and Angela Impey examine the ways in which film music has conveyed both "pleasure and pain" for black South African audiences (2010: 58). Through an analysis of the 1949 film *African Jim*, the authors argue that attending the cinema was a richly enjoyable experience for audiences, particularly because the black subjects of the apartheid regime were explicitly denied pleasure: "Cinemas-going thus entailed not only inherent pleasure, but also the transgressive pleasure of *emphatically embracing pleasure* while under siege or occupation" (ibid.: 60; emphasis in original). At the same time, however, much of the music in *African Jim* evokes the hardships of apartheid, alluding to racism, hard labour and urban migration. As the authors show, black audiences watching *African Jim* would have simultaneously experienced subversive pleasure alongside the pain of political self-identification. In another study on South Africa, Louise Meintjes illustrates the ways in which aesthetics is tied up with constructions of power amongst male Zulu *ngoma* dancers. By examining humour, 'sweetness' and the aesthetic principle of *isigqi* ("It has power"), Meintjes emphasizes the interplay between artistry and the articulation of political roles in *ngoma* performance. As she argues, the aesthetics of performance must not be overlooked in our desire to understand the broader relations of power: "Even when work is politically agentive and historically contingent, there remains the challenge of

retaining in the analysis the artistry of the moving body and the presence of the singer-dancer shaping his or her expressive practice in the moment” (2004: 177).

In exploring questions and complexities of pleasure, aesthetics and play, studies such as these provide an important model for countering the discourse of Afro-pessimism without resorting to romanticized or overly optimistic accounts. As Brian Larkin argues,

Africans do not merely exist in a state of permanent crisis, the crises themselves generate modes of cultural production and forms of self-fashioning that address widespread feelings of vulnerability – sometimes proffering modes of escape, sometimes exaggerating and distorting these insecurities for dramatic effect, and sometimes ignoring insecurity altogether. In photography, fashion, music, and film, the constant invention and experimentation of urban Africans are played out in public and are as constitutive of urban experience as the forms of crisis they address. (2008: 170)

Ethnographic study of African culture reveals that African people cannot simply be reduced to long-suffering victims or survival-oriented robots in the face of ongoing crisis and violence in many parts of the continent; nor should we seek to avoid the complex realities and hardships of contemporary African life. My study of popular music in Conakry thus contributes to a growing, humanistic approach to African politics, one that emphasizes contradiction, polyvalence and play. In this regards, the notion of ‘political music’, as commonly found in the academic and popular literature, must also be interrogated.

### ***3. The politics of music***

The idea that music can and should be used as a force for progressive change has a long ideological history to it, as I outline below. At the same time, music scholars have increasingly begun to examine music’s role in conflict and violence, questioning the

prevailing preoccupation with resistance and protest. Building on new studies in this area, in this thesis I explore the feelings and experiences of musicians who accommodate a repressive authoritarian regime.

Debates about the political nature of music are found within broader and historical inquiry into politics and aesthetics. Within aesthetics, a central question is whether the value of a work of art is tied to its moral content – can an artwork be considered good if its message is bad?<sup>24</sup> This relationship between aesthetic and political values has been a central question in Marxist cultural theory. Theorists of the Frankfurt School, for example, argued that art is grounded in historical reality, whether expressed through form or direct representation.<sup>25</sup> Their debates about the possibilities of oppositional art were set against a backdrop of socialism, Nazism and the advent of the capitalist ‘culture industry’. Theodor Adorno thus distinguished between ‘serious’ music – i.e. avant-garde art music – and popular music in a capitalist system. For Adorno, mass-marketed popular music was simply a commodity sold for entertainment, while art music alone had the capacity to be political and critical.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Berys Gaut outlines three commonly held positions on this question: 1) autonomism, which holds that a work’s morality has no bearing on its aesthetic value; 2) immoralism, which sees only immoral art as aesthetically good; and 3) moralism, which sees aesthetics as inextricably tied to ethics (2002: 342).

<sup>25</sup> In the essay ‘Reconciliation under Duress’, Adorno sets out his argument with the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács over artistic realism versus formalism. Lukács was a defender of literary realism, and criticized modernist writers such as James Joyce and Franz Kafka for their emphasis on form, which he held was a distortion of reality and ‘truth’. Adorno, on the other hand, rejected realism as not only naive but “philistine and ideological” (Bloch et al. 1977: 160). As he argues, “[a]rt and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not by passively accepting objects as they come. In art knowledge is aesthetically mediated through and through” (ibid.). As Raymond Williams observes, this notion of mediation developed to counter the realist idea of art as a reflection of reality; instead, mediation describes art as “an active process ... [involving] an act of intercession, reconciliation, or interpretation between adversaries or strangers” (1977: 97).

<sup>26</sup> In his introduction to Adorno’s essays on music and mass culture, Richard Leppert notes that whether music could enact progressive change remained “an open question” for Adorno (2002: 332). Nonetheless, as Leppert continues, Adorno held a deep conviction that art music could express social suffering, while popular music was a means of distraction and disengagement.

Influenced by the Frankfurt School, Raymond Williams further developed Marxist cultural theory to elaborate questions of politics and aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Williams argued for a sociology of culture that would examine the entire process of cultural production, not just the art object but “the social conditions of the making and reception of art” (1977: 152). From here, he rejected the distinction between art and popular culture, arguing that such distinctions attempt to abstract and separate art from social process. Instead, Williams highlights contemporary study of popular culture as an exciting and fruitful direction for sociological inquiry. These ideas established the critical foundation for the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in the 1960s. In contrast to Frankfurt School theorists, proponents of the Birmingham School – also known as the British New Left – emphasized the political capacity of popular culture, foregrounding questions of resistance and agency.<sup>28</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s saw increasing interest in popular protest music in Europe and North America, in both the scholarly and popular imagination. Rock and folk music, in particular, were often connected with oppositional politics, yet as John Street argues, such genres are not inherently more political than others, but rather are constituted as such by industry, social movements and the media (2004: 448). Furthermore, music scholars have actively searched for stories of the political in popular culture. As John Shepherd notes, “[m]uch work in the sociology of music since the 1970s has argued for the oppositional potential of many genres of popular music” (2001: §8, para. 2).

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<sup>27</sup> Williams did not favour the term ‘aesthetics’, however, arguing that it suggests an abstraction of art from social experience (see e.g. 1977: 156). Nonetheless, I have used the term here to refer to the general debate in Marxist cultural theory on art and society, broadly termed as involving questions of politics and aesthetics.

<sup>28</sup> Birmingham School theorists include Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Dick Hebdige. I will consider Hall, Hebdige and Tony Jefferson’s work on British youth sub-culture, published in the volume *Resistance through Rituals* (1977), in more detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Such an approach continues to shape music scholarship today. In a recent double volume on popular music and human rights, for example, Ian Peddie stresses music's role in enacting social and political change. He writes that "in many parts of the world music is one of the few avenues of public expression, [and] is therefore a vital means through which ideas are disseminated and opposition organized" (2011a: 1). While this idea is no doubt true, the capacity for opposition is figured here as an inherent feature of music:

Unlike those politicians or statesmen who champion the goals of human rights at the same time as they undermine them, popular music has long understood that human rights, if attainable at all, involve a struggle without end ... Thankfully the right to imagine an individual will, the right to some form of self-determination, and the right to self-legislation – however difficult to imagine or enact these sentiments might be – have long been at the forefront of popular music's approach to human rights. Where music has the power to enlighten, to mobilize, and perhaps even to change there remains hope. (2011b: 2)

My argument is not that the picture Peddie depicts is unrecognizably false, but rather that such views are ideologically-driven and have come to dominate representations of music. This type of view is particularly prevalent in discussions of African music. While European and North American music journalists today often bemoan the lack of protest music at home, they celebrate the fact that "in Africa it never went away."<sup>29</sup> African music is portrayed as progressive and heroic, with figures like the Nigerian Afro-beat star Fela Anikulapo Kuti seen as embodying the hopes of a continent.<sup>30</sup> Within

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<sup>29</sup> Ally Carnwath 'How the General soundtracked the 'jasmine revolution' in Tunisia', *The Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> January 2011, accessed 6<sup>th</sup> February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jan/18/tunisia-jasmine-revolution-the-general-rap?INTCMP=SRCH>

<sup>30</sup> In fact, such portrayals are true for African art in general. As the editors of a journal of African art recently write,

One of those pertinacious claims about Contemporary African Art is that many artists of African origin navigate in and around the political, i.e. do political art. This claim is based on the idea that due to the socio-political context of political uprisings, droughts, diseases etc. within which the continent finds itself, artists cannot do art beyond the political, and are bound to interpret or comment on such issues.

The editors ask how we can understand claims such as this, and most importantly, what African artists think. *SAVVY | art.contemporary.african*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (forthcoming)

ethnomusicology, volumes such as *Sounds of Change: Social and Political Features of Music in Africa* detail the ‘symbols of resistance and alternatives’ in African music (2004). Studies often focus on oppositional elements such as veiled critique in song lyrics (Vail & White, 1997) and music as a ‘zone of poetic licence’ (Ignatowski, 2006). It must be stressed that such inquiry provides valuable insight into the processes of African music and much-needed counterweight to the many negative portrayals of Africa. Yet, at the same time, this approach only tells half the story. As Karin Barber noted in 1987, much African popular music is in fact conservative and misogynist, and scholarship needs to acknowledge this fact.

Barber continues her argument by suggesting that much conservative African music might actually have progressive or oppositional undertones (1987: 8-9). Writing almost thirty years ago, she thus ultimately affirms the scholarly preoccupation with resistance. Yet her point that we must understand music in all its complexity is an important one. This view is reflected in recent ethnomusicological approaches that pursue a less idealistic view of music, in Africa and elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> As Marcello Sorce Keller argues, “[p]recisely because it catalyzes and amplifies emotions more than other artistic endeavors, music easily becomes divisive, discriminating, a potentially belligerent symbol of oversimplified, one-piece identities which, the less they allow nuances, the

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that such an approach is not entirely new, however. Writing in 1974, Maurice Bloch argued that song often serves as a means of social control. Citing the example of Merina circumcision ceremonies in Madagascar, Bloch notes that song, dance and language are used in restrictive ways to ensure individual participation within the work of the group. Thus unison singing allows no room for individual variation or creativity, but rather imposes a unitary structure and formula that everyone must follow. He acknowledges that his treatment “seems to go against a generally accepted view of art as a kind of super-communication, a supreme occasion for creativity. By contrast I am arguing that art is, in fact, an inferior form of communication” (1974: 72). More recently, Thomas Turino makes a similar point in specific relation to communal singing, noting that in Nazi Germany amateur choruses and other groups used singing to “create a sense of German community and as a way to implant Nazi ideology in people’s minds through ceaseless repetition” (2008: 209).

more they are prone to conflict” (2007: 113). At the same time, he acknowledges that “these two implicit and widely held misconceptions about music, a) that it is a universal language, and b) that it fosters feelings of human brotherhood, are quite hard to die” (ibid.: 114).

A number of recent studies have sought to overcome these biases by examining the role of music in war, violence and conflict. For example, John M. O’Connell and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco’s recently edited volume, *Music and Conflict*, presents case studies in which music both creates and resolves conflicts. Jane Sugarman’s contribution describes the role of music in the Kosova war, in which musicians vacillated in their sung support for and against the conflict. Thus, within the space of six months in 1998, the ethnic Albanian pop star Adelina Ismajli sang both for peace, in a recording commissioned by the ruling political party, and militantly against it. As Sugarman argues, through nationalist imagery and allusions to a mythic past, pro-war songs such as Ismajli’s served to create a sense of purpose and “self-worth” amongst Albanian Kosovars, while actively encouraging violent conflict (2010: 35). Similarly, Jonathan Pieslak’s research on music and the Iraq war examines the ways in which songs have “an intimate relationship with [American] soldiers as an inspiration for combat” and as a tactic for psychological warfare (2007: 125).

Nonetheless, work in this area frequently tends to emphasize the ways in which music is “often *used by* hegemonic bodies to disguise the tragedy of violence and the imbalance of power in discordant contexts” (O’Connell, 2011: 117; emphasis added). How then can we understand the musicians who create such music? Are they necessarily victims or collaborators? O’Connell suggests that more research is needed here, “with consideration

of musicians who serve as the tools of propaganda” (2010: 11). Once again, however, the emphasis is on the instrumentality of such musicians, rather than their agency. In contrast, my concern in this thesis is on the choices and subjectivities of musicians who support a violent and repressive regime. As I argue, musicians in Conakry are not coerced into supporting authoritarian rule, but rather, choose to do so based on a number of cultural, political and economic factors.

Within Africanist ethnomusicology, important studies have examined the relationship between musicians and the state, focusing in particular on musical nationalism (Turino, 2000), cultural policy (Askew, 2002) and protest (Veal, 2000). Researchers increasingly seek to flesh out the complexity of this relationship and the many varieties that it may take. As Birgit Englert notes, in many cases it is

... the same musicians who write political praise songs at one occasion and songs in which they criticise aspects of the political system or attitudes of the elites at another, thus making it difficult for the critic to upkeep neat categorisations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ musicians in the sense of ‘critical’ and ‘uncritical’ or even ‘pro-establishment’. (2008: 10)<sup>32</sup>

Englert argues that scholarly and popular preoccupation with ‘political’ African musicians leads to the desire to classify musicians as either heroes or collaborators / victims. Research must instead investigate the motivations and desires of musicians, rather than making assumptions about their political stance, and must consider the various forms of agency that they express.

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<sup>32</sup> Veal makes such an observation in his ethnography of the Nigerian Afro-beat star Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who early in his career sang a praise-song to the regime in an attempt to secure patronage (2000: 68). Similarly, in a recent study on music and politics in Cameroon, Francis Nyamnjoh and Jude Fokwang cite the example of Lapiro de Mbanga, a popular Cameroonian musician and vocal critic of the regime of President Paul Biya. As the authors note, Lapiro was accused by many supporters in the early 1990s of accepting a bribe from the authorities and of softening his criticism (2005: 271-2).

Bob White's ethnography of dance music in Kinshasa provides an example of such a study. In *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire*, White examines the relationship between popular music and the exercise of power under the former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Rather than framing music simply in response to the state, however, White argues that popular music is a "mediating force" between city dwellers in Kinshasa and the political elites (2008: 24). Yet, while describing the creativity and innovation of musicians in face of political and economic constraints, White is careful not to romanticize the situation. He notes that, while songs at times use love as a critical metaphor, such contestation

... may satisfy the intellectual's vicarious need for resistance [but] does very little to change a system of authoritarian rule. On the contrary, it may simply reinforce the system, especially in cases such as Zaire, where the state proved effective at keeping resistance in the realm of the unspeakable and unsaid. (2008: 226)

White's study provides a model of ethnographic complexity, presenting lived experiences under corruption and dictatorship. As he asks,

... how can we write about the relationship between politics and popular culture without reproducing a narrative that ends up blaming the victim? How can we ensure that the stories we tell reflect the complexity and dignity of a nation of people who never asked to be governed by a dictator? (2008: 228)

The answer for White lies in exploring the entanglement of politics and music in Kinshasa without imposing a master narrative of resistance or defeat. Similarly, in this thesis I aim to show the many, and at times conflicting, desires, aspirations and expectations facing musicians and audiences in Conakry.

#### 4. *Guinea and the Mande world*

Arriving in Conakry for the first time in 2002, I was hungry for information about my new home. My *Rough Guide to West Africa* contained only one picture of Guinea – a distant aerial shot of Mont Nimba in the south-western forest region – in contrast to the pages of photographs from neighbouring countries. Guinean people, culture and history seemed almost impossibly unknowable to me at the time, feeding my curiosity to learn more.

The lack of knowledge about Guinea outside its borders is striking. As one friend in Conakry told me, “When I go to France, people have heard of Mali, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, but nobody knows about Guinea.”<sup>33</sup> McGovern observes that it is “one of the least well-known countries on the African continent” (2004: 52). Jon Woronoff attributes this obscurity to a broader shadowiness in Africa in general:

... it is sometimes hard to know just what has happened in Africa. Much of it is obscure to begin with, the worst parts even being kept secret (and in Guinea not all the secrets have been revealed). (2005: xi)<sup>34</sup>

Moving beyond Woronoff’s hints at a heart of darkness, most commentators would agree that Guinea has been isolated for much of its postcolonial history. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter One, the Touré era was marked by secrecy and paranoia, as the regime sought to maintain control over its population. Research was difficult for both local and foreign scholars as Touré tightly regulated access to information, yet over the past two decades this climate has greatly improved (Conrad, 1993: 369). Since Touré’s

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<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Lama Barry, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

<sup>34</sup> In an earlier edition of the same volume, Woronoff noted the dramatic pace of isolation in the two decades since Guinean independence:

Few African countries entered independent nationhood with such great promise as Guinea, and few leaders aroused an enthusiasm as great and wide-spread as Sékou Touré ... [But] Guinea has ceased being a model and become a backwater ... What then has been happening in one of Africa’s once best-known countries ...? (1978: vii)

death in 1984, restrictions on visas and research permits have been eased and a new body of scholarship on the country is emerging. Much of this work has focused on Touré and the post-independence period, including important monographs on religious iconoclasm in the coastal region (Sarró: 2009); nationalist theatre and dance during the Revolution (Straker, 2009b); and the role of the Cold War in Guinean decolonization (Schmidt, 2007). The former French Ambassador to Guinea, André Lewin, has published an exhaustive eight-volume biography of Touré (2009-11), while an edited volume on Guinean independence recently coincided with the country's fiftieth anniversary (Goerg et al., 2010). The work of the political anthropologist Michael McGovern stands out as particularly insightful within this growing corpus, combining historical and political analyses with detailed ethnographic research to examine postcolonial Guinean politics and society from the bottom-up (2004; 2007; 2010).

Anthropologists such as McGovern and Ramon Sarró have paid close attention to the role of performance and aesthetics in shaping local and national identities in Guinea. Much of this work has focused on Islamic and modernist reforms undertaken from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries in an attempt to stamp out ethnic difference. These studies highlight the tensions between ethnic groups in Guinea's peripheral zones, namely the coastal and forest regions, and the dominant Mande culture and ethnicity. Guinea is composed of more than two dozen ethnic groups, of which the three largest are those comprising Fulbe (Fr. Peul), Maninka (Fr. Malinké) and Susu people (Fr. Soussou). Despite the country's enormous linguistic and cultural diversity, however, Mande culture occupies a central place in the national consciousness. While this thesis does not represent an ethnography of Mande music, my research nonetheless foregrounds Mande

culture because of its influence on musical and political life in Conakry. I thus build on a number of key areas in the literature on Mande.

In contrast to the relative lack of research on Guinea, scholarship on the broader Mande world is extensive and well-established. The term Mande refers to both a pre-colonial West African empire and its modern-day descendants, spanning from Mali in the north to Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire in the east, through Guinea and up to Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and the Gambia in the west. This region includes the northern Mandekan group of languages such as Maninka (north-east Guinea and western Mali), Mandinka (eastern Senegal and Gambia, and north-west Guinea), Bamana (central Mali) and Susu (south-west Guinea, including Conakry).<sup>35</sup> In this thesis, reflecting common usage in Conakry, I use the term 'Mande' to refer to Maninka and Mandinka people, while the Susu ethnic group – predominant in Conakry and its surrounding region – is identified separately.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted, however, that Susu music, language and culture share a closely intertwined history and many key features with Maninka / Mandinka culture, including musical instruments and rhythms and social norms, as I will discuss further below.

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<sup>35</sup> Eric Charry notes that the term Mandekan is not indigenous but was introduced by the linguist, Charles Bird, who created the term by combining *Mande* with *kan* (language) (2000: 16).

<sup>36</sup> The vast majority of Mande people in Conakry are Maninka speakers, with Mandinka speakers representing a much smaller group. Besides linguistic differences, however, little separates these two groups within the city. My own experiences studying music and conducting research with both Maninka and Mandinka speakers revealed that in Conakry the two generally regard themselves as members of the same group, while Susu, Fulbe and other ethnic groups are considered separate and distinct.



Fig. 1 Map of West Africa<sup>37</sup>

The Mande Empire is said to have been founded by Sunjata Keita,<sup>38</sup> a thirteenth century hero who defeated Soumaoro Kanté, the leader of the neighbouring Susu kingdom, at the Battle of Kirina in 1235. According to epic history, Soumaoro possessed a magical *bala* (xylophone) that was the source of his power. Sunjata's *jeli* (griot), Bala Faséké Kouyaté, gained control of this instrument and bewitched Soumaoro with his playing, thus paving the way for Sunjata's victory. Sunjata became the first ruler of the Mande Empire, a powerful and prosperous entity that dominated West Africa until the seventeenth century.

The Sunjata epic has been passed down through oral literature and song for centuries, with two Guinean authors more recently contributing influential written versions.<sup>39</sup> As Eric Charry argues, the epic's role in shaping "modern Maninka identity

<sup>37</sup> <http://users.skynet.be/sb288188/mamady/FrameContentMogobalu.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Alternative spellings commonly found in the literature include Sundiata, Soundiata and Soundjata, while John Williams Johnson writes the name as Son-Jara (2003).

<sup>39</sup> These versions are Laye Camara's *Kouma Lafôlô Kouma: Le Maître de la Parole* (1978) and Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1965). Another well-known version was recited in 1968 by the Malian *jeli* (griot) Fa-Digi Sisòkò and recorded by Charles Bird. The published version was translated and analysed by John Williams Johnson, who writes that the recording covers more than four hours of recitation (2003: xii).

and the national identities of Mali and Guinea cannot be overestimated” (2000: 41). During my fieldwork in Conakry, I heard countless musical renditions of the Sunjata epic, attended a play based on the story and encountered innumerable references to it in daily conversation. Mande friends discussed the Battle of Kirina as if recounting current events, or the efficacy of Sunjata in relation to contemporary Guinean leaders. One young Susu friend told me of the ongoing proscriptions on the *bala* based on its magical origins, explaining that, “you see, history continues.”<sup>40</sup> References such as these point to a deep historical consciousness amongst Mandekan people, rooted in the founding of the Mande Empire and the tales of legend. Furthermore, for many Guineans who came of age during the Touré era, Mande culture is linked to a broader national identity as Touré borrowed heavily from Mande traditions in crafting a new national culture for the postcolonial era. While ethnic identities have become more distinctly articulated since Touré’s death, Mande culture and the Sunjata epic continue to dominate national cultural representations and, as such, are central to my discussion in this thesis.

Within anthropology, study of the Mande world has focused particularly on social organization and the inter-dependence of two major groups: *horonnu* (nobles; Mn. sing. *horon*) and *nyamakalalu* (artisans; Mn. sing. *nyamakala*). A third group, *jon* (slaves, Mn.), has also been identified, but the literature has largely focused on relations between the first two. *Horonnu* are freeborn people, with the root *horon* literally meaning ‘free’, whereas *nyamakalalu* are the marked category, sometimes referred to as the “casted members of society” (Johnson, 1999: 10). *Nyamakalalu* are further divided into four sub-groups: *numu* (blacksmiths), *garanke* (leather-workers), *fina* (Islamic public speakers) and *jelilu* (griots; Mn. sing. *jeli*). These sub-groups all have mastery of highly specialized

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<sup>40</sup> Conversation with Cheick Alpha ‘Alfred’ Cole, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2009

forms of knowledge and thus hold a degree of social power to counterbalance the political prestige and wealth of the *horonnu*. Much of the anthropological literature on Mande culture centres on these dynamics of power between *nyamakalalu* and *horonnu*, emphasizing the inter-dependence between groups as artisans rely on nobles for patronage while nobles simultaneously fear and disdain artisans. Patrick McNaughton's 1988 ethnography, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power and Art in West Africa*, details the notion of *nyama*, an ambiguous term suggesting power and potentially dangerous forces. As McNaughton argues, *nyama* is at the root of Mande sociality, as groups interact so as to maintain social balance. Blacksmiths, with their mastery of the dangerous forces found in iron, sculpture and heat, serve as intermediaries between people, and between society and the wild forces of nature.

Closely associated with the question of power is that of secrecy, a key issue in the anthropology of Mande and the wider cultural and geographic region. In *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the Everyday*, Mariane Ferme examines norms of secrecy and ambiguity amongst Mende people of south-eastern Sierra Leone, a southern Mande language group. As Ferme argues, Mende social and political life is shaped by a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in which meanings and practices are left intentionally ambivalent so as not to disclose knowledge and the source of power (2001: 7). Secrecy serves as an important means by which politics is mediated, yet Ferme also stresses that these norms are not fixed. While older ethnographies of the region tend to present a picture of stable and unchanging social life, Ferme argues that social norms and meanings are contingent on the prevailing historical and political circumstances. Building on these

ideas, in this thesis I examine secrecy and the politics of silence and guardedness in Conakry as dynamic forces in a rapidly changing environment.

Within ethnomusicology, there is growing interest on music in the Mande world. Eric Charry's *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (2000) offers meticulously detailed analysis of four genres of Mande music: *donso fòli* (hunter's music), *jembe fòli* (drumming), *jeliya* (the music and verbal artistry of the *jelilu* or Mande griots) and modern electric dance music. Other studies include Lucy Durán's work on Malian *jeliya* and in particular the art and social role of the *jelimuso*, or female *jeli* (2007; 2000); Ryan Skinner's work on popular music in Bamako (2009; 2010); and Rainer Polak's work on *jembe* drumming (2006). The journalist and musician Banning Eyre provides a lively account of Mande guitar music in Bamako, in his 2000 book *In Griot Time*. A number of commentators have also considered the role of Mande music in shaping national cultural representations in post-independence Guinea (Cohen, 2012; Harrev, 1992; Nesbitt, 2001). In Chapter Three of this thesis, I will examine more closely the role of the Mande griot or *jeli*, in the literature and in Conakry's musical-political landscape.

Richard Shain has recently noted that “[r]esearch on Guinean popular music unfortunately is rare” (2011: 151 n. viii). Within the existing literature, however, important studies have examined the electric dance bands of post-independence Guinea (Charry, 2000; Counsel, 2006) while the former Guinean Minister of Culture has recently co-authored a book on the band Bembeya Jazz (Keita & Morel, 2012). These studies offer valuable insight into the musical and political worlds that artists in Conakry inhabit, with particular emphasis on patronage in the Touré era. This thesis builds on this research

by considering the enduring impact of the Revolution's model of culture in Conakry today.

### ***5. Methods and moralities***

In the spring of 2009, I embarked on fieldwork in Conakry with a set of questions and concerns about the Guinean past, concerns that were fundamentally altered by political and musical events over the ensuing months. Like many ethnographers, I found myself having to reframe the parameters of my study as I learned more about contemporary realities in my field site. In Conakry, the brief yet violent trajectory of the ruling military junta from saviours to villains often dominated music and conversations, as musicians vied for state patronage and as the population as a whole wondered where the country was heading. While I had set out to study the continuing reception of nationalist music from the Touré era, it became increasingly clear that the relationship between musicians and the state had not ended with Touré's death. Rather, music and politics were clearly still entangled in fascinating – and confusing – ways.

In large part, my earlier concerns were shaped by an ideological bias towards politically oppositional music as I sought to explore possible subversive messages or interpretations in nationalist music. Thus, as I reframed my study in response to the military coup, I actively searched for protest musicians. When I realized over time that few protest songs existed, I looked instead for hidden metaphorical critiques, certain that they represented the 'true' meaning of songs and intentions of musicians. After months of research, however, I began to see that while such subtle critiques did at times appear, far more common was relatively straight-forward praise for the regime. As I will describe in this thesis, praise-singing dominates the musical landscape in Conakry, across genres and

generations. Yet this realization represented a methodological and ideological crisis for me. How could I reconcile this seeming propaganda with my own desires for resistance and change? How could my musician friends be complicit in the regime's violence, or at best, complacent in their silence? And was my role simply to observe, or could I speak out about my own views?

This thesis stems from a long process of discovery, disillusionment and subsequent understanding as I sought to comprehend why Guinean musicians sing in support of an authoritarian state. In his research in rural Texas, Fox writes of his sense of alienation from his musician friends as they supported a war that he was actively campaigning against. Ideological differences over the first Gulf War signified to Fox a deeper division based on his own liberal, middle-class identity and the identity of his interlocutors. Fox describes this cultural conflict as “one of the major pitfalls of doing anthropological research in one's own society” (2004: 53). This scenario was all too familiar to me, however, as I experienced a similar crisis in Conakry as my friends reacted ambivalently to a brutal regime. Yet ultimately this cynicism led to what I hope is a more humanistic approach, as I began to see musicians and audiences in Conakry as complex beings rather than simple caricatures.

In a recent article, Michael Carrithers writes of anthropology as a “moral science of possibilities” (2005). Carrithers argues that cultural relativism, a foundational tenet of anthropological method and theory, is not synonymous with moral relativism. While ethnography does entail the loss of a degree of moral certainty, ethnographers do not simply relinquish their beliefs or values upon entering fieldwork. Instead, as Carrithers argues, anthropology requires another position: an aim to interpret culture ‘charitably’, to

acknowledge that there may be many possible causes, ideas or outcomes surrounding a given situation. This is not to say that anthropology exists in a ‘moral vacuum’, but rather that it requires from the outset a “sympathetic forbearance, the ability to enter into another person’s situation imaginatively without necessarily sharing the other’s values or cosmology” (2005: 438). It is this sense – this “basic moral aesthetic”, as Carrithers terms it – that in my own fieldwork pushed me to try to understand the dynamics at play, rather than rushing to judgment. As Signe Howell writes,

In our fieldwork it is at times difficult to avoid taking a moral stand. Our deeply felt sense of right and wrong is put severely to the test when we observe socially sanctioned physical violence, or manifestations of exploitative relationships between unequal social persons, such as between parents and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor, masters and servants, nobles and commoners, etc. Anthropologists can easily find themselves in situations where their disinterested role is severely challenged. This, in turn, may result in a reluctance towards conducting a disinterested analysis of the moral system in question on a par with an analysis of the kinship system, exchange relations or any of the more traditional anthropological themes. However, in my view, this ought to act as a spur to investigation, reflexivity and interpretation, not as a damper.” (1997: 10)

Building on the approach of Carrithers and Howell, I have taken my own initial moral anxiety as a launching point for deeper inquiry into music and politics in Conakry.

Moving beyond earlier disillusionment and ideological biases, I have sought to understand local perspectives on authoritarian rule, protest and praise. In doing so, I examine in this thesis not just the words people say and sing, but also unspoken behaviours, sound, performance, style, silence and play.

My aim here is not to attempt to outline a theory of Guinean morality that ‘explains’ why people support an authoritarian regime. Rather, I explore the multiple and seemingly conflicting practices and discourses of musicians and audiences in a volatile and at times violent context. Jarret Zigon argues that the idea of moral relativism, as

developed in anthropology by Raymond Firth, has traditionally led ethnographers to see morality, like culture, as a bounded and stable set of principles within a given society.<sup>41</sup> Instead, Zigon suggests that we conceive of morality as a social practice, “the acquired attitudes, emotions and bodily dispositions of a person throughout their life” (2008: 17). We can thus speak of ‘moralities’, which are constantly being contested and reshaped.

These ideas refute both the notion that there is such a thing as a universal morality and that morality is fixed and stable in any society. Carrithers contends instead that all people have a moral agency. This notion does not suggest “a ‘great-individual’ theory of change but rather a theory which attempts to reflect the ceaseless action and reaction of people upon each other and so to match more closely our actual experience of the world” (2005: 440).

In my own fieldwork, as I sought to overcome both my ideological biases in favour of protest music and my cynicism at the practices of my musician friends, I decided to study what was *actually* happening in Conakry, rather than what I wanted to happen. I thus tried to explore the city with open eyes and ears, and in the process came to find many, overlapping musical worlds and genres. This thesis is framed around three of those genres: the music of the Touré-era electric dance bands, contemporary *jeli* pop and a new urban traditional genre mainly performed by people of Susu ethnicity. Before concluding

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<sup>41</sup> Zigon quotes the following passage from Raymond Firth’s *Elements of Social Organization* (1951):  
Morality is a set of principles on which [judgments of right and wrong] are based. Looked at empirically from the sociological point of view, morality is socially specific in the first instance. Every society has its own moral rules about what kinds of conduct are right and what are wrong, and members of society conform to them or evade them, and pass judgement accordingly” (quoted in 2008: 6).

More recently, William Talbott has conflated the notions of cultural and moral relativism, describing the former as “the position that moral norms apply only to those whose cultures endorse them” (2005: 39).

this section, a few more words should be said about these choices and the particular methods I used.

First of all, in focusing on these genres, I have had to overlook other popular forms of music, including hip-hop, reggae, and dance and drumming groups known locally as *ballets*. Most of these genres share the practices – and in many cases, the musicians – that I discuss in this thesis. Nonetheless, I have focused on three neo-traditional genres that are related to *jeliya* (the art of the Mande *jelilu*) to different degrees. As I argue, *jeliya* exerts a great deal of influence over musical-political practices in postcolonial Conakry, and I have thus structured my study to explore this connection. Furthermore, it should be noted that these generic distinctions are in fact greatly blurred. As an urban ethnography, this thesis examines music in a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic city in which musical traditions are constantly in play with one another. As Martin Stokes notes, in such an environment, it “makes little sense to look at a particular musical genre in isolation”, both because such an approach reinforces ideological divisions and because it obscures the professional realities of urban musicians themselves (1992: 5). I have tried here to show the interplay between musicians and musical genres, while avoiding as much as possible the anthropological “impulse to categorize” (White, 2008: 29). In this regards, the terms ‘popular’, ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ do not serve as boundary markers. While earlier scholarship on African music firmly categorized between tradition and modernity, more recent approaches acknowledge that most African music in fact overlaps both (see e.g. Barber, 1997; Monson, 2000). Nonetheless, as I describe here, the revolutionary lexicon of Touré’s Guinea often evoked these categories and thus they continue to be commonly heard today. In this thesis, I use them as supplementary references,

included largely to reflect common usage amongst musicians, audiences and state officials in Conakry.

Focused on Conakry, my ethnography firmly foregrounds the Guinean state and its ongoing role in musical and political life in the city. Ethnographic studies of Africa increasingly look beyond the nation-state to study cosmopolitanism, transnational flows and non-state actors and identities (see e.g. Feld, 2012; Kapchan, 2007; Monson, 2000; Piot, 2010; Turino, 2000; White, 2002). Charles Piot has recently argued that the state has receded from public life in Africa, while ‘gray zones’ are growing outside of state control. Institutions such as churches, NGOs and international agencies increasingly represent the power brokers in such areas, as Piot suggests, “deciding who to support and who not to support, and thus where to draw the line between life and death” (2010: 12). In Conakry, as I describe in this thesis, new forces and affiliations are similarly vying for public influence, including the increasing circulation of music, people and ideas between Guinea and the diaspora. Nonetheless, the enduring legacy of Touré’s Revolution and the presence of the military regime in 2009 meant that, through my fieldwork period, the state continued to exert an outsize influence on daily life. In contrast to Piot’s argument, the examples I describe in this thesis suggest that we cannot yet do away with or underestimate the state in our analyses. At the same time, however, I am primarily interested in the subjectivities and strategies of musicians and audiences in relation to state power, considering the voice and agency of these actors as they interact with authoritarianism.

My research is primarily based on seven months of fieldwork conducted in Conakry in 2009. My methods included historical research in the national archives, where

I reviewed government reports, newspapers and magazines from the 1960s and 1970s. I also conducted formal and informal interviews with musicians across different genres, audiences and music fans, and cultural administrators in Conakry. Some of these interviews were conducted in French, others in Susu, Maninka or Mandinka, most often with the help of a translator as I attempted to traverse between four or five languages.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, through much of this process, the politics of guardedness that I describe in this thesis made itself apparent, as questions were often unanswered or answers left deliberately opaque. Fieldworkers are often confronted with such ‘ethnographic silence’ in their research and must seek their own means of interpretation and analysis in the face of unwillingness to talk. As Herzfeld notes, “[a]bsences are harder to interpret than presences” (1991: 81). Thus participant observation provided an invaluable means for me to look beyond words and silences to try to gain a deeper sense of local meanings, intentions and aspirations, particularly at moments of great political and emotional sensitivity, as I describe here.

Finally, I will briefly outline the structure of this thesis. In the following chapters, I explore the many contradictions, ambiguities and silences in Conakry’s musical and political landscape to examine the relationship between authoritarianism and musical agency. I begin in Chapter One by considering music and politics in the city during

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<sup>42</sup> While I primarily studied Maninka, both in Conakry and London, my interlocutors in Conakry often spoke in Susu or Mandinka and sometimes Fulbe. Most commonly, people in Conakry switch fluidly and constantly between languages, depending on the circumstances. Thus, the family of M’Bady Kouyaté, with whom I studied music and lived for a period (see Chapter Three), are Mandinka speakers who often converse amongst themselves or with their neighbours in the Fulbe language. Originating from Koundara, a predominantly Fulbe region in northwestern Guinea, the family have intermarried with Fulbe people and now live in a Fulbe neighbourhood in Conakry. Thus, M’Bady’s grandson, my *kora* teacher Demba Diallo, is the son of a Fulbe man and a Mandinka woman. As a *kora fòla* (kora player), Demba firmly identifies himself as a practitioner of Mande music and culture, yet often speaks in Fulbe with family and friends.

Touré's Revolution. I consider the role of the city in the creation of a revolutionary music for the new nation, exploring how Touré sought to unify and 'rationalise' musical and cultural practice. I examine the ways in which language was brought within the Revolution's aims through regulation of song lyrics, official political speech and everyday language. I then look more closely at the ways in which musicians in the new national dance bands responded to the requirements imposed on them, with particular attention to Guinea's involvement in the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival. Through their practices and stances, I examine the ways in which popular musicians accommodated and pushed against the strictures of the Revolution, shaping the politics of silence.

Having examined the foundational historical moment of Touré's Revolution, I then turn in Chapters Two, Three and Four to consider the Revolution's enduring legacy for musicians, audiences and the state in Conakry today. As I describe, the particular circumstances of military rule in 2009 provide a means for understanding the overlapping continuities and discontinuities of the Revolution today. My analysis here focuses on three genres of popular music. In Chapter Two, I revisit the Touré-era national dance bands, considering their place in the popular and official imagination in Conakry today. I look at the ways in which the new military regime in 2009 attempted to appropriate the music of these dance bands and how musicians responded. Much of this discussion centres on Guinea's participation in the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival, held in 2009. I also consider the place of the Touré-era dance bands in world music discourse, examining how musicians respond to the expectations of world music commentators and

decision-makers. My discussion throughout this chapter explores memories of the Revolution today, looking at the growing discussion in Conakry about Touré's legacy.

In Chapter Three, I consider in more detail the practice of singing for the state, examining how this practice and its surrounding tensions were magnified by the military coup. My focus in this chapter is on the art of the Mande *jelilu* or griots and on their historical and contemporary role as praise-singers. I examine the debates and moral anxieties about praise-singing, both during the Revolution and today, paying particular attention to questions of money and fame. This discussion is contextualized within a broader discussion of stardom and the professionalization of music in Conakry today. I consider how, despite the anxieties commonly expressed about praise-singing, audiences and patrons enthusiastically participate in and derive great pleasure from praise performance. I also consider how praise-singing is a pleasurable act for musicians, as well as a performance of an ideal for all participants involved.

In Chapter Four, I then return to the question of guardedness and silence. I begin with a discussion of the role of Guinean youth in Touré's Revolution. Considering musical responses to political violence in 2009, I then examine how young musicians in Conakry position themselves in relation to politics and the state, and how through their speech, song and style they express and play with different types of politics. I focus in particular on a new genre of urban traditional Susu music in Conakry. I compare the musical and political stances of young musicians in Conakry with those in the Guinean diaspora in Paris, considering how both face and respond to expectations from local and world music audiences and commentators. I also consider how the politics of silence is beginning to change in Conakry today as new voices are being heard in the public sphere.

Throughout this thesis, my aim is to explore the choices that musicians make and the various strategies they pursue by maintaining silence in the face of state violence and authoritarianism. As I describe, the politics of popular music in Conakry is one of caution, quietness and accommodation, continually shaped by musicians as they negotiate the legacy of authoritarianism and the ongoing volatility of the present moment. Building on research and ideas in anthropology, ethnomusicology and political theory, in this thesis I seek above all to illustrate the complexity of music and political culture in Conakry, the knotty subjectivities and strategies of musicians and others in a highly precarious yet vibrant place.

## Chapter One

### Agents of the Revolution

“Touré was a passionate lover of his people’s culture, but could also be a paranoid tyrant. Guinea was a beautiful and terrifying place.”

- Hugh Masekela, *Still Grazing*

#### *Introduction*

In January 1959, the Republic of Guinea appointed a national dance band. Composed of more than a dozen musicians, the Syli Orchestre National was charged with creating popular and distinctively local dance music for the new nation. Less than four months after Guinea had won its independence from France, the country’s president Sékou Touré emphasized music and performance as key sites for nation-building. Over the next two decades, Touré embarked on an ambitious programme of musical nationalism to create new forms, referencing both the modern era and the Guinean past. With its adaptations of older practices to a modern nationalist context, the Syli Orchestre National set a model for the intersection of music and politics under Touré’s Revolution.

In this chapter, I will consider the development of ‘revolutionary’ popular music in post-independence Conakry. State-sponsored music was closely intertwined with a political culture of control under the Revolution, one in which the regime sought to regulate music while also depending on it for legitimacy. As Marcello Sorce Keller notes, music is particularly well suited to ideological purpose because of its “uncanny potential to attract, catch and collect symbolic meanings of various kinds in a magnet-like fashion” (2007: 93). Sorce Keller argues that music has had “extraordinary importance ... in the

course of history” not because of the skill or talent of its practitioners, but precisely because it is so effective a bearer of ideology.

While the notion of ideology has often been associated with Marxist ideas of false consciousness, scholarship increasingly holds that ideology is not necessarily about lies or delusions (Eagleton, 1991: 26). Instead, as Ivan Karp suggests, ideology is “not a false set of beliefs but any belief which becomes an instrument of action” (1986: 136). Similarly, Clifford Geertz describes ideology as a historically important means for creating social meaning, adding that attention must be paid to the processes by which this happens. Geertz notes that the second half of the twentieth century was particularly marked by “ideological ferment”, most prominently in the new states of Africa, Asia and Latin America (1973: 220). These states were sites in which established patterns and received traditions had been overthrown in favour of new and as of yet unknown political and social structures. It is in precisely such environments, Geertz argues, that ideology arises and takes hold as a means for understanding the new order of things.

In post-independence Guinea, Sékou Touré sought to create a coherent narrative linking the nation’s past, present and future, yet his ideology defies easy description. As Terry Eagleton notes, “[i]deologies are usually internally complex, differentiated formations, with conflicts between their various elements which need to be continually renegotiated and resolved” (1991: 45). In Touré’s case, his writings and ideas incorporate a dizzying jumble of metaphors, quotes and doctrines, deriving from Marxism, socialism, various strains of African nationalism as well as local historical and cultural norms. These ideas all contributed to a dense, at times contradictory, yet fascinating set of ideas about the revolutionary African nation. As the very notion of Revolution suggests, Touré

was particularly concerned with social transformation and modernization. At the same time, he continuously mined the Guinean past as a source of political legitimacy, referencing precolonial history, tradition and legend. His ideology was crafted on oppositions between tradition/modernity, Africa/the West, and rural/urban, while he vacillated between these poles. As Eagleton notes, ideologues necessarily find themselves continuously having to resolve the conflicts in their system of ideas. Thus, as I describe in this chapter, revolutionary ideology in Touré's Guinea was constantly evolving, responding to its own historical circumstances and attempting to reconcile its inherent contradictions.

The Revolution was a brutal period in Guinean history in which opponents of the regime, whether perceived or real, were ruthlessly eliminated. Moreover, the Revolution represented not simply an exercise in physical violence but also psychological control. Through language, Touré attempted to shape the very ways in which Guinean people behaved and thought. A revolutionary lexicon emerged, based largely on Touré's own voice and which shaped song texts, official discourse and everyday conversation. The imposition of abstracted political speech effectively sought to conceal the Revolution's violence and to stifle any opposition. Violence in Touré's Revolution thus became a "public secret", to use Michael Taussig's phrase, one in which people "knew what not to know" (1999: 2). Throughout this thesis, I describe this evolving situation as a politics of silence, a cautious and historically informed accommodation of violent authoritarian rule. In Touré's Revolution, musicians and other people learned the value of ventriloquizing the president, while keeping any alternative views or voices to themselves.

Despite this suffocating environment, however, popular music flourished in 1960s and 1970s Conakry. As a poet, writer and orator, Touré's own medium was language and he thus focused on words and texts in his attempts at popular control. At the same time, musicians were relatively free to experiment with different stylistic forms more or less as they liked, including Cuban rhythms, Western electric instruments and genres such as funk and jazz. While the regime made attempts to dictate the aesthetic direction of music, as I will describe, musicians were nonetheless able to express their agency by playing styles and genres that had otherwise been banned. As I argue, musicians in the national dance bands were not resisting Touré's revolutionary ideology; rather, they operated within it, celebrating a 'return' to local culture and singing in the Revolution's praise. Yet in other, important ways, they also pushed back against the strictures of the Revolution – by choosing certain musical forms and styles over others, as well as by attempting to pursue their own careers and shape their identities as musicians. Touré willingly overlooked these choices because of the important role that musicians served. With its capacity to reference many things at the same time, music was a particularly useful means of ideological reconciliation, creating coherence out of contradiction, while song lyrics were an invaluable source of propaganda directed to a largely illiterate population. Touré thus celebrated the new national dance music and its laudatory lyrics, while turning a blind eye to musicians' practices that were less 'revolutionary'. In this chapter, I will examine the emergence of revolutionary popular music in Touré's Guinea, and its evolving interactions with authoritarianism. I will look in particular at the 1969 Bembeya Jazz recording 'Regard sur le Passé', as well as at Guinea's participation in the First Pan-African Cultural Festival that same year. I will also consider the development of a

strategic politics of silence through which popular musicians were able to carve out their own expressive space within the prevailing landscape.

### **1.1 Music, nation and city**

The development of Guinean popular music is part of a larger pattern of musical change throughout the continent in the early twentieth century. While African music has long been shaped by cross-cultural encounter, the colonial project and its reorganization of labour roles led to unprecedented and massive social transformation within a relatively short space of time. Mass migration to newly built urban areas led to the emergence of an urban African work-force, one which sought out new forms of recreation and expression that reflected its changing environment. By the 1930s, many African cities featured new styles of dance music, influenced by colonial military bands and imported recordings and instruments from Latin America, Europe and the United States. Coastal Ghana and Sierra Leone saw the development of palm-wine and highlife music, as local musicians adapted elements from colonial brass bands and dance orchestras (Collins, 1992). In Nigeria, the popular genre *jùjú* emerged in the 1920s as soldiers returned home from World War I with modern electric instruments (Waterman, 1990a), while in 1940s Congo, guitar players in Leopoldville copied chord progressions from imported recordings, adding new songs texts to create the first Congolese *musique moderne* (White, 2008: 40).

In Conakry, no such genre existed before independence. Since the late colonial era, electric dance bands such as La Joviale Symphonie, La Douce Parisette and Le Tropical Jazz had proliferated, playing tangos, foxtrots and waltzes for European and

Guinean audiences.<sup>43</sup> The Ghanaian high-life pioneer, E.T. Mensah, said of his 1958 visit to Conakry that “[t]he French dominated the blacks socially and this affected the music. They had white musicians from Paris, but the African dance music was small” (quoted in Collins, 1992: 183).<sup>44</sup> Partly in response to the Ghanaian example of high-life as an indigenous popular music, one of Sékou Touré’s first acts after independence was to ban all European music from the radio and live performance, insisting that the country unload itself of its imperial burden. Touré quickly disbanded the existing urban dance bands, while nonetheless retaining their basic style and format. Recruiting many of their musicians, he sought to refigure these bands into a popular nationalist form.

Of all the forms of nationalized art in Touré’s Guinea, dance music in particular allowed for popular participation and celebration, creating a space for people to experience the new culture directly and intimately. Popular music generated a sense of collective “effervescence” for the new moment (Durkheim, 1912 [2001]: 158), as young people met to dance to the new sounds.<sup>45</sup> Yet, as I describe in this section, what was claimed as a new national culture, as expressed through popular dance music, was really about urban youth experience. Moreover, this experience was tightly controlled within a growing context of authoritarianism.

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<sup>43</sup> Linké Condé, guitarist and *chef d’orchestre* of the former national dance band Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis, told me that La Joviale Symphonie was composed of Guinean, Sierra Leonean and Liberian musicians. Le Tropical Jazz did not have the same profile as the first two bands and played in the suburbs for a primarily local audience. A similar group was the Orchestre de Dixinn, based in what was at the time a Conakry suburb and playing for a largely local audience. Interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Touré invited Mensah’s group, The Tempos Dance Band, to perform at the celebrations marking Guinean independence in October 1958 (Suzuki, 2004: 54).

<sup>45</sup> Durkheim used the term ‘effervescence’ to refer to the excitement that comes from social interaction. As he argued, this emotion forms the basis for the development of religion, as people have long attributed such feelings to a sacred, higher force. Maurice Bloch suggests, however, that for Durkheim, ritual singing and dancing in themselves were secondary to the greater problem of creating collective representation and ideals. Bloch notes that Durkheim “never actually explained” how participation and social interaction lead to effervescence (1974: 57). In contrast, in Bloch’s own study of Merina circumcision ceremonies in Madagascar, he is concerned with the particular significance of singing and dance in shaping collectivity.

### 1.1.1 *New Sounds for a New Nation*

The project of creating a modern culture for the new nation of Guinea meant re-working music and the performing arts across a vast cultural topography of two dozen different ethnic groups. To this end, bureaucrats from Touré's *Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (PDG) were sent to far-flung villages to recruit the most promising young musicians and dancers from throughout the country. These performers were then filtered through an elaborate system of local and regional arts competitions, culminating in an annual *Quinzaine Artistique* (Artistic Fortnight) held in Conakry to anoint the nation's artistic representatives.<sup>46</sup> This festival saw dozens of troupes from around the country converging in Conakry, where they would perform each night at the city's concert hall, the Palais du Peuple. The audience would be composed of visiting dignitaries, local VIPs and members of the public. No concert at the Palais could begin, however, before Sékou Touré had arrived. Seated in the front row, Touré would take notes during each performance and mark each group, distilling his critiques and indicating which groups deserved to advance.<sup>47</sup> Touré was the 'executive producer' of all performance in post-independence Guinea, the arbiter in the creation of national culture (Masekela & Cheers, 2004: 248).<sup>48</sup>

Performance in the Touré era was divided into various categories: ensembles (traditional vocal and instrumental groups), ballets (traditional dance and percussion groups), *théâtre militant* (nationalist theatre groups) and *orchestres* (modern electric

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<sup>46</sup> The *Quinzaine* was held annually until 1970, when it was refigured as the biennial National Cultural Festival.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Lansana Condé, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2009

<sup>48</sup> According to one account, Touré himself played accordion and guitar, although I have not found any references to any public performances. H.T. (?) (2000) 'Anthologie de la Musique Guinéenne: Les Orchestres Modernes', *Horoya* No. 5430, 29-31 July 2000

dance bands). These various genres all shared the assigned task of amalgamating and re-presenting local, rural melodies, dances, stories and rhythms for the national and international stage. At the top of the system were national troupes from each genre: the national Ballets Africains and Ballet Djoliba; a national instrumental group, *L'Ensemble instrumental africain de la radiodiffusion nationale* (later known as l'Ensemble Instrumental);<sup>49</sup> a National Theatre Troupe; and a national dance band, the Syli Orchestre National.<sup>50</sup> Within this formalized, bureaucratized system, however, the music of the Syli Orchestre and its later off-shoots occupied a particular, popular role.

As noted above, the Syli Orchestre National was established in January 1959. Borrowing directly from its colonial predecessors, the band's instrumentation centred on electric guitar, bass, trumpet, saxophone, drum-kit and conga drums. Percussion largely borrowed from Cuban rhythms, which had been introduced through imported rumba recordings since the 1930s and were hugely popular throughout West and Central Africa.<sup>51</sup> Some of the Syli Orchestre's musicians had previously played with the colonial-era dance bands, including the saxophonists Momo 'Wandel' Soumah and Kélétiogui Traoré. Other musicians included pioneering guitarists from *jeli* (griot) families, such as Sékou 'Docteur' and Kerfala 'Papa' Diabaté, as well as musicians from non-*jeli* backgrounds, such as the trumpeter Balla Onivogui. A 1979 government report writes

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<sup>49</sup> The Ensemble Instrumental was created in November 1960 and incorporated traditional instruments from throughout the country, such as the Mande *kora* (harp) and *bala* (xylophone) and the Fulbe *serdu* (flute). The *chef d'orchestre* was the *jeli* singer Sory Kandia Kouyaté, while Kadé Diawara led the female chorus. Anonymous (1963) 'L'Ensemble instrumental africain de la radiodiffusion nationale', *Revue de l'Education Nationale, de la Jeunesse et de la Culture* No. 2, October 1963.

<sup>50</sup> The name Syli, the Susu word for elephant, took on iconic status in Touré's Guinea and was used as a prefix for almost every cultural nationalist activity, including the national football team, record label, cinema and, later, currency. Kaba cites Touré's poem, PDG, which states "Oh PDG, Syli is your name, it means honesty, justice and constancy in every work" (quoted in Kaba, 1976: 215).

<sup>51</sup> A number of scholars have written about the influence of Cuban rhythms on the development of West African popular music in the 1940s and 1950s (see Collins, 1992; Counsel, 2006; Shain, 2002; Skinner, 2009; White, 2002).

that musicians in the Syli Orchestre were mandated to “draw their inspiration solely from the wealth of epic and popular folk traditions” of Guinea, in line with Touré’s nationalist aims (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1979: 80). Linké Condé, a guitarist who played in the band in 1960, told me that the band thus served as a “school of music” for musicians, who had to relearn local melodies after years of playing European dance tunes.<sup>52</sup>

As more musicians began performing local songs on modern instruments, the Syli Orchestre strained to incorporate the talent swelling its ranks. In response, the government decided in 1963 to divide it into two national dance bands: the Orchestre de la Paillote and Orchestre du Jardin de Guinée (later renamed respectively as Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis and Balla et ses Balladins). Three years later, a regional band from the town of Beyla in southeastern Guinea was accorded the same status after amassing victories at successive *Quinzaines*, and thus became Bembeya Jazz National. These three dance bands defined the sound of popular music in Guinea through the 1960s and 1970s. Their music bore the influence of other popular urban styles from West and Central Africa: the finger-picking guitar style of palm-wine,<sup>53</sup> the trumpet and saxophone of high-life, the Latin rhythms of Congolese rumba. But the songs themselves were distinctly Guinean, often derived from the repertoire of the Mande *jelilu* or griots, with guitar-driven melodies adapted from *jeli* instruments such as the *bala* (xylophone). Eric Charry has written extensively of the guitar’s role in bridging traditional *jeli* and modern

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<sup>52</sup> Interview 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2009

<sup>53</sup> Palm-wine is a popular genre that emerged in 1920s coastal Sierra Leone and later spread to Ghana. In contrast to the late colonial-era dance bands, guitar music developed in coastal West Africa amongst fishermen and sailors, with ensembles featuring banjo, accordion and harmonica. John Collins writes that the Ghanaian guitarist Kwame ‘Sam’ Asare popularized palm-wine, incorporating finger-picking styles from other coastal genres (1992: 35).

dance music in post-independence Guinea. Since at least the 1920s, musicians from *jeli* families had been transposing *bala* melodies to acoustic guitar, developing a distinct finger-picking style in which the index finger played the *bala* patterns of one hand while the thumb played the patterns of the other (Charry, 2000: 295). As Charry notes, the guitar opened the door to musical innovation by adapting *jeli* music to a new format.

By foregrounding *jeliya*, the dance bands centred their practice on Mande music. Like other national cultural representations, popular dance music was distinctly Mande in its lyrical and melodic form, reflecting Touré's own ethnicity.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the use of *jeli* songs served two important lyrical purposes. Firstly, the new popular dance music was sung in local languages. While the colonial-era dance bands sung in French, Touré championed the use of local languages. Ideologically, local languages provided a source of cultural authenticity, but equally important was their use in spreading messages to a largely illiterate population. As Elizabeth Schmidt notes, Touré sought political legitimacy through support from the masses rather than the elite, and therefore "[t]heir languages had to be spoken, their cultural forms respected" (2005: 1004). Thus, borrowing from *jeli* traditions, the new dance songs were primarily in Maninka but also in Susu and Fulbe, the languages of Guinea's other major ethnic groups, as Touré sought to disseminate ideas of the new nation to people throughout Guinea.

Secondly, the use of *jeli* songs allowed modern dance bands to adapt older traditions of praise-singing in Mande culture, now re-framed for the modern nation-state. I will discuss praise-singing in greater detail in Chapter Three. For now, it is worth noting that praise-singing (*fasa*) involves the recitation of a noble's *jamu* or family name,

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<sup>54</sup> McGovern notes that Touré was not a Maninka speaker, but a Kuranko speaker from south-central Guinea (2004: 364) Kuranko is a northern Mande language closely related to Maninka.

securing the noble's status in the present by tracing his or her genealogy back to the ancestral past. In return for this highly honorific act, nobles reciprocate with gifts and loyalty. In post-independence Guinea, many of the leading musicians in the national dance bands were from *jeli* families, whose social power Touré sought at once to exploit and restrain, as I will discuss further in Chapter Three. *Jeli* songs provided a prestigious and culturally familiar template for praise which could now be redirected to the Guinean state and its leader.

As these descriptions suggest, the music of the national dance bands was a hybrid, one built on a broad range of influences. This hybridity draws our attention to a key contradiction in Touré's nationalist ideology. On the one hand, Touré spoke often and zealously about the need to recover local cultural authenticity. As he wrote a few years after independence,

How many of our young boys and girls no longer appreciate our traditional dances and the cultural riches of our folk songs? They have all become fans of the tango or waltz, admirers of this or that European singer. If we ignore our precious heritage we shall become utterly divorced from our own social surroundings and unable to see its least human qualities. We shall end up by being unable to recognize the true significance of the things around us, unable to recognize the meaning of ourselves. (Touré, 1963: 154)

Touré framed political independence as the first step in a longer struggle for securing Africa's place in the modern world, in large part through cultural liberation from Europe. He often used metaphors of return – the need to 'rehabilitate' Guinean culture, for example, or to recover African dignity – while arguing that "Africa is endowed with its own culture, its own civilization."<sup>55</sup> Yet, on the other hand, such language invariably signals the desire to create a better culture rather than returning to an old one, as Ramon

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmed Sékou Touré (1963) 'A chaque peuple sa culture', *Revue de l'Education Nationale, de la Jeunesse et de la Culture* 2: 1

Sarró notes (2009: 14).<sup>56</sup> As a modernist reformer, Touré was caught in the familiar paradox of nationalism, seeking both legitimation from and a break with local tradition (see Gellner, 1983; Turino, 2000). His concern was in fact not to return to a precolonial tradition, but rather to craft a *new* culture for the independent nation, one which would unite members of disparate ethnic and religious groups into a cohesive whole, with himself firmly at the head.

In this regards, elements of foreign culture, including from Europe, often served as a binding thread in the creation of a modern Guinean identity. Touré condemned the colonial imposition of European culture in Africa, yet his cosmopolitan instincts were apparent. For example, Touré promoted local Guinean languages as authentic, writing (in French) that “[a] People that abandons its language becomes an infirm People, accepting the most serious dependence, cultural dependence. To be and to develop according to its will, interests and specificities, each People should exploit its language and tirelessly perfect it” (1972: 149). Yet, despite such declarations, Touré’s prolific writings and public speeches were exclusively in French, as he sought both to unite disparate ethnic groups in Guinea and to communicate with a wider audience overseas.

This ambivalence was similarly evident in his musical policies. While banning the colonial-era dance bands shortly after independence, Touré did not reject their music outright. Rather, musicians from those bands were encouraged to appropriate and mix, to adapt local songs to new instruments and arrangements. As with language, Touré glossed

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<sup>56</sup> Sarró cites Anthony Wallace’s 1956 article on the “revitalization movement”, which he describes as “a conscious, organized effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (quoted in Sarró, 2009: 14). Similarly, Ernest Gellner later described the nationalist aim to create a modern ‘high culture’ based on the folk traditions of various ‘low cultures’ (1983), while Thomas Turino writes of the process of ‘modernist reformism’: the creation of a new culture legitimated by its links to the ‘best’ aspects of local traditional culture, while also incorporating the ‘best’ modern forms and technologies (Turino, 2000: 16).

over the ideological implications of using electric guitars, drum-kits or brass instruments in Guinean national music. The role of music was in fact to synthesize the old with the new, the local with the foreign, rather than to faithfully resume an older practice.<sup>57</sup> Touré sought to create something distinctively modern, referencing Guinea's place alongside Europe in the postcolonial world. As a result, and in contrast to Touré's Afro-centric rhetoric, musicians were relatively free to play and innovate with Western instruments. As the first series of LP recordings of Guinean popular music in the early 1960s suggested, these were 'New Sounds for a New Nation'.<sup>58</sup>

### 1.1.2 *Urbanity and controlled effervescence*

In addition to creating the sounds of local modernity in post-independence Conakry, electric dance music provided a means for the institutionalization of nationalist celebration. In the years after independence, optimism and nationalism were emotions that the regime actively sought to stir up. Thus, during the annual *Quinzaine Artistique*, members of the party's youth wing were mobilized to organize neighbourhood festivities, while women cadres were instructed to dress in white and line the streets cheering arriving dignitaries and guests.<sup>59</sup> Within this bureaucratized system, however, the music of the Syli Orchestre and later national dance bands held a particularly important role as

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<sup>57</sup> Charry notes that the guitar had since the early twentieth century been incorporated into 'traditional' Guinean music (2000: 254). Electric guitar, however, was an innovation more recently borrowed from the colonial-era dance bands.

<sup>58</sup> Leo Sarkisian, an American radio producer with the Voice of America, befriended and was granted permission by Sékou Touré to live and work in Guinea in the early 1960s. *Sons nouveaux d'une nation nouvelle* were recorded from 1961 to 1963 (Counsel, 2006: 88; see also <http://www.afropop.org/multi/feature/ID/328/The+Story+of+Bembeya+Jazz>, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2009).

<sup>59</sup> The colour white was particularly associated with Touré and the PDG. At public events, people were often distributed white cloths to wave, and this practice continues at many state-oriented concerts today. At concerts I attended in 2009 in honour of the new military regime, white tissues or handkerchiefs were sometimes handed out to all attendees to wave during the performance.

forms of *popular* national culture and celebration. Electric dance music was organized to allow for participation in informal, off-stage settings. Since the early 1960s, the national dance bands were each assigned a venue – a *bar-dancing* – where they would perform in the evenings for the residents of the capital. While Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis performed at the venue La Paillote and Balla et ses Balladins at the Jardin de Guinée, Bembeya Jazz were assigned to Club Bembeya. It was in these nightclubs that the urban population was able to experience and participate in the creation of the new national culture. Yet, as I discuss here, this celebration was also strictly controlled.

A 1961 article in the party newspaper *Horoya* describes the emergent African urbanity of a *soirée dansante* (dance party) in Conakry:

It was a Saturday night, the moment where the morning breeze starts to appear. The room was packed with dancers, mostly minors ... Bent in two, his right hand stretched in front of him, as if taking an oath, his left fitting around his small dance partner at the height of her chest, his head shaking in time to the squeals of a clarinet, [the young man] moved his great height and broad shoulders. We danced, we danced for the human pleasure of dancing ... and as I looked around, I contemplated with an indefinable sense of love all these people climbing the hill of civilization.<sup>60</sup>

With its description of couple dancing and the sound of clarinets, the passage evokes youth, urbanity and modernity.<sup>61</sup> Yet this picture is further contextualized within a deeper, if somewhat patronizing, sentiment of nationalist celebration. Popular music and dancing here are not just forms of ‘human pleasure’ but also an expression of collective optimism and pride. This ‘effervescence’ – the force of collective feeling, heightened here by music – served to arouse patriotism in the new nation. Moreover, in contrast to

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<sup>60</sup> Anonymous (1961) ‘Chronique Littéraire: Hommage à la danse’, *Horoya* 31: 3; my translation from the French original

<sup>61</sup> In line with Shain’s observations about post-independence Dakar (2002; 2009), the most common style found in Conakry’s *bar-dancings* was salsa, danced in couples. This style continues to be prevalent amongst audiences of Touré-era dance music in Conakry today.

the concert hall settings of other artistic forms such as the national ballets and ensembles, young people here actively perform rather than passively watch what it means to be a modern Guinean person. By placing the national dance bands off-stage and amongst the population, popular music became a means for people to experience national culture – and feel the power of nationalist ideology – first-hand.

Such experiments in modern living were taking place throughout the country. In a study on the Baga ethnic group of the upper Guinea coast, for example, Ramon Sarró describes the emergence of *soirées dansantes* in the 1950s, a new form of socialization involving young men and women dancing as couples to popular music, and much to the anger of older men who saw the existing social order being supplanted (2009: 99).<sup>62</sup> Yet in the post-independence period, it was in Conakry in particular that this new culture was crafted and nationalized. With its inherent cosmopolitanism, national culture was necessarily built on the site of maximum encounter between Guinea and the rest of the world (cf. Turino, 2000). Touré often spoke dismissively of urban life, relying on romanticized images of folk purity to underpin his vision of local identity. Yet as a young man himself, he had long since left the provincial town of Faranah for Conakry. Touré’s vision of African modernity – and his blueprint for political control – were inextricably associated with the capital. The festivals system, culminating with the *Quinzaine Artistique*, for example, meant that there was a continual flow of the best artists and performers from throughout the country to Conakry, where national culture was formalized and sanctioned by the state. This movement paralleled broader patterns of

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<sup>62</sup> Sarró’s account does not include a description of the music in these dance parties, but he notes that it “included new musical instruments, and in particular the use of the flute.” As he explains, flute playing was particularly infuriating to elder Baga men because it had up until then been restricted to sacred sites in the forest that were their exclusive domain (2009: 99).

urban migration since the early twentieth century, as traders, students and others migrated to the capital in search of opportunities. Touré thus recognized its transformative possibility. Such a channelling of ideas and people towards the capital also represented a way for the government to continually exert central control over disparate groups and loyalties. While regionalism and provincialism represented threats to the authority of the state, Conakry represented the centre, the seat of power whose control radiated outwards to the country's borders.

The *Quinzaine Artistique* provided official spaces in which national culture was crafted and displayed. But parallel to this highly centralized system, the music of the electric dance bands provided a means for young people to socialize, dance and celebrate in a more intimate, yet nonetheless state-sanctioned setting. While the Ensemble Instrumental and the national ballets performed for visiting dignitaries in the Palais du Peuple and other concert halls, the national dance bands also performed every night solely for the pleasure of the local, urban population.<sup>63</sup> As Ryan Skinner notes in his research on popular music in Bamako, such evening entertainment in mid-twentieth century French West Africa was often described as having *ambiance*. The term related to the particular feeling associated with this new urban nightlife – a “general sentiment of conviviality in public spaces of music-making and listening” (2009: 39). Moreover, this feeling was related not simply to recreation and fun, but also to a moral and political sense of being and belonging in a context of rapid change and urbanization. Skinner notes that many older Malians today remember *ambiance* as an expression of solidarity and community as well as liveliness and good times. In Guinea, evenings in *les bars-dancings*

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<sup>63</sup> In her autobiography, Miriam Makeba writes extensively of her time in Touré's Guinea, describing evenings beginning with the formal concert-hall performances and ending in the more relaxed, unofficial spaces of Conakry nightclubs (1987: 181).

provided a similar feeling – a collective sense of possibility in the new world, an effervescence. As the guitarist Linké Condé said to me, “everyone was together at the bars-dancings and because of that, there weren’t any thugs or crooks then. The city was always alive. There was *ambiance*.”<sup>64</sup> As Condé remembers, such lively evenings were characterized not just by their party atmosphere, but also by a sense of safety, security and collective sense of purpose.

Yet this exuberance was also tightly regulated, with Touré’s surrogate eyes and ears always present. The South African singer Miriam Makeba, who lived in Guinea during a long exile from her home country during the apartheid regime, recalls in vivid detail her experiences in Conakry in the late 1960s and 1970s. Makeba notes that “[e]very club in Conakry has what is called a co-director. This is a man who works directly for the Ministry of the Interior. Anyone who causes trouble knows who they will have to answer to” (1988: 215). While Touré may have allowed popular nightlife to flourish, he maintained a watchful gaze over the scene. In a context of growing authoritarianism, the *bars-dancings* were thus intertwined with the broader political culture of control.

One does not need to look far to find further evidence of the close link between music and authoritarianism in Touré’s Guinea. For one, the state strictly regulated popular music as a collective endeavour, actively discouraging individual stardom to avoid the emergence of public figures rivalling Touré. In other parts of Africa, dance bands routinely elevated their individual stars through spatial arrangements, distinctive clothing and deferential behaviour from other band members (see e.g. Waterman, 1990b: 373; White, 2008: 195-199). Guinean dance bands, on the other hand, were expected to

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<sup>64</sup> Interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2009

follow a socialist model of non-hierarchical collectivity. Thus, while bands such as Kélétigui et ses Tambourinis and Balla et ses Balladins clearly designated their stars and bandleaders (*chefs d'orchestre*) in their names during the early years of independence, this style of naming quickly lost its currency. From the mid-1960s onwards, band names never referenced individual musicians and instead drew their names from local places or cultural references, such as *horoya* (liberty) or *sofa* (nineteenth century Mande warriors). In this way, it was not individual musicians who were celebrated, but rather the symbols of nationhood, implicitly referencing the Father of the Nation himself. As Touré stated in a 1968 speech, “[a]rtists do not create Art. It is created by the people.”<sup>65</sup> Even the period’s most celebrated band, Bembeya Jazz, did not escape this dogma. In a 1969 concert review, for example, the party newspaper (and Touré’s mouthpiece) *Horoya* accused Bembeya’s lead guitarist Sékou ‘Diamond Fingers’ Diabaté of “always showing too much individuality in this great band that includes five other instrumentalists.”<sup>66</sup> Touré wished for individual performers to be synonymous with the group, and for the group in turn to be synonymous with his regime.

Additionally, the decision to have more than one national band also served to disperse the accumulation of status and power. By the 1970s, there were seven national dance bands in all, none of whom could thus claim a monopoly of musical prestige. Although Bembeya Jazz was the most celebrated, its popularity was balanced by the fact that up to six other bands shared its status.<sup>67</sup> Thus when it came to selecting a band to

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Discours du Responsable Suprême de la Révolution aux Cadres de l’Information, du Cinéma et de l’INRDG, le 18 avril 1968’, Reprinted in *Horoya* 16-17 June 1968, No. 1496: 1-4

<sup>66</sup> I.K. Diaré (1969) ‘A l’occasion des 22 ans du PDG : Des concerts à la gloire du PDG’, *Horoya Hebdo* 24-30 March 1969, No. 19 (?): 49-50

<sup>67</sup> Graeme Counsel notes that the band with the most victories at the *Quinzaine Artistique* was Kebendo Jazz, from the town of Gueckedou in the south-eastern forest region. The band won the festival’s first prize on four different occasions but was never nationalized, purportedly because Bembeya Jazz already

represent Guinea at the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival, Touré brought together musicians from various groups to reconstitute the Syli Orchestre National. Once again it was the nation, rather than any one group of musicians, that was celebrated. I will return to this festival in more detail a little later in this chapter.

Despite these early signs of authoritarianism, however, the first years of independence in Conakry were marked by celebration and optimism, as the new national culture was lived and enjoyed. The historian Lansine Kaba suggests that these early years reflected a “positive ideology” towards culture and politics, through which the government intervened to promote a flourishing of art and music (1976: 207). Yet, as I will discuss in the next section, Touré’s desire for control was still unfulfilled.

## **1.2 *The Revolution and Its Hero***

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt writes of the “perpetual-motion mania” of totalitarian movements, which retain their power “only so long as they keep moving and set everything around them in motion.” (1951: 408) The idea of movement(s) is central to her analysis. Arendt argues that totalitarians do not seek simply to gain control over the state, but rather to control individuals through psychological as well as other means. Citing the examples of National Socialism and Bolshevism, she argues that “[t]heir idea of domination was something that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can ever achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion: namely, the permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life” (ibid.: 432).

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represented that region of the country at the national level. Personal communication, 8<sup>th</sup> March and 18<sup>th</sup> April 2012

Arendt examines the historical and socio-political particularities of Europe and the Soviet Union, yet her work illuminates features of similar political systems in other contexts. In the case of post-independence Guinea, Sékou Touré was, over the course of his rule, increasingly preoccupied with establishing and maintaining total control over the state and its subjects. Furthermore, Touré continually sought out new forms of control that were, as Arendt suggests, both political and psychological. As economic decline and disillusionment began creating the space for political opposition by the mid-1960s, Touré conceived of a new stage in the struggle for independence, one which borrowed heavily from Marxist ideology and sought to create a ‘permanent revolution’ in the consciousness of Guinean people, as I will describe below.<sup>68</sup>

### *1.2.1 The Socialist Cultural Revolution*

While the first years of Guinean independence were a time of optimism, signs of autocracy became evident early on. In a largely enthusiastic portrait of the new nation in 1959, for example, a Swiss journalist noted that “Touré wants to be in charge of everything. Around him no one is directly his second-in-command. His ministers will not take any decision without coming to speak to him” (Gigon, 1959: 12; my translation). By 1965 an American commentator noted that “[i]n Guinea it is unhealthy to disagree with the President, and the few who have tried have either ended up in prison or disappeared, never to be heard from again” (Du Bois, 1965: 2). Touré was keenly aware of the need to guard against disillusionment as the initial glow of independence faded by the early 1960s. He therefore sought to refigure the struggle as an ongoing one against a shadowy

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<sup>68</sup> The Trotskyist term appears in the resolution adopted by the PDG in October 1967, as well as in numerous subsequent references by Touré and other party officials.

and unseen enemy, urging Guinean people to remain vigilant to the unknown threat: “Men and women, young and old of the PDG, you will have to monitor everyone ... All those whom you consider likely to bring shame to Guinea and to Africa, denounce them (Touré, 1961: 223; my translation).

The idea of an ongoing struggle was partly fuelled by reports of the many attempted coup d'états that characterized Guinea from 1960 onwards. The “permanent plot” became a regular feature of Guinean life, with new conspiracies against the government discovered almost annually (O'Toole, 1995: 132). 1963 was marked by the ‘Shopkeepers’ Plot’, for instance, in which market traders were accused of conspiring against the government, while 1969 saw the ‘Labé Plot’, allegedly backed by French ‘imperialists’. Graeme Counsel further notes that both a cholera epidemic in 1973 and Guinea’s second place finish in the 1976 African Cup of Nations were attributed to plots against the government (2006: 110). The announcement of yet another attempted coup was a renewable resource for the government, providing justification to crack down on critics and opponents and further secure control over the Guinean population.

By 1967, however, Touré sensed the need for an ideological reboot. At the Eighth Congress of Touré’s party, the PDG, in late July and early August that year, the president thus announced the start of a “Socialist Cultural Revolution.” Touré later clarified that the Revolution had actually begun before independence, with a preparatory “methodological phase” from 1947 until 1957, a “political phase” during the subsequent decade as Guinea secured its independence, and a “cultural phase” launched in 1967.<sup>69</sup> By thus revising the political history of postcolonial Guinea, Touré suggested that the Revolution had

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<sup>69</sup> This description comes from Touré’s speech to the Third Session of the PDG Central Committee, held in Kankan, July 1968.

always existed (in the modern era, at least) and was continually renewed. Understanding the need for both timelessness and ‘perpetual motion’, Touré described the Revolution as “simultaneously a continuous and dynamic process of transformation of the old order into a new order consciously determined by and for the People.”<sup>70</sup>

In practice, the Guinean Cultural Revolution was a means to re-assert control over Guineans collectively and individually. As Arendt writes, total loyalty to the leader is

... the psychological basis for total domination ... Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party. (1951: 429)

In Guinea, Touré thus sought to reorganize society so that the Revolution supplanted older associations and networks in all walks of life. He envisioned a Revolution that “conditions all our way of life, our behaviour, our social relations, our relations with nature and penetrates to the very depths of our private life”.<sup>71</sup> In this way, the Revolution was not simply an external set of political conditions, but an internal reworking of the self.

Touré based his Revolution directly on the Chinese model, reflecting Guinea’s close ties with China since the late 1950s. In 1959, Guinea became the first sub-Saharan African country to establish diplomatic ties with China, opening the doors to cultural and political exchange and economic assistance. Touré travelled to China in September 1960, at which time the two governments signed a Treaty of Friendship aimed at, amongst other things, strengthening their cultural relations. Throughout the 1960s, Guinean and Chinese national music and performance ensembles toured each other’s countries and performed

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

in praise of each other's leaders. The trumpeter Mory Sidibé, formerly with Bembeya Jazz, recalled to me that the group sang a praise song to Mao Tse-Tung in Maninka and Mandarin during an official reception for a visiting Chinese delegation in the 1960s, while a Chinese performance troupe similarly performed praise songs to Sékou Touré in Susu and Maninka during a visit to Conakry in 1967.<sup>72</sup> Yet alongside such musical exchange, ideological ties were also built, with Touré absorbing many of the messages of Mao's 1967 Cultural Revolution and its attempts to consolidate Communist Party rule.

Under the aegis of Touré's Revolution, the late 1960s and 1970s in Guinea involved an ever-increasing effort by the state to rework society and exert authority over every aspect of life. Touré banned political, religious and social associations that existed outside the state's power, denouncing them as "subversive" tools wielded by imperialist enemies (Touré, 1972: 99). He established local party cells, or *Pouvoirs Révolutionnaires Locaux*, in towns throughout the country, and re-imagined schools as *Centres d'Education Révolutionnaire*. Art and culture were particularly in danger of elitism, he argued, and needed to be brought back into the revolutionary mandate. Like Mao, he called for a 'mass' society, one in which culture belonged to the People.

In practice, radical social transformation had long been a goal of Touré's Guinea. The most violent example was the government's 1961-63 Demystification Programme, which sought to stamp out traditional and secretive religious and social practices.<sup>73</sup> This programme's particular targets were the country's northwestern coast and southeastern

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009; Anonymous (1967) 'A l'occasion du départ de la troupe l'Aurore', *Horoya* 8-9 November 1967, No. 1328: 4

<sup>73</sup> McGovern notes that the Demystification Programme also targeted Islam and Christianity, with for example priests and Imams banned from making political statements in their sermons. The programme's main target was, however, local polytheistic religions, which were practiced by about ten percent of the Guinean population (2004: 428).

forest region. In a piercing analysis of the Demystification Programme, Michael McGovern argues that these peripheral regions became the “designated national space of Otherness” in Touré’s Guinea, serving as examples of backwards and ‘primitive’ cultures against which Guinean modernity could be defined (2004: 43). While the highlands and savannah regions of Guinea were dominated by Fulbe and Maninka people, both converts to Islam, the upper coast and forest region were inhabited by polytheistic groups that had largely retained their spiritual lives predating colonialism and Islamic reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>74</sup> McGovern notes that, by identifying their practices and beliefs as barbaric and anti-modern, the state was able to tap into a long-standing image within Guinea of these groups as ‘savages’, thus offering a mirror against which dominant groups could imagine themselves. Nonetheless, while government bureaucrats conducting demystification missions arrested and tortured spiritual leaders and burned ritual objects, they also recruited the best performers and appropriated the most spectacular dances and objects from these regions into national cultural troupes and representations (ibid.: 441). The process of demystification was thus one of selective violence through which powerful local forces were neutralized and contained within a state-controlled national culture.

Here too the symbolic importance of Conakry is visible. ‘Mystical’ practices from the country’s dangerous marginal zones were harnessed and brought to the capital, where

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<sup>74</sup>There is a long history of socio-cultural and religious reform movements in Guinea dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. McGovern and Sarró both discuss the historical precedents to Touré’s reforms, detailing campaigns of iconoclasm in the coastal and forest regions. In his work amongst Baga people of coastal Guinea, Sarró describes in particular the campaign led by Asékou Sayon Camara, a Maninka Islamic reformist, to wipe out local religious practices amongst Baga people during the 1950s (2009). McGovern further outlines a number of Islamic reform and jihad movements from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, which together with decolonization and Touré’s modernism created “religious (but also political) rhetorics of renewal that played out between 1850-1958, in the region that became Guinea” (2004: 359).

they were re-activated in service of the nation. Thus, masks and other objects were removed from their ritual contexts and brought to the National Museum in Conakry for display to showcase the wealth of Guinean culture. Similarly, performers, instruments, dances and rhythms from the forest and coastal regions were incorporated into the repertoire of the national ballets.<sup>75</sup> Of course, the ultimate aim of this process of centralization was to consolidate power and wipe out all threats to Touré's rule. With their distinct histories and traditions, the upper coast and forest regions represented the most uncontrollable parts of the new nation, and Touré thus set about to systematically destroy their cultural and political identity.

Beyond social transformation in the nation's margins, however, Touré was increasingly concerned with controlling the very way that Guinean people acted, spoke and thought. The Guinean Cultural Revolution thus represented a new effort by the government to enforce social and political conformity as Touré became more paranoid about threats to his rule. The Revolution aimed to impose Touré's voice as the sole authority in Guinea, with language itself shaped to meet this goal.

### *1.2.2 The language of secrecy*

The anthropology of West Africa is filled with accounts of secrecy, ambiguity, concealment and opacity as key features of social life. Knowledge and sources of power in this part of the world are found not on the surface but in the "underneath of things", as Mariane Ferme writes (2001). Ferme's work details ritual practices and notions of power amongst Mende people of coastal Sierra Leone, where numerous strategies of secrecy

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<sup>75</sup> In fact, the Guinean national Ballet Djoliba performed an initiation dance from the forest region, the *Gnamou*, during the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, for which it was awarded a gold medal.

and invisibility are used to hide and protect knowledge. Similarly, Michael McGovern writes of the “aesthetics and mechanisms of discretion”, such as esoteric initiation practices, that Loma people of the Guinean forest region use to maintain social order (2006: 442). Sarró cites the examples of the well-known *Poró* and *Sande* ‘secret societies’, male and female initiation associations existing along the Guinea coast and that have long been feared by other groups (2009). As he writes, such societies have come to characterize the region to outsiders and were a particular target of pre-independence religious reformists in the 1950s, as well as of Touré’s Revolution, because of what was understood as their violent and superstitious practices.

Beyond the coastal regions, scholars of the more northern Mande culture and society have also analysed the connection between secrecy and power. In his study on Mande blacksmiths, for example, Patrick McNaughton describes the “trade secrets”, or *gundow*, held by certain categories of Mande artisans, who jealously guard their knowledge to create “power, prestige and an aura of mystery” around them (1988: 41). Barbara Hoffman notes that not all knowledge is secret in Mande society, only that which is particularly powerful (1998: 90-1). Thus, as Charles Bird and Martha Kendall argue, in Mande society, “[t]he hero, seeking every means possible to distinguish himself, cloaks himself and his instruments of action in great secrecy” (1980: 17). As they note, if everyone had similar powers to act, no one could attain heroic status.

Bird and Kendall’s description offers great insight into the strategies and ideology of Guinea’s Sékou Touré. Seeking to position himself as the undisputed national hero, Touré understood the value of concealing his own instruments of power in order to elevate himself as the national hero. The Revolution was itself the most elaborate

example – a disparate series of policies, initiatives and discursive strategies all aimed at consolidating control. Behind this political cloak, Touré aimed to secure his undisputed, personal rule over the new nation. As Lansiné Kaba wrote in a 1976 article,

The Guinean universe has become, as has been symbolised in *Dramouss* [a novel by Guinean writer Laye Camara] a world of Kafka in which freedom of expression and individuality have completely disappeared. Conformity or 'revolutionary realism', as it is referred to in Conakry, consists in dressing like the President, speaking like him, writing pamphlets in his honour, ending letters and answering the telephone with 'Prêt pour la Révolution' instead of the old formulae of courtesy (1976: 211-2).

'Revolutionary realism', as Kaba describes, simply meant submitting entirely, both physically and mentally, to Touré's personality cult. In this "one-man show" (ibid.: 212), those who did not abide by this rule were suspect – a dangerous position in Touré's Guinea.

It is estimated that Touré executed tens of thousands of his compatriots during his regime, while hundreds of thousands others are said to have fled the country. Those persecuted by the regime included anyone who could be perceived as a threat to Touré's autocratic rule, such as writers, intellectuals, and the wealthy and powerful. Seeking to distinguish himself above others, as Bird and Kendall suggest, Touré thus imprisoned and executed any cabinet ministers and political allies he feared were too influential. In 1969, for example, Touré arrested his former friend, Fodéba Keita, the founder of the national dance and percussion group, Les Ballets Africains. While Keita held various ministerial posts in the early years of Guinean independence, Touré increasingly saw him as a potential rival and a voice outside his control. Keita was accused of allegedly plotting to overthrow the president, a crime for which he was executed in 1971. Ironically, as a minister Keita had zealously implemented Touré's programme, including commissioning

Camp Boiro, a notorious prison synonymous with the regime's brutality and where Keita himself was ultimately imprisoned and killed.<sup>76</sup>

Alongside this state-sponsored violence, the Revolution also introduced a new vocabulary to Guinea – creating an impenetrable wall of rhetoric to justify and conceal the government's actions. This strategy of obfuscation was a key component of Touré's agenda. As Touré's regime evolved, theoretical concepts such as “modernity”, “socialism” and “revolution” became constantly iterated but never defined. Such language served to render politics abstract for the population at large. All those whom the regime eliminated, for example, were labelled “enemies of socialism”, imprisoned and killed to conform to the will of ‘the People.’ In this way, Touré was able to mask his authoritarianism through opaque words and concepts.

Such a strategy is not unique to Guinea. In the essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, George Orwell writes of the relationship between words and ideologies in twentieth century European politics, warning that both can corrupt each other:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible ... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness ... The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns, as it were instinctively, to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. (2002 [1945]: 963-4)

Orwell describes jargon as a shield to hide political crimes, a tactic that Touré successfully deployed. His speeches and writings are thus at times meaningless in their vagueness and almost indecipherable in their density:

The Revolution is a historical movement conscious of global and multi-faceted transformation, at the same time that it is collective conscience in motion, having necessarily a historical, social and human content, expressing itself concretely

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Telivel Diallo, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2009

through research by the People through all the means of their balance, their greater welfare. (Touré, 1972: 324; my translation)

Yet while continually detailing what the Revolution meant in ‘scientific’ terms, he never actually elaborated what it did. The Marxist buzz words here instead substitute for actual descriptions and details, for the processes and actions of governance to be explained.

Moreover, such language was to be faithfully imitated. As Dominic Thomas notes, “[w]hen publications did not carry original contributions by the Guinean leader himself, the message and discourse articulated effectively ventriloquized the omnipresent leader” (2002: 37).

Such enforced ventriloquism aimed to stifle independent thinking, to instil the language of the Revolution into people’s consciousness, thus turning it from a means of expression to a means for “concealing or preventing thought” (Orwell, 2002 [1945]: 966).<sup>77</sup> As Lisa Wedeen notes, authoritarianism thus “clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of producers and consumers alike” (1999: 6).

Through its dense inscrutability, language in Touré’s Revolution served to elevate the president as an increasingly remote and inaccessible figure, as illustrated by a review of the party newspaper *Horoya* over the 1960s. While earlier issues describe the head of state simply as President Touré, by the end of the decade he is referred to as “the Secretary General of the PDG and Party-State of Guinea, Supreme Leader of the

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<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Maurice Bloch notes that formalized language, as often used in political speech, is “*impoverished* language; a language where many of the options at all levels of language are abandoned so that choice of form, of style, of words and of syntax is less than in ordinary language” (1974: 60). In this way, speech and language serve to restrict communication rather than to facilitate it. Bloch argues that while anthropologists have traditionally tended to examine ritual for what it reveals about society and culture, the example of formalized speech illustrates in fact a concerted attempt to “hide reality” (ibid.: 67).

Revolution, Comrade Ahmed Sékou Touré.” In this way, the president’s status and power were shielded behind a barrage of words and titles.

The most striking example of this semantic concealment was the notion of the Revolution itself. The Guinean Cultural Revolution as officially conceived was indistinguishable from Sékou Touré himself, so thoroughly did he permeate public life. Yet it served as a useful metonym, suggesting that another, higher power was at work rather than simply Touré’s personality cult. Touré thus rarely referred to himself, but rather, spoke of the Revolution as the embodiment of and driving force behind Guinean modernity.<sup>78</sup> In fact, however, he was the higher authority. Though increasingly referenced indirectly, Touré was the sole and central figure representing the nation, its past, present and future. As Miriam Makeba noted, everyone knew to whom they were answerable.

Under the Revolution, the strategies of concealment that I have described were intertwined with a campaign to elevate Touré as the nation’s hero, as the president sought to naturalize his personal rule. As I will discuss in the next section, music provided a particularly important means to establish this idea. Building on older traditions of praise-singing, Touré sought musical homage as a means to secure his heroic status, as a unique and irreplaceable figure embodying the link between Guinea’s glorious past and revolutionary future. Popular music thus helped to promote the idea of Touré’s exceptionalism, as I will discuss in the next section.

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<sup>78</sup> In one memorable metaphor, Touré speaks of the Revolution as the wife to his party, the PDG: Our party, the Democratic Party of Guinea, is twenty-four years old. It is therefore no longer a baby. It has reached the age of majority. And like all young men, it has to get married. Who is the beautiful woman that it has thus chosen? The woman of all races and of all colours, the woman who will be forever young, beautiful, charming and radiant? That woman is called the **cultural revolution**, and it is she who will most certainly renew Guinean, African and International Society (1972: 84; my translation, emphasis in original)

### **1.3 Looking to the past**

In August 1968, a few weeks after the launch of the Cultural Revolution, the members of the national dance bands were summoned for a meeting at the headquarters of Touré's party, the PDG. The meeting, chaired by leaders of the PDG youth-wing, was officially described in the party newspaper as a working session to elaborate a new direction for Guinean music.<sup>79</sup> The youth-wing leaders presented the musicians with a three-point proposal. Firstly, the dance band musicians were informed that they must create new pieces based on the directives of the Revolution. Secondly, the musicians were required to compose a repertoire of "concert music" for a series of galas in honour of Sékou Touré and his guests. And thirdly, the dance bands were henceforth required to perform weekly before party leaders. Having received these instructions, the newspaper account reports, the musicians present adopted the proposal unanimously.

In this section, I will consider what the Revolution meant in practice for musicians of the national dance bands. While the Touré regime had long regulated musical practice and organization, August 1968 nonetheless represented a renewed attempt at control, both politically and aesthetically. The new demands of the Revolution led musicians to further promote the idea of Touré's exceptionalism as the heroic leader of the nation, as exemplified by the Bembeya Jazz song 'Regard sur le Passé'. At the same time, however, musicians continued to explore their own forms of artistic agency. As I argue, Touré was above all considered with the lyrical content of popular songs, while other aspects of musical practice were able to exist outside his control.

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<sup>79</sup> Anonymous (1968) 'Réunion des Orchestres de Conakry sous la Présidence du Comité National de la JRDA', *Horoya* 1546: 4, 31 August 1968

### 1.3.1 *Creativity and contradictions*

As noted, from the late 1960s, the Guinean government mandated that popular music, along with other art forms, demonstrate ‘revolutionary realism’. The term was clearly borrowed from Soviet socialist realism, a Stalinist movement in the 1930s away from contemporary abstract art towards more realistic and moralistic representations. As Sorce Keller observes, the adoption of socialist realism revealed “the supposed revolutionaries of the Soviet system to be in reality ultraconservatives” who favoured literal interpretations over conceptual explorations (2007: 108). Under socialist realism, Soviet art thus stagnated as artists were increasingly restricted in their content and expression. Yet, in Guinea popular music remained inventive and rich even after the launch of the Revolution. Why was this the case?

In Guinea, revolutionary realism was never defined but rather served as an amorphous, catch-all term to describe conformity with party ideology and objectives, foremost of which was maintaining Touré’s absolute rule. A 1979 government report praises, for example, the “revolutionary realism” of older Guineans for transmitting cultural knowledge to young people (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1979: 76). Such transmission was not only essential to lending legitimacy to newer cultural forms, but also to shifting the traditional base of power in a gerontocratic society – and thus to reducing threats to Touré’s rule. At every moment, revolutionary realism thus meant framing action to support Touré’s rule. At the August 1968 meeting, for instance, the national dance bands were told that musicians at the next *Quinzaine Artistique* “will surely sing about our national agricultural and literacy campaigns.”<sup>80</sup> Through such

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. Not coincidentally, the dance orchestra Horoya Band released a 1971 single, ‘Alphabétisation’, praising the government’s literacy campaign.

directives, music was firmly oriented towards spreading party messages, and indeed songs on these very subjects soon followed.

Held within weeks of the Revolution's official start, the meeting at PDG headquarters showed that the government took popular music seriously. In particular, the decision to conduct weekly reviews of the dance bands signalled a renewed desire to control, reflecting the importance of music as a means to disseminate political messages. At the same time, the party also wished to dictate the aesthetic direction of popular music, to exert control over the music as well as the lyrics, and thus it called for a new art practice intended for concert listening rather than dancing. This decision was also more directly an exercise in popular control, aiming to regulate the informality and popularity of dance evenings as well as to focus the bands' attention on performing for the Supreme Leader.

Yet, despite this renewed attempt at total control, musical creativity remained unfettered. In part, music continued to thrive because of the generous support of the regime, and specifically of Sékou Touré himself. Throughout my fieldwork in Conakry, musicians from the Touré-era dance bands continuously spoke to me of Touré's patronage and love of music. As the bass player Laye Diabaté said, Sékou Touré was a "man of culture" who gave musicians "all the materials, all the resources and encouragement to succeed."<sup>81</sup> Laye and others often recounted to me that Touré paid for instruments for all the national bands and ensembles, that musicians were employed by the state and received regular salaries, and that many received housing and monthly supplies of rice, fish and cooking oil. As they argue, with these needs met, musicians thus

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2009

had the necessary means to focus on their art.<sup>82</sup> For this reason, members of the dance bands retain extraordinary loyalty to the former president to this day, an issue to which I will return in the next chapter.

In addition to material support, however, musical creativity under the Revolution can be attributed to another cause – the knowing oversights of Touré’s programme. While the government claimed to exert total control over musicians, in reality they were subject to looser and varying degrees of regulation. Thus, for example, the announcement in August 1968 of weekly performances before party leaders was never followed up, while musicians in the national dance bands largely continued pursuing their own artistic interests. As this point suggests, despite the constant spectre of the Revolution, state power in Touré’s Guinea was in reality often more chaotically and inconsistently wielded.

In her study of music and socialist transition in Bulgaria, Donna Buchanan notes that musicians in state-sponsored traditional ensembles through the 1980s had to submit “their own creative voices to the demands of cultural policy” (2006: 178). State-sponsored music during the socialist era was overseen by a vast cultural bureaucracy involving musicologists, folklorists, historians and others who detailed and dictated the aesthetic values of performance to promote socialist ideology and national unity. This bureaucracy was exhaustively comprehensive, with various committees, directorates and bureaus regulating artistic content, for example, by emphasizing Thracian instruments and tuning systems over other regional musics. As Buchanan describes, national

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<sup>82</sup> Miriam Makeba contends, however, that state-sponsored musicians at times became complacent precisely because of their guaranteed income. She writes that she eventually recruited non-Guinean musicians for her band because the Guinean musicians, secure in their state salaries, would rarely bother to attend rehearsals (1987: 224).

musicians in Bulgaria chafed under this exercise of state power, as they found their own creativity greatly curtailed.

In Guinea, on the other hand, Touré's own preoccupation was primarily with song texts, and no teams of musicologists or others were organized to supervise the musical elements of song. As Tèlivel Diallo, the former Guinean National Director for Culture, told me, as long as lyrics followed the party line, musicians in the national dance bands had relative freedom to do as they liked. Thus, as I described earlier, these musicians were able to continue using imported electric guitars, brass instruments and drum-kits, even while Touré condemned capitalism and the "cultural sabotage" of the West.<sup>83</sup> By 1968, the party declared that "[o]ne fact is definitely settled in Guinea, that music fans only have ears for African hymns, chants, ballads, work and celebration songs and instrumental arrangements drawn from their own national repertoire."<sup>84</sup> Yet musicians with the national dance bands experimented with American popular genres such as jazz and funk, genres that had long since been banned from radio broadcast. Through the 1970s, newer bands such as Kaloum Star and Camayenne Sofa featured electric organs and guitar wah-wah pedals in their sound, while syncopated funk drum beats in 4/4 time became increasingly common. While jazz and funk are African-American genres whose popularity in Guinea suggests musical and cultural affinities across the Black Atlantic, it should be noted that African-American music was also expressly used as a tool of soft power by the American government. Thus, in the context of the Cold War, the United

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<sup>83</sup> Ismael Touré (1972) 'Aperçu sur le sabotage culturel en République de Guinée', *Horoya* 1870, 5th March 1972: 2-3

<sup>84</sup> Ibrahima Khalil Diaré (1968) 'Quinzaine Artistique Nationale 1968: Ensembles de Musique de Danse', *Horoya* 28-30 September, No. 1570, pp. 3-4

States sent jazz bands and blues musicians to Guinea.<sup>85</sup> As Gayatri Spivak argues, “American expansion would use African-Americans to conquer the African market and the extension of American civilization” (1999: 376). Yet, despite these implications, sounds such as these were sanctioned by the state and promoted through the *Quinzaine Artistique*.

Satisfied with the direction of lyrical practices, Touré overlooked such ideological inconsistencies in musical form in part because of his desire to capture global attention, to export his ideas overseas. While he professed a purely local, African outlook, his own magpie instincts absorbed influences from Mao’s China to ancient Greece and almost everywhere in between.<sup>86</sup> In a similarly cosmopolitan vein, Guinea’s national dance bands could reach out to wider audiences by using the idioms of European and North American pop music. The international success of the Ballets Africains, a group founded in 1940s Paris to present West African dance in a European concert-hall format, paved the way in this regards.<sup>87</sup> The group was nationalized after Guinean independence, yet

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<sup>85</sup> In 1968, for example, the U.S. government sponsored the blues musicians Junior Wells and his band during a one-week ‘cultural mission’ to Guinea. Anonymous (1968) ‘L’arrivée de l’orchestre Junior Wells en Guinée’, *Horoya* 6<sup>th</sup> January 1968, No. 1372. In *Jazz, Rock and Rebels* (2000), Uta Poiger makes a similar observation about the use of jazz music as a tool of American soft diplomacy in 1950s East Germany. Poiger notes that in the 1940s and 1950s, authorities and many older people in East and West Germany alike were dismayed by the popularity of American pop culture, and in particular jazz, amongst local youth. By the late 1950s, however, the West German and American authorities began to deploy jazz as an important tool of soft power, through radio broadcasts and the dissemination of records amongst East German youths.

<sup>86</sup> Touré’s most famous quote – his statement before Charles de Gaulle in 1958 that “We prefer freedom in poverty to slavery in riches” – was itself adapted from the Greek philosopher Democritus, who stated that “poverty in a democracy is preferable to poverty in a tyranny.”

<sup>87</sup> The Ballets Africains originated as the Théâtre Africain, a performance group founded in 1940s Paris by two Guinean students, Fodéba Keita and Facélli Kanté. The group later switched from theatre to dance and percussion and was renamed the Ballets Africains de Fodéba Keita. Keita was keenly aware of the tastes of European audiences and thus adapted dances and rhythms from West African ritual performance to shortened, stage-friendly formats. One of his central aims was to promote African culture as sophisticated and modern, embracing the idea of both African tradition and an African modernity “marked by Western civilization” (1957: 206; my translation). Thus, for example, in addition to adopting European stage choreography, he also foregrounded the guitar in many Ballets’ songs. Such a cosmopolitan ideal fit closely with the aims of Sékou Touré and the two men became close allies. Upon Guinean independence, Keita

Touré continued allowing it to conduct tours of Europe and North America, where it was enthusiastically received. While Touré's rhetoric was often inflammatory in its African socialist exclusivity, the cosmopolitan Ballets Africains served as a useful instrument of soft power, showcasing Guinean culture to a receptive international audience.

Similarly, the regime encouraged the national dance bands to develop a cosmopolitan sound as Touré recognized music's ability to reconcile ideological contradiction. Yet this allowance also created anxieties, as the regime worried about musicians operating outside its control. The 'perpetual motion mania' of Touré's Guinea meant that musicians needed from time to time to be reminded of their revolutionary duties.

### 1.3.2 *Regard sur le Passé*

In response to the new ideological atmosphere of August 1968, Touré sought to rein in popular musicians within the mandates of the Revolution. At the PDG meeting, a new emphasis was thus placed on looking back into the nation's past, as the national dance bands were told to adapt "the great African hymns" for contemporary audiences.<sup>88</sup> The reference here is to *jeliya*, the art of the Mande *jelilu*, as Touré attempted to regain control of the aesthetic direction of popular music. As an evocation of the nation's glorious roots in the Mande Empire, but importantly also as a prestigious vehicle of praise, *jeliya*, performed by the national dance bands and in honour of the president, ticked all the right boxes of 'revolutionary realism'. Thus, for example, the party

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was named Minister of the Interior and of Information, a position from which he oversaw cultural production in the new nation. Interview with Hamidou Bangoura, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009. See also Cohen, 2012; Counsel, 2006; Rouget, 1956b.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous (1968) 'Réunion des Orchestres de Conakry sous la Présidence du Comité National de la JRDA', *Horoya* 1546, 31 August 1968, p. 4

newspaper *Horoya* singled out the army dance band (the Orchestre de la Garde Republicaine, later renamed Super Boiro Band) for commendation following its concert in October 1968. At the concert, the band performed both the Mande epic ‘Janjon’, a praise piece to the Mande emperor Sunjata Keita, followed by an adaptation of the Mande hunter’s song ‘Kulanjon’, reworked in praise of Touré and the PDG. As the journalist notes, the musicians had successfully “understood that the African concert must depict great African figures and moments of African history alongside the present concerns and the future of our people.”<sup>89</sup>

A few months after this performance, in March 1969, Bembeya Jazz debuted a new song at a concert to celebrate the twenty-second anniversary of the PDG. The concert, a gala affair held at the Palais du Peuple and featuring performances by the National Instrumental Ensemble and four of the national dance bands, capped three days of festivities in honour of the party. Yet from all these celebrations, Bembeya’s performance was the crowning point. Dedicated to the Guinean struggle from colonialism to independence, this was not merely a pop song but a Guinean “opera”, as one member of the audience called it, featuring instrumental music, song, speech and action.<sup>90</sup>

The song in question was titled ‘Regard sur le Passé’ (Look to the Past), released by the national label Syliphone later that year (accompanying CD tracks 1 and 2).<sup>91</sup>

‘Regard sur le Passé’ signalled a radical departure for the electric dance bands and has

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<sup>89</sup> Anonymous (1968) ‘Quinzaine Artistique National’, *Horoya* No. 1575, 6-7 October 1968

<sup>90</sup> In an interview with Banning Eyre, Bembeya’s guitarist, Sékou Diabaté, recounts that the dance bands had all been commissioned to write music in honour of the repatriation of the remains of Almamy Samory Touré from Gabon, and of other Guinean resistance heroes. Diabaté says that he had the idea to compose a song based on *jeli* praise pieces to the Almamy and other warriors. Interview with Sékou ‘Bembeya’ Diabaté, <http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/47/Sekou%20Bembeya%20Diabate-2002>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010

<sup>91</sup> The Syliphone label was created around 1967 and disbanded in December 1977. Graeme Counsel has conducted extensive research on the label and is currently involved in a project to digitise and catalogue the Syliphone archive (see Counsel, 2009).

been described as the song that “single-handedly transformed Guinean music” (Counsel, 2006: 102). For one, the orchestration prominently features *bala* (xylophone) alongside electric guitar and brass instruments. The slow tempo *bala* line, played by Djeli Sory Kouyaté, represents a shift away from the Cuban rhythms that had until that time characterized Guinean popular music (Charry, 2000: 263). As noted, Cuban rhythms had been popular in West and Central Africa since the 1930s and were a consistent feature of electric dance music. In West Africa, not everyone favoured this influence. Richard Shain writes that Senegal’s first president Leopold Senghor “abhorred” Cuban music, largely due to his ties with France and his dislike of Fidel Castro (2011: 146).<sup>92</sup> For many West African musicians, however, Cuban music represented an “alternative modernity” to the European and North American model, a cosmopolitan reference with roots in Africa (Shain, 2002: 84; see also, White, 2002: 668). In Guinea, Sékou Touré maintained close relations with Castro, while Cuban and Guinean dance bands crossed the Atlantic to perform in each other’s country. Nonetheless, as the trumpeter Mory Sidibé said to me, if you wanted to win in the national festival and to be well considered, you did not play Cuban music.<sup>93</sup> Cuban music was considered good for dancing, but did not adequately address the demands of revolutionary realism. While Cuban music remained popular, there was a perceptible shift away from it in the 1960s and 1970s – a shift signalled by ‘Regard sur le Passé’ and met with party approval.

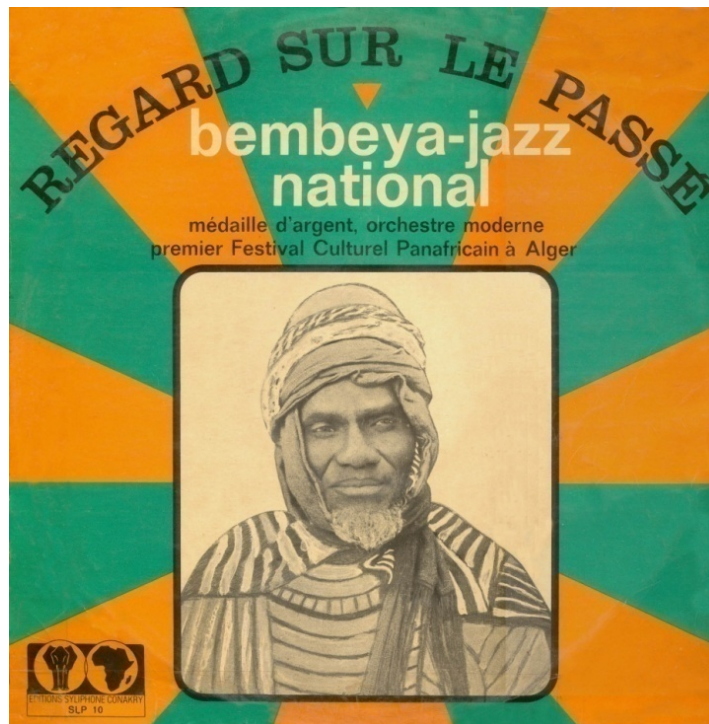
‘Regard sur le Passé’ is a thirty-four minute praise piece to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Guinean resistance hero, Almamy Samory Touré, who was the ruler of the Wassoulou

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<sup>92</sup> Shain writes that Senghor’s antagonistic relationship with Touré was another factor here, as Touré maintained close ties with Castro. Thus, despite its popularity, Senghor banned Afro-Cuban music from the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar (2011: 147).

<sup>93</sup> Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2009

Empire and was arrested and executed by the French in 1898.<sup>94</sup> The lyrics detail the life of the Almamy (a West African title for an Islamic leader), extolling his virtues as a ruler and his place in the pantheon of great African figures. By presenting this story, Bembeya depicts a glorious and uniquely Guinean past, itself a key part of Touré’s ideology. Touré sought to establish Guinean exceptionalism, referencing precolonial resistance heroes such as Almamy Samory Touré as presagers of the brave new postcolonial state.



**Fig. 2** Bembeya Jazz, ‘Regard Sur le Passé’, SLP 10a, with a picture of the Almamy Samory Touré on the cover. Image reproduced courtesy of Graeme Counsel

Yet while much of the lyrics sing about the Almamy and his *sofa* warriors, the song is also a direct homage to Sékou Touré, who claimed the Almamy as an ancestor. Counsel notes that there is some disagreement in the literature as to the veracity of Sékou Touré’s claim

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<sup>94</sup> The Wassoulou Empire occupied a region in present-day northeastern Guinea and southwestern Mali. The Empire existed from 1878 to the Almamy Samory’s defeat and arrest in 1898.

(2006: 107-8). Nonetheless, the song's lyrics take this lineage as a fact, as the last recitative passage illustrates:

<i>Ils ne sont mort, ces héros</i>	They are not dead, these heroes
<i>Et ils ne mourront pas</i>	And they will not die
<i>Après eux, d'audacieux pionniers reprirent la lutte de libération nationale qui qui finalement triompha sous la direction d'Ahmed Sékou Touré, petit-fils de ce même Samory.</i>	After them, bold pioneers took up the struggle for national liberation that eventually triumphed under the leadership of Ahmed Sékou Touré, grandson of that same Samory.
<i>Le 29 septembre 1958, la Révolution triompha, nous vengeant définitivement de cet autre 29 septembre 1898, date de l'arrestation de l'Empereur du Wassoulou, l'Almamy Samory Touré.</i>	On 29 <sup>th</sup> September 1958, the Revolution triumphed, avenging us definitively of that other 29 <sup>th</sup> September, date of the arrest of the Emperor of Wassoulou, the Almamy Samory Touré.

Following *jeli* traditions of praise-singing, 'Regard sur le Passé' glorifies Sékou Touré's genealogy by linking him to an illustrious ancestor, in this case his alleged grandfather. In reinforcing the sanguinity between the president and a heroic past leader, the song seeks to reinforce the narrative of Touré as national hero and thus to legitimize his rule. The link is made not just through blood lines, but also through a coincidence of dates – Almamy Samory Touré's arrest on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1898, and the Revolution's 'triumph' on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1958. This second date refers to Guinea's vote for full independence from France, which actually occurred a day earlier on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1958 but is slightly fudged here to reinforce the connection. Through these links, Touré is positioned as the obvious and irreplaceable leader of the new nation, a figure who has rightfully inherited

the mantle of leadership. ‘Regard sur le Passé’ testifies not just to Guinean exceptionalism, but more specifically to that of Touré himself.

Lyricaly, the song is divided between sections in Maninka sung by Aboubacar Demba Camara and spoken sections recited in French by Sékou ‘Le Growl’ Camara, recounting the story of the Almamy. The sung passages are based on various *jeli* pieces, including ‘Keme Burema’, a praise song to the Almamy’s brother, and ‘Douga’, a song to the courage of warriors. This mix of song (*donkili*) and speech (*kuma*) is a common feature in *jeli* music. What is particularly significant about ‘Regard sur le Passé’, however, is that the recitation is in French. Despite Touré’s stated opposition to European languages, lengthy and lyrically significant portions of the song are delivered in the language of the former colonial power. Moreover, the delivery of *kuma* is typically considered a highly specialized *jeli* art, as this type of speech is historically authoritative and rests on a high degree of knowledge of genealogy and the past (Charry, 2000: 95). The speaker in this case, however, is not a *jeli* and instead was chosen for his command of French (Lee, 1988: 68). Contrary to Touré’s revolutionary policies, the ability to communicate well in French is integral here to the song’s delivery.

In this regards, ‘Regard sur le Passé’ skilfully interprets Touré’s ideology through music. As the PDG youth leaders had told the dance bands the previous summer, the regime wanted ‘concert music’, intended for listening rather than dancing. ‘Regard sur le Passé’ thus replaces Cuban dance rhythms with a slow-tempo beat, articulated on the locally distinctive *bala*. By referencing *jeli* pieces such as ‘Keme Bourema’ and ‘Douga’ within a modernized format, featuring electric guitar and brass instruments alongside *bala*, the song represents an innovative re-working of the ‘great African hymns’ of the

past. Tradition and modernity are integrated into a piece of epic grandeur and length. In addition to these musical elements, the song's lyrics conform to the demands of 'revolutionary realism' by elevating Guinea – and Touré – to heroic status. That this occurs here in French as well as Maninka reconciles the conflict between the regime's cosmopolitan and cultural nationalist objectives.

'Regard sur le Passé' was hailed by Touré and his party, and featured prominently in Guinea's contribution to the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival, as I will describe in the next section.<sup>95</sup> As a result, the song provided a model of revolutionary realism in music, one which was quickly emulated. At a November 1970 concert in honour of the Guinean army, for example, the dance band Balla et ses Balladins performed a twenty-minute praise piece to Sékou Touré, entitled 'L'Homme d'Afrique' (The Man of Africa). The piece included the *jeli* instrument *kora* (harp) alongside guitar, trumpet and saxophone. Like 'Regard sur le Passé', the lyrics were also divided into sung and spoken passages, which the audience listened to in "attentive silence".<sup>96</sup> Once again, this was 'concert music' emphasizing presidential homage, rather than popular dance. At the same concert, Bembeya Jazz followed up on their earlier success with a new piece entitled 'Echos des Anciens' ('Echoes of the Ancestors'). The main melodic theme of 'Echos des Anciens' was played on *bala* and based on the *jeli* pieces 'Boloba' and 'Dougá', praise songs respectively to the thirteenth century Susu king Soumaoro Kanté and to the courage of warriors.<sup>97</sup> The performance also included a recitative section by Sékou 'Le

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<sup>95</sup> Hélène Lee writes that, at its debut performance at the Palais du Peuple, the song received a six-minute ovation (1988: 68).

<sup>96</sup> Anon. (1970) 'Soirée solennelle en l'honneur de l'A.P.G.', *Horoya* 14-20 November 1970, No. 96, pp. 42-44

<sup>97</sup> As noted in the Introduction, Soumaoro Kanté was the Susu king defeated by Sunjata Keita at the Battle of Kirina. 'Boloba' is said to have been played to him by Sunjata's *jeli*, Bala Faséké Kouyaté, in order to win him over, and is thus one of the oldest pieces in the *jeli* repertoire (Charry, 2000: 143).

Growl' Camara, praising the Guinean army. None of these songs received the same success as 'Regard sur le Passé', however, and after a moment the dance bands largely turned their attention away from epic adaptations of the 'great African hymns'.

'Regard sur le Passé' presents the paradigmatic example of 'revolutionary music' in Touré's Guinea. Touré wanted above all music that promoted his personality cult, that referenced 'African-ness' and 'Guinean-ness' by offering a culturally prestigious platform for praise. Yet while many aspects of the song were emulated in its immediate wake, to a great degree it remains a one-off. Even after its success, the national dance bands, including Bembeya Jazz, continued primarily playing dance music in shorter pop formats, although now with local instruments more commonly used. The song did succeed in moving away from Cuban rhythms in the revolutionary repertoire, but such influences were largely replaced by funk rhythms, which by the late 1960s were becoming a new musical signifier of global black modernity. The major impact of 'Regard sur le Passé' was its elevation of praise to new heights in popular music, paving the way for later songs such as 'Mandjou', by the Malian dance band Les Ambassadeurs du Motel.<sup>98</sup>

'Regard sur le Passé' is little heard or spoken of in Conakry today and never arose spontaneously during my conversations with the Touré-era dance band musicians. The

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<sup>98</sup> 'Les Ambassadeurs were invited to perform at Guinea's 1975 *Quinzaine Artistique*, where the group's lead singer, Salif Keita, sang in praise of Touré. Although Keita is from a noble family, he often performs *jeli* praise, with his version of 'Mandjou' the most iconic example. Like 'Regard sur le Passé', 'Mandjou' identifies Touré as the grandson of the Almamy Samory. Moreover, the song traces Touré's genealogy to the first *mori* or Islamic holy men in West Africa (Charry, 2000: 38). For this act, Touré awarded Keita with a Presidential medal, money and clothing. The association has proved deeply controversial for Keita, who is often criticized in the international press for praising a brutal dictator. In Guinea, however, Keita is largely celebrated for 'Mandjou', and, at a concert of his that I attended in Conakry in 2004, performed it as the last song of the evening, to great emotion and tipping from the audience. As the Touré-era saxophonist Mamadou 'Le Maitre' Barry said to me, "you know, the greatest praise song ever sung to Sékou Touré wasn't even a Guinean song; it was 'Mandjou'" (Interview, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009).

song generates more excitement amongst world music and academic commentators (including this one) than it does locally and is rarely heard, even in abbreviated form, on Guinean radio. Yet Touré's aim in part was precisely to rouse international interest. With its central recitative passages in French, 'Regard Sur le Passé' was specifically intended to spread Touré's praise to new audiences overseas, as I will discuss next.

#### ***1.4 The First Pan-African Cultural Festival***

Over the course of his regime, Sékou Touré developed two key concerns: ensuring his absolute rule in Guinea and exporting his ideology overseas. The president sought to establish himself as a pan-African, pan-socialist leader throughout West Africa and well beyond. As Thomas Turino argues, nationalism is by its nature a cosmopolitan endeavour, borrowed from numerous sources and seeking to engage others in the world (2000: 12-3). In pursuing these ambitions, music was an integral instrument under Touré's Revolution, as the example of the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival shows.

As the Cold War raged in the mid-twentieth century, Guinea, like many countries in the developing world, was an arena in which both the East and West sought to exert influence. While Touré visited the United States as early as October 1959, relations with the country had deteriorated by the mid-1960s and Guinea became increasingly allied with China, Cuba and the Eastern bloc. Yet, while Western commentators often described Touré as a socialist or communist, his ideology cannot be easily labelled. From the 1960s, he did embrace the term 'socialist', and used it frequently as a prefix to describe various features of Guinean life. But his ideas were rooted in a number of schools of thought, of which socialism was only one. His government did not evoke class struggle

until 1967, and rarely even then, since in Touré's Guinea, "nationalism transcends socialism" (Rivière, 1977: 91). Another commentator at the time wrote that Touré's "elaborate philosophy borrowed in bits and pieces from Russian Marxism, Jaurèsian socialism, and Nkrumah's brand of African nationalism" (Du Bois, 1965: 3), while Touré described himself as an Africanist.<sup>99</sup> Yet further added to this mix was Touré's ambivalence towards Europe. As in other postcolonial contexts, Guinean nationalism was deeply cosmopolitan, engaging with ideas, relations and forms of modernity from throughout the world (see Berger, 2008; Turino, 2000).<sup>100</sup> Touré thought globally and sought to promote his Revolution well beyond Guinea's borders.

In the mid-twentieth century, two strains of cosmopolitan thought shaped the black francophone world. On the one hand was the political and cultural philosophy of *négritude*, a movement started in 1930s Paris by a group of intellectuals, writers and scholars from the French Black Atlantic. *Négritude* sought to foreground and embrace 'blackness' in the face of European racism, colonialism and domination.<sup>101</sup> The movement's founders included the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the future Senegalese president Léopold Senghor. Their aim was to accept and examine the black condition as a means to redress the colonial project of cultural assimilation and erasure.

In its earlier form, *négritude* was primarily focused on culture and artistic representation,

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Leo Sarkisian, [http://www.afropop.org/radio/radio\\_program/ID/545](http://www.afropop.org/radio/radio_program/ID/545)

<sup>100</sup> Stefan Berger argues that colonialism's success in exporting European ideas of modernity and the nation-state meant that non-European nationalists were "discursive prisoners of Eurocentrism" (2008: 13). Postcolonial nationalists thus sought to craft their own identities and ideologies, yet Europe appeared as the ever present interlocutor, against whose history and culture these nationalists sought to define themselves.

<sup>101</sup> Aimé Césaire is held to have coined the term *négritude* in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in which he writes,

... the determination of my biology, not prisoner to a facial angle, a shape of hair, a sufficiently flat nose, a sufficiently *mélanien* complexion, and *négritude*, no longer a cephalic sign, or a plasma, or a soma, but measured by the compass of suffering; and the negro each day lower, more cowardly, more sterile, less deep, more widespread outside, more separated from oneself, more crafty with oneself, less present with oneself; I accept, I accept all that ... (1939: 46-7; my translation)

although under Senghor, the movement became more explicitly political, concerned with international relations between Africa and Europe. In contrast to *négritude*, a more militant ideology had emerged by the 1960s, championed by African leaders such as the Guinea-Bissauan nationalist Amílcar Cabral, the Beninese writer Stanislas Spero Adotevi and Guinea's Sékou Touré. These and other figures promoted African and Third World liberation in revolutionary terms, calling for the total overthrow of colonial political and cultural domination. While Senegal's Senghor maintained close relations with France and emphasized the fraternity of a 'Universal Civilization', militant African nationalists denounced these ideas as neo-imperialist, ensuring continued African subjugation at the hands of Europe.<sup>102</sup> For proponents of both *négritude* and militant African nationalism, however, culture and art were inextricably linked to politics. In this regards, two cultural festivals were held in the 1960s that defined the argument between these schools of thought.

In 1966, Senegal hosted the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar from 1<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> April. Senghor intended the festival as a celebration of *négritude*, affirming the contributions of African culture to the world.<sup>103</sup> As the festival's name emphasised, this was a global event, in which art from Africa and the African diaspora was showcased to an international audience. The primary relationship here, however, was between Africa and the West. The festival was co-sponsored by UNESCO and the Senegalese and French governments, with an inclusive approach to artists and dignitaries

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<sup>102</sup> For Senghor, the world's races were complementary, each with something unique to contribute to the others. He imagined that *négritude* would contribute to a 'Civilization of the Universal', in which the African person and the European person would co-exist in harmony.

<sup>103</sup> Hélène Neveu Kringelbach notes that the Dakar festival also served an important role for Senegalese artists and dancers in developing their profession at home. As she observes, Senghor was a "controversial patron but generous with artists who accepted his politics" (2007b: 86).

from throughout the world. Senghor's négritude emphasized "relations with others, an opening out to the world, contact and participation with others" (Senghor, 1970 [1997]: 630). In practice, this meant in particular a strengthening of ties with Europe and the United States. At the opening ceremony, for example, one commentator noted that a young African artist threw open his "handsome tribal robe" to reveal a Western shirt and tie underneath, while asserting to the applauding audience, "I am African – but I come to you by way of Europe" (Povey, 1968: 104). This gesture illustrates the balance that Senghor sought to achieve. Yet it was precisely this inclusiveness that angered Touré and other militant African nationalists.

Because of his objections to Senghor's politics, Touré forbade Guinean participation in the Dakar festival.<sup>104</sup> Instead, he directed his attention to a festival organized by the Organisation of African Unity and held in Algiers from 21<sup>st</sup> July to 1<sup>st</sup> August 1969. The Pan-African Cultural Festival assumed a vastly more militant tone than its Senegalese counterpart. Unlike Dakar, the Algiers festival limited the role of foreign visitors, and instead emphasised the need for African peoples to work together to achieve development and liberation. Despite the themes of African unity, however, the festival resembled a referendum on négritude, and on Senghor himself. French-speaking African participants, in particular, emphasised négritude as the festival's defining issue (Lindfors, 1970: 5). Delegates at Algiers declared négritude a failed idea, and advocated a political role for art that would liberate African people from any vestiges of colonialism (Harney, 2004: 76). This stance is reflected in the Pan-African Cultural Manifesto, unanimously

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<sup>104</sup> One reason for this conflict was the fact that, by the mid-1970s, hundreds of thousands of Guineans were living in Senegal, and were openly opposed to the Touré government (Kaba, 1976: 211). For Touré, the Senegalese government's tolerance and implicit support for this group amounted to a direct threat to his rule in Guinea. But, beyond Guinea, Touré also saw Senghor as a rival to his own claims for regional dominance (Dave, 2009: 466-7).

adopted on the festival's final day, and reflecting a more exclusive view of African culture for African people.<sup>105</sup> With its call for a new revolutionary African culture, the Algiers festival thus represented a rejection of Senghor's universalist vision.

In this debate, Sékou Touré sought to play a defining role. As one observer noted, in the charge against Senghor's *négritude*, "Guinea led the attack" (Lindfors, 1970: 5). Neither Touré nor Senghor personally attended the Algiers festival, but both leaders addressed the plenary session through pre-recorded speeches. While Senghor defended *négritude* as the best hope for African progress and unity, Touré used his address to mount a forty-minute attack against Senghor's ideas. Bernth Lindfors writes that some other francophone delegates saw Touré's attack as "too personal", and chose themselves to focus on the concept, rather than the man behind it. For Touré and the Guinean delegation, however, their target was clear, and their addresses to the assembly were "an obvious slap at the thinking of President Léopold Senghor" (ibid.).

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<sup>105</sup> The preamble of the Manifesto denounces colonialism as "an evil" and states that

We must go back to the sources of our values, not to confine ourselves to them, but rather to draw up a critical inventory in order to get rid of archaic and stultifying elements, the fallacious and alienating foreign elements brought in by colonialism, and to retain only those elements which are still valid ... (Organization of African Unity (1969) 'Pan-African Cultural Manifesto', para. 5)



**Fig. 3** Members of the Guinean delegation at the Pan-African Cultural Festival, carrying pictures of Touré; image reproduced courtesy of Gerhard Kubik and the International Library of African Music

In personalizing the criticisms of *négritude*, Sékou Touré sought to elevate himself as the true leader of francophone West Africa. Thus beyond his own recorded speech, Guinea’s artistic and political representatives were charged not only with showcasing the country’s culture but with exporting Touré’s personality cult to an international audience. In attendance at the Algiers festival, Gerhard Kubik dismissively observed that “the delegation of Guinée did nothing but carry huge pictures of Sekou Touré”, as captured in Figure 3.<sup>106</sup> Musically, performance of the song ‘Regard sur le Passé’ served a similar purpose. As a direct homage to Touré, with long recitative sections delivered in French, the song was a perfect vehicle for disseminating praise for Touré beyond Guinea. Thus, in addition to a live performance, recordings of the song were also sold at Guinea’s stand in the festival’s exhibition hall.

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<sup>106</sup> Gehrard Kubik (1969) ‘Letter to Hugh Tracey on the Pan-African Cultural Festival’, 28 July 1969

Initially, Bembeya Jazz was appointed to represent Guinea in the category of ‘modern music’ at Algiers.<sup>107</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps to diminish Bembeya’s status, Kélétigui Traoré, the bandleader of Kélétigui et ses Tambourinis, was designated as chef d’orchestre. In addition, a number of musicians from the other dance bands were also added to the group, including the saxophonist Momo Wandel Soumah and the trombone player Pivi Moriba. In its final line-up, the band was reconstituted as the Syli Orchestre National, thus deflecting attention from Bembeya as the national favourite. On the day of the performance itself, fifteen musicians appeared, dressed in black tie and performing a number of popular Guinean dance songs, including Balla et ses Balladin’s ‘Sara’ and Bembeya’s ‘OUA’. The centrepiece of the performance, however, was an abbreviated version of ‘Regard sur le Passé’, as recommended by the PDG itself.<sup>108</sup> With its praise passages in French, the song served to present direct homage to Touré on an international stage.

Despite Kubik’s observation, this performance was received enthusiastically, with the band winning a silver medal in their category. Guinea’s other contributions to the festival were equally well received. Many of these performances also foregrounded political messages delivered in French, such as the National Theatre Troupe’s play *Et la Nuit S’illumine* (‘And Night Turns to Day’), an homage to Touré and the PDG. Similarly, the national Syli-Cinéma presented four documentaries praising Touré’s programmes.<sup>109</sup> Guinean performance at the festival was overtly political, in a language easily understood by many of the festival’s participants.

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<sup>107</sup> Anon. (1969) ‘Vie Culturelle: La Jeunesse de la Révolution Démocratique Africaine au rendez-vous d’Alger’, *Horoya* 19-25 July 1969, No. 27, p. 26-33

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> The Guinean delegation also included a choral performance entitled ‘PDG’, after Touré’s party.

In addition to the Syli Orchestre's silver medal, Guinean performers in other categories also won gold or silver medals and overall the country received the festival's Grand Prize for its artistic contributions.<sup>110</sup> This victory represented a tremendous triumph for Sékou Touré, who saw the award as a vindication of his deployment of revolutionary art. Within the context of a heated debate with Senghor, this victory was all the more triumphant for Touré, who framed it as an affirmation not just of his ideology but of his very rule itself – one which he particularly relished as won on an international stage. Guinea's success was soon woven into the narrative of Guinea's / Touré's exceptionalism, with Algiers regularly cited as proof of the Revolution's triumph. A 1979 government report cites the festival as proof of Guinea's "world-wide audience and influence", with victory in Algiers "confirm[ing] the soundness of Guinean cultural policy" to the rest of the world (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1979: 81).

This victory was not attributed to Guinean musicians and performers, however. Rather, as one of Touré's ministers said to the party youth wing in 1970, it was a victory for the People, for Guinean youth:

The people of Guinea in particular won at Algiers by fighting imperialism on its favourite terrain: the terrain of Culture. At that meeting, the youth of Guinea proved that our way of cultural development, our mass direction, therefore of total development is historically just and objectively valid for all African people.<sup>111</sup>

In characteristic language, this passage frames the success of Guinean performers as a victory for the Revolution. Yet for the musicians themselves, the Pan-African Cultural Festival represented an important step in their careers, as they gained recognition on a

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<sup>110</sup> Guinea won silver medals in the categories of traditional music ensemble, modern dance music, choral and solo vocal music and theatre; as well as a gold medal in the category of modern ballet. The only category in which Guinea won no prizes was that of folkloric dance.

<sup>111</sup> N'Famara Keita (1970) 'La jeunesse doit bénéficier d'une éducation révolutionnaire rigoureuse', *Horoya* No. 52, 10-16 January

prestigious international stage. Speaking to me about his participation at the 1969 Algiers festival, Bembeya Jazz's lead guitarist Sékou Diabaté told me that the band triumphed, rather than the country or the Revolution. For Diabaté and other musicians, the festival was above all a creative and artistic victory, one attesting to their own agency and identity as modern, global musicians. I will consider this question of musicians' agency in more detail below.

### ***1.5 The politics of silence***

Despite its successes, popular music posed a problem for Sékou Touré, who held himself as the “sole interpreter of national realities” in post-independence Guinea (Kaba, 1976: 202). On the one hand, Touré desired a form of collective effervescence by which the population – particularly the urban young – could invest themselves emotionally in the Revolution. On the other hand, however, Touré was paranoid about potential rivals to power and eliminated anyone who seemed to pose a threat. As noted, musicians were kept in check by stressing collectivism and populism, and by actively discouraging individual stardom. Touré's government also kept a close watch on nightclubs, reviewed new material before it could be publicly released and summoned the national dance bands to meetings to monitor their activities. For the government, ‘Regard sur le Passé’ represented an apogee of revolutionary music, a format intended for focused listening to presidential praise. Yet despite party approval for the song, the national dance bands continued primarily performing dance music – and the government did not stop them. As long as the messages were politically useful, these bands were allowed relative freedom

to play with styles and genres as they liked, as Touré attempted to balance support for his musical messengers with a desire for total control.

The political usefulness of song lyrics was non-negotiable, however. As Touré set out in a 1970 speech, at the national arts festivals, the dance bands were to be judged first and foremost on their lyrical message.<sup>112</sup> In Touré's Guinea, praise was an essential component of state-sponsored art, while dissent of any kind was impermissible.

Opposition to Touré or the Revolution were crimes of the highest degree. Over the course of his regime, Touré fostered a climate of paranoia and secrecy in which neighbours were recruited to spy on each other, suspected traitors were arrested at night and detained in secret locations, and all governmental action and accountability were cloaked behind the impenetrable facade of the Revolution. Friends told me of public hangings from the 8 *novembre* bridge in Conakry, so that the force of Touré's Revolution could be seen – even if not spoken of.<sup>113</sup> Another recounted to me that the army bulldozed her uncle's house in Conakry late one night, simply because it was large and he was wealthy. The film-maker Moussa Diakité spoke to me of his year-long detention in Camp Boiro in

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<sup>112</sup> Touré set out the following criteria for the jury to take into account in the dance bands' performances: "Theme treated, presentation, melody, harmony and execution" ('Discours de Clôture du 1er Festival Culturel National', *Horoya* No. 64, 4-10 April 1970). While melody can be understood in reference to the Mande term *donkili*, indicating particular songs in the *jeli* repertoire, there is no equivalent local notion of harmony. Touré's inclusion of the term here suggests a conscious attempt at theorizing Guinean music in Western terms. In fact, some of the dance band musicians told me that Touré commissioned a group of Korean music teachers in the 1970s to instruct them in European music theory, including solfège. Charry notes the continued use of solfège at the National Music Conservatoire in Dakar. As he writes, "[t]he psychological boost in prestige attained by using French methods such as *solfège* to teach African music may have had great value for a generation brought up in a colonial era", while for younger musicians today it makes practical sense when integrating traditional instruments such as *kora* into modern mixed ensembles (2000: 331).

<sup>113</sup> 8 November 1964 was the adoption date of the *Loi Cadre*, a comprehensive law outlining a wide range of social, economic and political reforms under the PDG. In addition to the 8 *novembre* bridge, Conakry is filled with similar landmarks named after important revolutionary dates. Thus the *Stade du 28 septembre* (28<sup>th</sup> September Stadium) commemorates Guinea's vote against joining the French West Africa community in 1958, while the *Jardin 2 octobre* (2<sup>nd</sup> October Garden) celebrates Guinea's independence four days later. By inscribing such dates into the urban landscape, Touré sought to further impose and naturalize his revolutionary version of Guinean history.

1971 because he had been educated in West Germany and was suspected of harbouring counter-revolutionary feelings. At the same time, by the late 1970s, Touré had become increasingly xenophobic as he feared plots to overthrow him, and thus Guinea cut off ties with other countries, becoming isolated and inward-looking. As a result of actions such as these, the country came to be defined by an atmosphere of guardedness, caution and quiet, of strategic and meaningful silence, as people learned to keep the violence of the Revolution a public secret. As Kaba wrote in 1976, “[m]ost of those who had the ability to criticise [the regime] have been physically eliminated or imprisoned, and this has created a deep sense of insecurity among those who are still living, and has taught them to be prudent” (1976: 217-8).

This silence was in part an act of censorship enforced by the state. As noted, ‘revolutionary realism’ demanded that art support the regime, while those who violated this rule were duly punished. Thus, critical Guinean writers such as Djibril Tamsir Niane and Laye Camara were either imprisoned or forced into exile, while all their works were banned. In general, Touré was deeply suspicious of literary forms as a source of dissent. Touré himself wrote prolifically and students and citizens were made to memorize and quote lengthy passages of his own writings, yet he discouraged all other literature, poetry and writing. The official attitude supported ‘revolutionary literature’ (i.e. Touré’s writings) but, as a government report stated, “[w]e do not want authors and artists with a bookish cast of mind” (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1979, 71). Writers were seen as intellectuals, a dangerous ‘counter-revolutionary’ force representing the educated elite that Touré sought to eliminate. Thus, even Fodéba Keita, the poet, government minister

and founder of the Ballets Africains, was imprisoned and executed, despite his support for the Revolution.

Yet, in addition to violent censorship, the politics of silence under Touré's Revolution was also self-regulated. Cultural aesthetics in Guinea have long valued discretion and concealment, as illustrated by the Maninka proverb *Kuma te kunan ceba min kono*: "An intelligent man keeps the words inside him." In Mande culture, "[t]rue knowledge is held in silence", while words are often regarded with suspicion (Miller, 1990: 81).<sup>114</sup> Under the constant threat of violence and arbitrary detention, these values gained new urgency in the post-independence era as Guinean people learned first-hand the importance of keeping quiet. In her autobiography, Makeba observes that, "[a]s for challenging the president or offering criticism about anything, I never see a display of courage as great as this" (1988: 214). Thus, outside of literature, there are strikingly few reports of artists or musicians who dissented during the Touré era. During my fieldwork in Conakry, I was told of members of the Ballets Africains who were said to have defected during their European and American tours. Charry notes that the guitarist Kerfala 'Papa' Diabaté left Guinea for Abidjan in the 1960s "in part owing to his strong individualistic personality and objections to the overt politicization of music by the ruling PDG party" (2000: 254). Other musicians who left Guinea for Abidjan in pursuit of greater artistic license included the *kora* player Jali Musa Jawara (Counsel, 2006: 123) and the singer Fodé Conté.<sup>115</sup> I did not hear, however, of a single musician in Conakry

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<sup>114</sup> Miller notes that 'truth' and authenticity are associated with the inner organs. Speech originates from the inner body, but loses its trustworthiness as it reaches the mouth, at which point "[t]he word is then ejected upwards to the mouth, 'the enemy of man', where it enters the world, capable of insulting and deceiving" (1990: 81).

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Amirou Conté, 12 May 2009. The director of the Syliphone record label, Boubakar Kanté, also left Conakry for Abidjan in the 1970s due to friction with the Touré regime (Suzuki, 2004: 71).

who publicly criticised the regime or expressed dissent through song. Rather, musicians were keenly aware of both the potential rewards of state-sponsorship and the dangers of angering Touré. The *jeli* M'Bady Kouyaté told me that when state officials came to his village in northwestern Guinea to bring him to Conakry, his mother, knowing only that Touré wanted to see him, began crying in fear for her son's life.<sup>116</sup> The percussionist Papa Kouyaté similarly recounted that when he was first recruited as a state-sponsored musician, officials from the regime came to his house to tell him that Sékou Touré had summoned him. Not knowing the reason for the meeting, Kouyaté recalled that he was so terrified he could barely dress himself and arrived at the president's residence wearing two pairs of trousers, one on top of the other, before realizing his mistake.

Yet once recruited, as an accompanist for Miriam Makeba during her stay in Guinea, Kouyaté saw the benefits of state patronage. In return for accommodating the regime, state-sponsored musicians were employed as civil servants, receiving salaries, housing, instruments and monthly food rations.<sup>117</sup> In a context of poverty, it is understandable that such financial security would not be taken lightly, even if it came with a condition of singing for the state. Furthermore, with *jeli* music as the model, the notion of performing praise in exchange for patronage had deep historical precedent. It was simply that, in this case, the 'grand patron' was the postcolonial state (Newton, 1999: 323). As the theatre director Fifi Bangoura, daughter of the writer and historian Djibril Tamsir Niane, told me,

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<sup>116</sup> Conversation, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2009

<sup>117</sup> Larkin notes that in post-independence Africa, government salaries were "as much a political technology as ... an economic one ... [defining how] African subjects were constituted as citizens, drawing them into a political contract with the state" (2008: 179). In this way, he argues, the postcolonial state was able to assert itself as the patron, thus demanding not so much products but rather loyalty and support from its clients.

[The dance band musicians] agreed to serve the national cause, to be its ambassadors ... The state had its own interests. It made use of a consenting ambassador that accepted [its role]. Certainly you couldn't refuse without dying, but we can't really speak of an intellectual and creative movement of contestation amongst musicians. That I haven't seen.<sup>118</sup>

Such a role for musicians is mirrored elsewhere in Africa, reflecting wider regional and historical practices of praise-singing. In 1960s Nigeria, highlife musicians refrained from political critique and thus won state patronage, while writers such as Wole Soyinka were marginalized because of their oppositional stance (Ojomola, 2009: 255). Later that decade, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the Nigerian Afro-beat pioneer more known for his musical protests and rebellious stance, sought patronage by singing 'Viva Nigeria!' in support of the ruling interests (Veal, 2000: 68). In Mobutu's Zaire, the president rewarded musicians who steered clear of anti-government politics, as music became intertwined with a "political culture in which propaganda thrived" (White, 2008: 11). Congolese popular musicians thus became dependent on the state and wealthy power-brokers as their major source of patronage. With the threat of marginalization and political violence in the background, praise-singing developed as an important means for these musicians to protect themselves, both physically and economically.

In Guinea, the politics of silence similarly meant that it was 'prudent' to keep one's criticism to oneself, as Kaba notes. This stance was true not just for musicians but for the population at large. In fact, the safest way to express oneself, whether a cabinet minister or a market trader, was to ventriloquize the president. As a result, speeches by government officials and articles by journalists relied heavily on Touré's writings, while ordinary citizens were expected to quote his favoured sayings and schoolchildren to memorize his works. (As I will discuss in the next chapter, Touré's voice continues to

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<sup>118</sup> Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009

echo in Conakry today through the continuing use of such formulae). In music, state-sponsored dance bands sang in praise of almost every aspect of government, including songs celebrating literacy and agricultural campaigns, the national fruit juice distributor, the army, the party, the national airline carrier, and the president's wife. 'Regard sur le Passé' set a standard for praise of the president himself, promoting the idea of Touré's exceptional status as national hero. The regime hailed 'Regard sur le Passé', prominently featuring it in Guinea's contribution to the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival and issuing several recordings of it through the state distribution label. Political silence in Touré's Guinea was thus filled with words, yet words that were carefully chosen for their guardedness.

But what about the spaces in between these words? Much of the literature on African music describes metaphorical critiques in song, detailing the ways in which seemingly innocuous words can in fact be oppositional. Scholars have written of the use of humour, satire and metaphors of love as veils for political attacks (Olaniyan, 2004; Vail & White, 1997; White, 2008). In Touré's Guinea, the use of metaphor was also a common feature of popular music, but such devices did not necessarily constitute oppositional messages. Thus, for example, Bembeya Jazz's song 'Waraba' is an adaptation of a hunter's song about a lion. The lion in this case, however, is Sékou Touré. Similarly, the song 'Doni Doni' quotes the Maninka proverb, *Doni doni kononin da nya na*: "Little by little, the bird builds its nest." Here, the proverb is an exhortation to Guinean people to be patient with regime as the nation reconstructs itself.

Yet by accommodating the Revolution in these ways, musicians were also able to express their artistic agency, not by opposing the regime's politics but by pursuing their

own careers and musical identities. As discussed earlier, while revolutionary discourse insisted on local cultural identity and authenticity, the national dance bands played with European and North American popular genres through the course of Touré's regime. Furthermore, despite the regime's call for 'concert music', the dance bands continued primarily writing and playing popular electric dance songs. In so doing, musicians from the dance bands sought to carve out their own fame, glory and fulfilment within an ideology of collectivism. Bembeya Jazz thus wrote 'praise songs' to itself, such as 'Bembeya', which celebrates the group as both "national and international" stars, and 'Petit Sékou', an instrumental tune showcasing the talents of the group's young lead guitarist, Sékou Diabaté. As Salifou Kaba, one of the group's singers says, songs such as these were advertisements for Bembeya Jazz in a competitive environment, as the dance bands tried to outdo each other in 1960s and 1970s Conakry to win over audiences and attract new fans.<sup>119</sup> While Touré proclaimed that revolutionary art is made by the People, the dance bands strove to express their own artistic agency as musicians and bands with their own identities and objectives beyond the Revolution.

Moreover, by pursuing their careers and experimenting with various styles, musicians from the dance band strove to craft their own modernity. While Touré spoke often of music as 'revolutionary', 'socialist' or 'militant', musicians from the national dance bands speak of their style today as 'modern music' (*musique moderne*) or as 'Mande modern' (*le mandingue moderne*). In this regards, their success at the 1969 Algiers festival is not remembered as a national or revolutionary success, but rather as an acknowledgement of their modernity, an affirmation of their inclusion in global culture.

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Salifou Kaba, <http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/48/Salifou%20Kaba,%20of%20Bembeya%20Jazz-2002>

These musicians did not represent an alternative set of ideas outside the Revolution, yet operating within the Revolution, they were nonetheless able to push back against its strictures and thereby shape it in certain ways.

In a political culture of control, popular musicians were able to push the boundaries largely because Touré recognized their importance to his cause. In a predominately illiterate population, music was an integral means to disseminate messages, while *jeli* traditions of praise-singing brought prestige and status to the leader. As long as praise was sung, Touré thus sought to keep musicians happy. Miriam Makeba writes that in the 1970s, she opened a clothing boutique in Conakry, despite Touré's ban on private enterprise. She notes that "Sékou Touré is not a capitalist, and for this reason he does not congratulate me or say anything when I do finally get to open my own business. He knows about it, of course. He knows about everything that happens in his country." (1988: 188) Touré simply turned a blind eye to this intransigence because he also needed Makeba, whose presence in Guinea added great weight to his claim of pan-African leadership. Guinean musicians similarly fulfilled a vital role, both locally and internationally. Through the Pan-African Cultural Festival and other such international performances, music was a means for Touré to export his ideology and personality cult, as well as to showcase the richness of Guinean culture.

In Touré's Guinea, religion occupied a similar place.<sup>120</sup> Like the vast majority of Guineans, Touré himself was Muslim, although he rarely associated himself with Islam in

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<sup>120</sup> Guinea is predominately Muslim, with approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the population practicing either Christianity or local religions. While a more extensive discussion of the role of Islam in Guinean public life is beyond the scope of this thesis, it should be noted that Islam has played an important role in shaping national cultural representations in the post-independence period (see e.g. McGovern, 2004; Sarró, 2009). Moreover, Islam is often evoked in *jeliya* and newer neo-traditional Mande and Susu genres, with song texts frequently referring to God, religious duty and historical West African Islamic holy men.

his presidency's early years. Through the first decade of his regime, Touré exhibited a deep suspicion of religious practice, due to both his Marxist leanings and his fear of alternative systems of power and authority. In contrast to Guinean song texts, Touré's early speeches and writings rarely if ever referenced God, and much of his discussion of religion was in Marxist terms of alienation. Thus, in 1959, for example, he called for the "de-intoxication of the masses" from exploitative and deceptive social institutions (quoted in Sarró, 2009: 139). In this regards, polytheistic belief systems concentrated in the country's coastal and forest regions represented a particular threat, existing dangerously on the edges of state authority. Touré continuously framed such practices as fanatical and 'irrational', waged a 'demystification' campaign against them in the 1960s and declared a further ban in 1972 on any such beliefs. At the same time, his attitude towards monotheistic practices and Islam in particular greatly changed over the course of his rule as he understood their potential political value. While he dressed solely in European-style suits in the first years of independence, by the late 1960s he was always seen in a robe (*boubou*) and round Muslim men's hat (*kufi*). Moreover, by this time, the party newspaper wrote of Touré's meetings with Imams and publicized his participation in Muslim ceremonies and festivals as the president fulfilled his "religious duties".<sup>121</sup> By the 1970s, Islam had gained a greater public role in Guinea, including the creation of a National Islamic Council, as Touré recognized the political expediency of keeping Imams close. Like musicians, Imams served to communicate with the people, to spread messages, and as such, it was politically expedient to maintain a conciliatory stance. He thus modified his earlier view, espousing instead an "Islam at the People's service". His

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<sup>121</sup> Anon. (1968) 'La fête de Tabaski à Kankan', *Horoya* 1425: 4; Anon. (1968) 'Le 24 mai au Palais du Peuple : Le Chef de l'Etat a eu un entretien amical avec une délégation des Imams de Conakry I et II', *Horoya* 1481: 1

1977 volume of the same name opens with the *Al-Fatiha* prayer found at the beginning of the Koran,<sup>122</sup> while throughout, the text is at pains to reconcile religion with the Revolution.<sup>123</sup> “If our State is secular, Islam nonetheless remains, like all other popular and democratic institutions of the Guinean Nation, a means, an instrument at the People’s service, for its ever growing progress” (Touré, 1977: 107).

Touré’s attempts to balance religious tolerance with revolutionary exigency here mirror his stance toward music. In both cases, Touré sought to appropriate the power of deep-rooted cultural institutions, refiguring them in service of the Revolution. As a result, religious leaders and musicians were able to a degree to engage in their own practices, to pursue their own religious and musical agendas, as long as they ultimately acknowledged the authority of the state. For musicians, this meant accommodating the regime’s politics, maintaining silence about its violence and singing in the Revolution’s praise – strategies which thus afforded members of the national dance bands the ability to build careers, travel, perform and create.

Writing of ideology in ‘advanced capitalist society’, Terry Eagleton argues that

... there is no reason to assume that [the] political docility [of the exploited] signals some gullible, full-blooded adherence to the doctrines of their superiors. It may signal rather a coolly realistic sense that political militancy, in a period when the capitalist system is still capable of conceding some material advantages to those who keep it in business, might be perilous and ill-advised. (1991: 36)

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<sup>122</sup> The prayer begins with the verse (in Touré’s volume transliterated and translated to French) *Bissimillâhe Rahamâne Rahîme*: In the name of God the All-Powerful, Forgiving and Merciful (quoted in Touré, 1977: 11; my translation).

<sup>123</sup> While the focus here is on Islam, Touré also adopts a conciliatory approach towards Christianity, writing that Christianity originally emerged as “the refuge of the poor, of slaves, without discrimination according to race” (1977: 14). He elaborates, however, that under colonialism, Christianity became a tool of the imperial powers. Thus, the PDG was necessarily justified in expelling all foreign priests after independence, as it sought to ‘Africanize’ the Guinean church (ibid.: 15). In this regard, Christianity, as well as animism, are associated with possible reactionary or counter-revolutionary ideas: “There are certain people who call themselves Catholic, others Protestant or animists etc. and who, in their belief have assimilated reactionary ideas to substitute them concretely with the ideas of the People” (ibid.: 16).

Similarly, in post-independence Conakry, the lack of opposition and dissent that I have described did not simply mean that the population had fully submitted to Touré's dictatorship. Rather, quietness and silence represent expressions of agency as musicians and others took a 'coolly realistic' assessment of the situation and decided to act accordingly. Wedeen describes such a strategy as "a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader" (1999: 6; emphasis in original). Thus, in Touré's Guinea, state-sponsored musicians sang in praise of the regime, as they were expected to. Whether they did in fact revere Touré is impossible for me to tell, in light of the continuing opacity with which such topics are addressed (as I will elaborate in the next chapter). It is clear, however, that musicians from the national dance bands gained certain advantages through state patronage, while the risks of displeasing the regime were severe. Moreover, within a highly controlled, authoritarian context, state-sponsored musicians were able to exercise a degree of artistic freedom, promoting their bands, building up their fan bases and experimenting with new sounds and styles. As Miriam Makeba's compatriot and ex-husband, the jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela, noted of his visit to Guinea during the 1970s, "It was a regimented life, but it had its consoling pleasures" (Masekela & Cheers, 2004: 248).

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which 'revolutionary' popular music was imagined and developed under the post-independence regime of Sékou Touré. Under the cloak of the Revolution, Touré cultivated a political culture of authoritarianism, concealment and control in the new nation, in which popular music was expected to play

a key role. With a particular focus on language and song texts, Touré sought to impose his voice on Guinean public life, while elevating himself as the national hero. Musicians with the national dance bands thus performed laudatory songs in support of Touré and his Revolution, re-working Mande traditions of *jeliya* to create a culturally prestigious, yet modern form of praise. As I have described, Bembeya Jazz's 1969 song 'Regard sur le Passé' was a paradigmatic example, innovatively referencing *jeli* pieces to affirm Touré's place in the nation's past, present and future.

As I argue throughout this thesis, however, the lyrical practices of popular musicians in Conakry must be understood within a broader politics of silence, a means by which musicians attempt to negotiate the complexities of life in an authoritarian state. In Touré's Guinea, musicians with the national dance bands thus sang according to the dictates of 'revolutionary realism' while also pushing against the Revolution's strictures in other ways. As I have shown, these musicians sought to express their agency through their sound and self-promotion, and by maintaining silence on certain subjects, were to a degree able to do so.

Exploring the key foundational moment of Touré's Revolution allows us to understand the ongoing interaction between authoritarianism and musical agency in contemporary Conakry. As I will show in the next three chapters, events following a military coup d'état in December 2008 set this historical moment in play as new tensions, anxieties and strategies emerged about the history of musical practice and its current incarnations. In the next chapter, I will revisit the Revolution's national dance bands to see where they fit into the 21<sup>st</sup> century musical and political landscape and what their position reveals about Touré's legacy today.

## Chapter Two

### Memories of Musical Nationalism

What good was my reputation if I was obliged to run around to presidents for money?

- Manu Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee* (1994: 103)

#### *Introduction*

In May 2009, the African Union organized the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival, in Algiers. For the ruling military junta in Guinea, the timing of this festival was fortuitous. As discussed in the previous chapter, Guinea was awarded the Grand Prize for culture in the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in 1969. Some forty years later, the country's new government was keen to evoke this glorious episode in the nation's past in its bid to legitimize its rule and weave itself into the national story. Guinea's participation in the 2009 festival coincided with a larger attempt by the new military regime to revive the cultural policies and perceived successes of the Touré era. Yet, such attempts were a simulacrum of an earlier historical moment, a moment which is increasingly contested and removed from local realities today.

In this chapter, I will consider the role of the Touré-era national dance bands in a post-nationalist context. Throughout Africa, recent decades have seen a dramatic shift from the nationalist ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s to new political and economic paradigms. As M. Anne Pitcher and Kelly Askew argue, however, commentators on contemporary Africa often ignore the recent past in favour of future-oriented discussions of democratization and the rise of civil society. As they contend, such analyses “devalue

and ignore the interpenetration and interweaving of the old with the new order in the formulation of national policies as well as in local responses to the enormous changes that have taken place” (2006: 3).<sup>124</sup> While examining new circumstances and ideas, an understanding of African public life today must also consider the enduring impact of the post-independence period on state power and popular subjectivities.

In Guinea, Sékou Touré’s Revolution continues to reverberate in public life today, even though its structures of power had crumbled by his death in 1984 and have never been effectively replaced. In attempting to recreate the sense of a strong centralized state, governments since 1984 have turned to the symbols of the Revolution, and in particular the music from the former national dance bands. The new military government that assumed power in December 2008 thus embraced the Touré-era dance bands in an attempt to legitimate its rule and evoke a sense of shared national identity. As I argue, however, Touré’s musical nationalism has lost much of its relevance in contemporary Conakry. Today, public memories of the post-independence period are being challenged and re-shaped, and an unprecedented debate has emerged on Touré’s legacy. New attempts to historicize Touré occur in private conversation and public forums, and reveal paradoxical views about the former dictator. Musicians from the Touré-era dance bands are largely absent from this debate, however, and maintain unwavering loyalty to Touré. Despite the changing landscape, these musicians remain largely fixed to the past, both aesthetically and ideologically. Yet, as I argue, such loyalty is not nostalgia but an active choice, made in response to two distinct forces today.

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<sup>124</sup> Pitcher and Askew’s analysis focuses specifically on post-socialism rather than post-nationalism, but as they note, they two are greatly intertwined, with the vast majority of nationalist movements in the late twentieth century identifying as socialist.

Firstly, since 1984, successive governments have referenced the Touré-era dance bands in the name of nationalism. Touré-era dance music continues to capture the official imagination as a valuable means for arousing patriotic feelings amongst Guineans. As Bob White notes in his work on music in Mobutu's Zaire, authoritarian regimes have long recognized the value of music in "constructing an illusion of consensus" (2008: 80). A number of studies have examined the strategic deployment of music at times of national crisis (Cloonan & Johnson, 2002; Mach, 1994; Kartomi, 2010; Pettan, 1998) with scholars increasingly exploring the role of emotion and participation in this process (Perman, 2010; Sugarman, 2010; Turino, 2008). Yet music is subject to multiple and changing interpretations and the efficacy of such a strategy is ultimately questionable, as I argue here.

Secondly, the musical and political stances of the Touré-era bands have been further shaped by recent attention from an audience outside of Guinea. Since the 1990s, there has been growing interest in these bands from the world music market, a relatively small but influential group of music fans and producers in the Global North. While some commentators have described this market as a largely benign if not wholly positive force (Boyd, 2009; Dibango, 1994), much scholarship in ethnomusicology has taken a more critical stance. Key studies have noted world music's preoccupation with the authenticity of elsewhere (Meintjes, 2003), its inherent imbalance of power (Stokes, 2004), tendency to appropriate and commodify (Feld, 2000), and illusory celebration of difference (Erlmann, 1996). Building on these critiques, I will discuss the problems associated with representations of Touré's Revolution in world music discourse. As this chapter shows, the world music market has framed Guinean bands such as Bembeya Jazz in melancholic

terms of a glorious, faded legacy, one which largely ignores the politics of the Revolution.

As I describe here, musicians from the Touré-era dance bands responded strategically to the opportunities presented by the new military regime in 2009 as well as by the world music market. To musicians who have lost their source of patronage, these opportunities present a new means of income and status and thus Touré-era musicians willingly participate. Yet, while dance music in the post-independence period was a form of collective effervescence and celebration for the city's population, it no longer holds such meaning for most people in Conakry today, while the very notion of national culture that it represents has long since lost its currency. Official and international expectations link the Touré-era musicians to an abstracted and imagined past, thus encouraging these musicians to remain bound to a particular historical representation, while overlooking changing attitudes in the city today.

Africanist ethnomusicologists over the past decade have been particularly interested in the question of nationalism (Perman, 2010: 442). Important ethnographies by Thomas Turino (2000) and Kelly Askew (2002) in particular have provided invaluable insight into musical nationalism, focusing on the construction and emergence of national identity through music. Philip Bohlman observes, however, that “[h]ow and where music narrates the nation...depends on the variety of meanings and subject positions in music that are open to debate at any and all moments” (2008: 249). The circulation of music across years and decades allows for continued reappraisal of such identity, examining how individual and national subjectivities change over time. As Kofi Agawu holds,

musical meanings are contingent, while “the final authority for any interpretation rests on present understanding. Today’s listener rules” (2008: 4).

This chapter thus considers the ‘afterlife’ of the Touré-era dance bands, considering what this music reveals about the “continuity of its subsequent history” since Touré’s death (Treitler, 1989: 174). While the construction of musical nationalism continues to be a major theme in Africanist ethnomusicology (see, for e.g., Sanga, 2008), this chapter builds on recent inquiry into music in the post-nationalist state. Such scholarship examines how musicians adjust from seemingly coherent ideology to chaotic provisionality. In a study on popular music in Bamako, for example, Ryan Skinner describes the move for Malian artists from spokespeople of the nation to “freelance subjects” of the liberalized state (2009: 81). The demise of the First Republic in Mali signalled an end to the cultural politics and policies of the independence era, in which musicians served in the project of nation-building. As Skinner writes, this shift from emergent nationalism to unruly kleptocracy has meant that the formerly state-sponsored musicians have found themselves “dismissed and devalued” by an ambivalent political leadership (ibid.: 87-8).

Yet such a shift can also be creatively fertile. In Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko, musicians and other performers were bound by the government’s programme of *authenticité*, in which art served to recreate a ‘traditional’ local sense of identity. As White shows, this project was central to the “institutionalization of one-man rule” in Zaire, by which the president became synonymous with the nation itself (2008: 72). In such a system, musicians were supported if they actively sang for the regime, while those who did not remained “poor and silent” (ibid.: 81). As Mobutu’s regime waned by the

late 1980s, however, performers sought out new and inventive forms of musical ‘name-dropping’ and flattery to win the support of wealthy patrons in a competitive marketplace.

In the transition from one regime to another, musicians can find themselves overlooked one day and in demand the next as the symbolic meaning of their music changes. Bode Omojola describes how the Nigerian highlife singer Victor Olaiya, once a symbol of national identity and unity, found himself marginalized in the 1970s following the oil boom, as the new Yoruba elite sought modernized references to older practices (2009: 255). By 2002, however, Olaiya’s music had been brought back to the national stage by the new democratic government. Furthermore, unlike the Touré-era bands in Guinea, Olaiya was celebrated not just by the government but by musicians and the broader population as a whole as they sought to recapture the feel of an earlier moment.

These examples all illustrate how understanding of music and identities change over time as they intersect with prevailing political and historical conditions. In this thesis, I seek to understand this transition from nation, with its centrally defined identity and culture, to the more diffuse environment of the post-nationalist state. My concern is with how an imposed version of national culture becomes fragmented and contested; how a unified conception of the nation unravels as a fiction, as ethnic divisions and outside influences increasingly exert their own force. In this chapter and the next, I examine the ways in which Guinean music today, rather than performing the nation, is about singing the state: appealing to the largesse of wealthy and powerful individuals who constitute the ruling elite. Musicians today operate in a highly personalistic and competitive environment in which there is no coherent cultural policy or narrative. Yet, while

increasingly less relevant today, the Revolution's ideology of a national Guinean culture, of how to do culture, continues to capture the official imagination. In this chapter, I will consider the Touré-era dance band musicians today, looking at their role in the post-coup moment, and in particular, at the military regime's use of the Bembeya Jazz song 'Armée Guinéenne'. By examining the preparations for the 2009 Algiers festival, I will show the tensions between official and popular notions of culture in Guinea. I will also consider these musicians within the world music market to show how a particular version of nostalgia is marketed internationally, while the reality in Guinea is more complicated. These examples reveal the precarious place of Touré-era dance band musicians in Guinea today as the country struggles to address its recent past.

### **2.1 *The afterlife of the orchestres***

In Chapter One, I discussed the ways in which popular music in 1960s and 1970s Conakry intersected with the authoritarian politics of Touré's Guinea. In this chapter, I consider the afterlife of music from the Touré-era dance *orchestres*, examining its place in contemporary Conakry and what it reveals about the Revolution's legacy. In this section, I will briefly set the scene, describing where these bands fit into the contemporary musical landscape. I will then turn to their place in the political imagination in sections two and three before considering their representation in the world music market in section four.

Throughout the post-independence period, the 'Mande modern' formula of Guinean dance music was hugely successful and paved the way for what some commentators have termed a 'golden age' in African popular music (see e.g. Graham,

1988). The state record label, Syliphone, released more than a hundred recordings, while popular dance music contributed to Guinea's top prize at the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival. By the time of Touré's death in 1984, however, the fortunes of the national dance bands had greatly altered. With state support cut off and no real domestic recording industry to replace it, these groups largely stagnated for the next generation. The country's new president, army captain Lansana Conté, seized power through a coup d'état shortly after Touré's death and quickly distanced himself from the symbols of the Revolution. Conté pursued market reforms promoted by the IMF and European Economic Community and privatised Guinean art, definitively ending the era of musical nationalism.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, the Touré-era dance bands continued to exist, although without official status. During my fieldwork period in 2009, five of the great national dance bands of the post-independence period were all active to varying degrees: Bembeya Jazz, Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis, Horoya Band, Balla et ses Balladins, Les Amazones de Guinée and the 22 Band (formerly the 22 Novembre Band).<sup>126</sup>

Yet while the music of the Touré-era dance bands can still be heard in Conakry today, it occupies a shrinking place alongside a growing number of popular styles and genres. For the listening public, the Mande modern sound is only one amongst many

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<sup>125</sup> Over the course of his regime, however, Conté (who later promoted himself to the rank of army general) softened this stance and came increasingly to refer to Touré-era music. Four of the former national dance bands, including Bembeya Jazz, were invited to headline Guinea's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1998, for example, which both Lansana Conté and his wife attended at the Palais du Peuple. Interestingly, Bembeya performed a shortened version of 'Regard Sur le Passé' at the concert, although *Horoya* notes that the celebrations also included a ceremony to commemorate the centenary of Almamy Samory Touré's death. (Lanciné Camara (1998) 'An 40 de l'Indépendance: Une Mémorable Soirée de Gala', *Horoya* No. 4979, 7 October 1998)

<sup>126</sup> Although a number of important musicians from the Touré era have passed away over the years, many older musicians are still alive and continue to make music. Younger musicians have also been recruited to fill the ranks, and have been assimilated into the dance bands to create their current incarnations.

musical options, both local and imported, that are readily available. The recently expanded choices of Guinean radio made this clear to me as I began my fieldwork.

In Guinea, as in many places in sub-Saharan Africa, radio provides the primary means for audiences to listen to recorded music. With the proliferation of battery-operated transistor sets in the 1950s, radio became accessible to almost everyone in Africa, even in places with little or no electricity (Mytton, 2000: 23; see also Larkin, 2008: 70-1).<sup>127</sup> In Conakry, where only those with generators can rely on a steady stream of power, radio constantly hums in the background, caught on snatches from the windows of passing cars and the hand-held sets of old men walking down the street. As in many places in the continent, the monopoly of state-owned radio has given way in recent years to a multiplicity of private stations, as part of larger moves towards economic and political liberalization (Myers, 2000: 91). During my first stay in Guinea, the broadcast options available were either the national RTG station (*Radio et Télévision de Guinée*) or, for those with short-wave radios, Radio France International or the BBC World Service. With the lifting of a ban against private radio stations in 2006, however, the government of Lansana Conté allowed the entry of new voices and sounds into the Guinean airwaves. When I returned to Conakry in early 2009 for fieldwork, I found that at least ten private radio stations had emerged in the capital since I had left Guinea four years earlier.<sup>128</sup> This

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<sup>127</sup> Brian Larkin provides an interesting account of African radio, describing the ways in which radio-listening changed in late colonial-era northern Nigeria. Larkin notes that British colonial authorities originally used loudspeakers to project radio out into public spaces, with the express aim of controlling what people listened to. In practice, however, cheap, portable battery-operated sets soon became popular, avoiding the problems of electricity supply, and thus shifting listening to a private activity. As Larkin observes, from its very beginning “the mechanics of radio have been tied to the very material conditions of its existence” (2008: 71).

<sup>128</sup> The first private radio station, Nostalgie-Guinée, was established on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2006. The private Guinean newspaper *Le Lynx* reported in 2009 that there were twenty-two private radio stations throughout the country, including community stations. (Bangoura N’Famara, ‘Radio Privées: Nostalgie-Guinée Fête ses 3 Ans!’, *Le Lynx* 905, 17th August 2009)

change has meant that a much wider range of music can be heard as one navigates through the city, from taxis and markets to courtyards and businesses. While the national RTG programming largely consists of music from the Touré-era bands and more recent hits by *jeli* stars such as Sékouba ‘Bambino’ Diabaté, the playlists of private radio stations are filled with hip-hop and reggae alongside *jeliya* and other local genres, reflecting changing local preferences. As a result, the Touré-era dance bands are only one of an ever-widening number of musical forms on the airwaves.



**Fig. 4** Papa Kouyaté at La Paillote

Occasionally, the sounds of these bands can also be heard from old cassettes playing in neighbourhood bars, restaurants and market stalls. The most reliable way to experience this music today, however, is through live performances at La Paillote, the Touré-era venue which remains the home of most of the older generation of popular musicians in Conakry. Located in the city’s Cameroun neighbourhood, La Paillote

consists of a large open-air courtyard dominated by a huge mango tree and with a bar on one side and an enclosed performance venue on the other. The area immediately surrounding the venue is known as the Cité des Musiciens because of the high concentration of Touré-era performers who live there, all of whom were provided housing by the post-independence government. A walk through the Cité might involve passing the house of Mory Sidibé, a trumpeter formerly with Bembeya Jazz, and Papa Kouyaté (Figure 4), a percussionist who used to accompany Miriam Makéba when she lived in Guinea. Around the corner from them is the house of Sékou Diabaté, the lead guitarist and *chef d'orchestre* of Bembeya Jazz, while Laye Diabaté, the bass player of 22 Band, lives just behind him. During the day, these and other musicians gather at La Paillote to drink coffee or beer, play chequers, rehearse and talk. On Saturday evenings, a mostly older crowd gathers at the venue to dance to live performances by groups featuring different permutations of the dance band musicians. Speaking to members of the audience on the occasions that I attended, I found older couples representing the Guinean urban middle class, most of whom had fond memories of the music from their youth. Most young people that I knew, on the other hand, rarely went there.

Musical change inevitably happens everywhere and pop music audiences can be notoriously fickle, captivated by the constant thrill of the new. The history of African pop provides a fascinating example because this music was often energetically linked with nationhood and a collective step into the modern. Today, throughout the continent the generation of musicians who provided the postcolonial soundtrack is being replaced by younger artists representing newer social ideals. In a study on Senegal, for example, Richard Shain argues that Afro-Cuban music, once indicating cosmopolitan

sophistication and refinement, has today become culturally and spatially marginalized (2009: 202). Dakar nightclubs are now “cultural battlegrounds” in which younger people challenge older notions of appropriate social behaviour, choosing the newer genre *mbalax* over Afro-Cuban music. A semi-traditional genre developed by the singer Youssou N’Dour and based on distinctive *tama* tonal drum rhythms, *mbalax* features raw sounds and explosive upper-body dance moves in direct contrast to the stately, upright style of Senegalese salsa. This popular genre suggests a loss of dignity to the older generation, leading them to retreat to private homes to enjoy Afro-Cuban music and causing a sense of estrangement from “spaces they previously felt they controlled” (ibid.: 203).

Shain’s account resonates with some of the confusion that I sensed in Guinean musicians from the post-independence period. These musicians were once central to the project of nation-building, articulating the aspirations of a renewed region. Today, however, they sense their public role shrinking. Throughout the region, those musicians who were formerly employed by the state often now feel a sense of abandonment. Skinner cites the example of Pionniers Jazz in Mali, a group who once called on Malians to return to their homeland in order to develop the new nation. Yet today, with no state funding and no role in public life, the group’s founder laments that the only way for artists to survive is by emigration (2009: 79-80).

My conversations with the Touré-era musicians suggested that they are keenly aware of this sense of marginalization. Many often spoke to me of their feelings of self-sacrifice, stating that they served the nation for more than two decades before being unceremoniously abandoned. The trumpeter Mory Sidibé said to me, for example, that “Sékou’s death changed everything. Art was completely trampled and ... the new regime

washed its hands of us.” Like most of his contemporaries, Mory blamed the government of Touré’s successor, Lansana Conté, lamenting that under Conté, “For 24 years, culture was dead in Guinea.”<sup>129</sup> I knew from my own observations that the music scene in Conakry, although under-funded, was alive and well, with many newer groups and genres gaining national and international popularity. Yet I understood that from the perspective of the Touré-era musicians, the particular model of culture they knew had been dismantled. Unsure of where they now fit in and how they should navigate through the new marketplace, these musicians have retreated to their memories and practices of the post-independence period. La Paillote thus serves as a refuge from the present, a place where the conversation often relates to Touré while the music echoes back to his era.

As I argue, however, this decision to stick to the past has been an active choice, made in the face of official and international expectations of what Touré-era musicians represent. In the next section, I will consider these official expectations, examining how the dance bands became the centrepiece of government cultural policy in 2009. Guinea’s participation in the 2009 Algiers festival, discussed in section three, illustrates some of the discontinuities in applying these policies today. I will then turn in section four to expectations of the Touré-era dance bands in the contemporary world music market.

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<sup>129</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009. Almost all the Touré-era dance band musicians were openly dismissive of Lansana Conté in our conversations. It is impossible for me to know exactly what they felt or how they behaved during his lifetime, but journalistic accounts from the time do offer some clues. In a 2002 interview with Banning Eyre, for example, Bembeya’s lead guitarist, Sékou Diabaté, says of the lack of state patronage under Conté: “I ... cannot condemn the government, because everyone has his idea, his way to move things along. You can’t make someone do what he doesn’t want to do”. (<http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/47/Sekou%20Bembeya%20Diabate-2002>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010) Speaking while Conté is still in power, Diabaté is cautious and guarded in his statement, reflecting the need to keep all possibilities open. In our own conversations in 2009 after Conté’s death, however, Diabaté was considerably less conciliatory.

## 2.2 *Armée guinéenne 2009*

The question of how power and authority come to be seen as ‘natural’ and meaningful is at the heart of contemporary political and social theory.<sup>130</sup> For ethnomusicologists, the role of music in this process is vital. As Kelly Askew notes, “power holders have always known that in order for their power to be recognized and respected, it must be rendered palpable” (2002: 24). Music is a key way of providing emotional resonance to claims of political legitimacy. Music mediates political ideals and arguments in everyday life, translating them to an intuitive language of feeling and belonging. As Thomas Turino argues,

From Lincoln to Mao to Robert Mugabe, politicians in countless times and places have clearly understood and have effectively harnessed the iconic and indexical power of music to further their own pragmatic ends. (2008: 189-90)

Turino cites the contrasting examples of Nazi Germany and the American civil rights movement to support his claim, showing how in both cases unison singing was used as a powerful act of participation. In these cases, song helped create a sense of shared identity and values. Similarly, in her work on Trinidadian carnival music, Jocelyne Guilbault writes of how upon independence the Creole political elite promoted calypso, an Afro-Trinidadian genre, as the country’s “national music” (2007: 48). Despite Creole ambivalence to calypso, the post-independence government recognized its popularity amongst the black working class and its role in their political mobilization. The government thus nationalized calypso performance competitions in order to appropriate and regulate the genre.

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<sup>130</sup> In addition to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, as discussed in the Introduction, Michel Foucault’s work on power has been particularly influential, examining the ways in which power is contested and reproduced by individuals and institutions in society (1980). Pierre Bourdieu’s work on habitus also seeks to examine the ways in which relations of power are shaped by social dispositions and interactions (1977).

In times of political crisis, music often provides the strategically necessary ingredients of fear, tension and reassurance, projecting out into the imagination of both allies and enemies. As Martin Cloonan and Bruce Johnson write, “[f]rom the trumpet of Joshua’s army at Jericho to the loudspeakers of US Marines blasting AC/DC at the besieged General Noriega ... sound has been used to flood spaces with power, to oppress and conquer” (2002: 29). Since the twentieth century, a common strategy at such moments of crisis is to take over the nation’s airwaves with a particular piece or body of music. This serves simultaneously to block information and news, create a sense of the familiar, and yet also, with its break from regular sounds, to signal the gravity of the moment. Richard Fardon writes of his experience living through a coup in Cameroon and first sensing a note of tension when he heard “turgid” yet unmistakably military music being broadcast over the radio (Fardon & Furniss, 2000: 1). In such a moment, the background hum of the radio suddenly becomes foregrounded as the soundtrack to everyday life is symbolically taken over by something more sombre.

Such scenarios are not limited to Africa. Zdzislaw Mach describes how the communist state in Poland deployed Chopin recordings at crucial political moments. Such strategic deployment of music becomes transparent, however, as cultural insiders quickly discern the underlying meaning of events taking place. Thus, Mach quotes one Polish intellectual who said that “[w]henver I hear Chopin on the radio, I fear that something horrible has happened” (1994: 69).

This sentiment is recognizable to Guinean people. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2008, hours after the death of previous president Lansana Conté, a group of junior army officers seized control of the country, much as Conté himself had done a generation earlier.

Branding themselves as the CNDD (*Conseil National pour la Démocratie et le Développement*), the new military junta quickly took over government apparatus in a series of familiar moves: closing the airport and national borders, setting up roadblocks on major roads, and shutting down all radio and television broadcasts. In their place, the national RTG station played on a continuous loop a recording of the 1968 Bembeya Jazz song ‘Armée Guinéenne’. As Graeme Counsel writes, Guinean people immediately knew from this use of the song that upheaval was underway (2010: 95).

The CNDD’s choice of song was both inspired and obvious. Released shortly after Touré declared his Cultural Revolution, ‘Armée Guinéenne’ is based on the classic West African melody ‘Douga’, originally a praise-song to the courage of warriors. To those familiar with Mande music, ‘Douga’ is instantly recognizable for its basic melodic structure, a repeating four-bar cycle. Figure 5 below shows transcriptions of two versions of ‘Douga’: the first a flute melody from a 1961 recording by the Guinean Ensemble Instrumental (accompanying CD track 3) and the second, a *bala* (xylophone) line from the 1969 Bembeya Jazz recording ‘Regard Sur le Passé’, part II (CD track 2), which turns to ‘Douga’ at 12m 46s. The third example is a variation of the same melody played on rhythm guitar in Bembeya Jazz’s ‘Armée Guinéenne’ (CD track 4).

**Fig. 5** Variations on Douga



Douga, Ensemble Instrumental de Guinée 1961



Regard Sur le Passé, Bembeya Jazz National 1969



Armée Guinéenne, Bembeya Jazz National 1968

Bembeya Jazz's version slightly varies the basic melodic contour and rhythm and adopts more of a pop format than its predecessors. The song begins with a solo by Sékou Diabaté, a fast descending guitar melody which culminates in Bembeya's characteristic wall of brass instruments. Such ornamentation, known locally as *birimintingo*, is a distinctive feature of instrumental *jeliya*, reflecting an influence from Islamic music (Charry, 2000: 168).<sup>131</sup> Here this line is played on electric guitar rather than on a *jeli* instrument such as *bala* or *kora* (harp). Furthermore, the melodic pattern is used to mark a clear introduction to the song. The version of 'Douga' on track 3 of the accompanying

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<sup>131</sup> *Kumbengo* and *birimintengo* are the two patterns of playing that together constitute *kora fôli* (kora playing), the first involving cyclical accompaniment patterns that form the basic melodic structure of a piece, while the latter involves fast, ornamented melodies, often descending in steps. Charry translates *birimintengo* in *kora* playing as 'rolling' (2000: 168). He notes that the same style of playing on the *bala* is referred to as *bala wora* (ibid.).

CD, in contrast, has no clearly defined beginning, middle or end, reflecting a cyclical music without a fixed length but rather one which fades in and out. ‘Armée Guinéenne’, on the other hand, is clearly structured with a solo introduction, chorus-verse-chorus form and an instrumental bridge in the middle. In addition to this change, the rhythm guitar in ‘Armée Guinéenne’ is slightly syncopated, as shown in the transcription, lending a sense of freshness and excitement to the stately mood of ‘Douga’. As Bohlman writes, “[m]ilitary music need not be unequivocally militaristic to represent the nation” (2008: 256). In this case, the modern pop aesthetics of the song conveyed a sense of hope and energy for the newly-independent country.

A further change from ‘Douga’ can be found in lead singer Aboubacar Demba Camara’s lyrics.<sup>132</sup> While ‘Douga’ is often associated with the pre-colonial warriors Douga Koro and Da Monson Jara (Bird & Kendall, 1980: 21),<sup>133</sup> the lyrics here express homage to Touré’s ‘revolutionary army’, thus transforming the song to a direct praise of the regime:

*A-ah l’Armée Guinéenne*  
*Fabara makara ni keya te korobola*

*O-oh milisi guinéen*  
*Fabara makara ni keya te korobola*

*Bureau politiki national ani gouvernement*

*Lagine jamanadennu bee ye dubala ayi ye*

A-ah the Guinean Army  
 The fatherland’s defense is a  
 fundamental need  
 O-oh the Guinean militia  
 The fatherland’s defense is a  
 fundamental need  
 The National Political Bureau  
 and the government  
 All the population blesses  
 you

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<sup>132</sup> Graeme Counsel reports that the song may not have first been recorded by Bembeya Jazz, as an earlier recording appears to have been made by the National RTG Ensemble in 1964 (2010: 99)

<sup>133</sup> *Douga* means ‘vulture’ in Maninka / Mandinka, seen as a metaphor for the patience and courage of hunters and warriors. The song tells the story of two heroes who fought each other. The vanquisher, Da Monson, King of the Segou Empire, claimed the song of his enemy, Douga Koro, for himself. See Bird & Kendall (1980: 21) and Durán (2007: 592-3) for further analysis of the song’s narrative.

*L'armée nin te moo kele k'ui telen nin*

The army doesn't attack  
honest people

*L'armée nin te moo kele jonmaya ma*

The army doesn't hold the  
people in contempt

'Armée Guinéenne' was a huge hit in the 1960s and became something of an "unofficial national anthem" (Bohlman, 2008: 256), heard more frequently and acquiring more saliency than the official anthem. By using the song, the CNDD sought to appropriate both its direct lyrical message praising the army and a general sense of optimism and pride that it evoked in the post-independence period. Throughout the early months of 2009, the song thus featured heavily in CNDD efforts to allay public fears and re-brand the armed forces as advocates and defenders of the people. In one such tactic, in April and May 2009 a publicity clip for the CNDD aired nightly between programmes on the national television station. The clip featured images of CNDD soldiers in military fatigues and combat boots marching in the national stadium, and of the new President Moussa Dadis Camara (known locally as Dadis) in his signature red beret and sunglasses saluting the troops, while 'Armée Guinéenne' provided the soundtrack.

The CNDD's use of 'Armée Guinéenne' was just one part of a larger effort to associate itself with the cultural nationalism, and perceived successes, of Touré's Revolution, as the new regime tried to enhance its bid for power with emotional content and a sense of continuity. Thus, in early May 2009, the junta announced the creation of a new Ministry of Information and Culture, to replace the former Ministry of Culture under the Conté administration.<sup>134</sup> From the beginning, Touré-era musicians embraced this change because of several signs that suggested a return to an earlier model of state-

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<sup>134</sup> The patterns and symbols of political change throughout the region are strikingly familiar. Thus Skinner notes that the Malian government in 1975 announced the creation of a new Ministry of Culture, signalling a similar desire to "recover a formal politics of culture largely neglected during the early-1970s" (2009: 119).

sponsorship of the arts. For example, a number of former musicians and music administrators from the Revolution were appointed to high-level posts in the Ministry. The Minister himself, Justin Morel Junior, had previously been the manager of the Touré-era band, Camayenne Sofa. The new National Director of Culture, Jean-Baptiste Williams, was formerly the guitarist for Camayenne Sofa, while the newly appointed Director of the National Museum, Riad Challoub, was lead singer of the same group.<sup>135</sup>

In addition, the new Ministry announced early on a series of initiatives aimed at re-asserting state involvement in culture. In late May, for example, the Director of Culture Jean-Baptiste Williams, spoke on the national radio station about the CNDD representing a “new era” in Guinean culture. In his words, there was an urgent need for the “restoration of the state’s authority” in cultural affairs:

The authority exists. [The Touré-era *jembe* master] Papa Kouyaté and other artists must be aware that the state exists ... After long years of rupture from 1984 to today, we’re now reaffirming culture as a primary value. The rebirth of Guinean culture is our cause. President Dadis has come and he’s recognized men of culture and the media.<sup>136</sup>

Williams’ radio appearance was intended to signal a shift in tone in Guinean cultural politics, marking a departure from the liberal policies of the Conté era and a return to the Revolution’s programme. His language here directly references the Touré-era discourse on African modernity, citing a return to and revitalization of a long-dormant culture. This statement was followed in subsequent days and weeks by the announcement of a number of new programmes, all closely resembling those of the Touré era. Such programmes

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<sup>135</sup> *Camayenne* is the name of a neighbourhood in Conakry, and *sofa* is a Maninka word meaning ‘warrior’, used specifically in reference to the troops who fought alongside the 19<sup>th</sup> century Maninka resistance hero Almamy Samory Touré. The band Camayenne Sofa was originally started as a student music group in the 1970s but was eventually co-opted into the state-run system. My thanks goes to Graeme Counsel for his knowledge and insight on this subject. Conversation with Graeme Counsel, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2009

<sup>136</sup> Heard on RTG radio, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2009

included the organisation of a National Cultural Festival and the creation of a national record distribution company, Sonogui, to replace the long-defunct Syliphone.

A week after these announcements, in early June the Ministry held a formal event to mark the ‘Official Launch of Artistic and Cultural Organisation in Conakry’. The evening was a glittering affair involving government officials and their wives, Touré-era musicians, and other VIPs, and was held at Bembeya Jazz’s former venue, Club Bembeya. I was lucky enough to secure an invitation through one of the musicians and watched the proceedings with interest.

The evening itself began with speeches by ministry officials, who spoke of their plans to renew culture in Guinea. As the Minister Justin Morel Junior told the seated audience, “Guinean music has had a precipitous decline since 1984. But the talent is there, and the memories of the past are there.”<sup>137</sup> To underline this last point, Bembeya Jazz then took the stage. As the group was announced to great cheering and applause, twelve musicians appeared, all sporting black dinner jackets and ranging in age from the white-haired trumpeter Achken Kaba to the young singer Mamadi Diabaté. The group began their set with the eponymous single ‘Bembeya’ before launching into ‘Armée Guinéenne’.

Although the evening as a whole felt like a largely civilian affair, with more suits than military fatigues visible, the act of performing ‘Armée Guinéenne’ at this particular event was a direct overture to the army, a statement of readiness and expectations. In return, the seated audience embraced the gesture. As the familiar opening strains of Sékou Diabaté’s guitar solo rang out, spectators around me murmured their approval, while a number of government officials ostentatiously removed bundles of folded

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<sup>137</sup> Observed on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2009 at Club Bembeya

Guinean francs from their pockets and wallets. Throughout the song, a steady stream of officials stood up to tip the musicians for the appropriateness of their performance. The singers in turn moved forwards to greet each approaching dignitary, interrupting their dance routine with nods and bows. Bembeya Jazz thus appeared to seal an agreement with the new CNDD government, patronage and recognition in exchange for appropriation of the song.

A second event in the Official Launch, featuring the band Kélétigui et Ses Tambourinis, was held a week later at La Paillote. In his opening speech, Jean-Baptiste Williams celebrated the iconic venue as “the cradle of Guinean culture”, and to great applause from the musicians and audience of dignitaries, announced plans to renovate and promote it.

A third *soirée de culture* was to be held a week later on 20<sup>th</sup> June, featuring the dance orchestra Horoya Band among others. This event was canceled because of rain, however, and never took place, as a sense of political crisis grew over the course of the summer. Despite plans for continuing regular events featuring the Touré-era dance bands, no such evenings materialized after the Official Launch. Furthermore, after some initial painting of the walls lining the courtyard at La Paillote, no other renovation work was undertaken. A friend of mine who was meeting with Williams a few days after the La Paillote evening recounted to me what happened when the painters came to the Ministry of Culture looking for their fee. Arriving at the Director of Culture’s office, the team of workers were told that Williams did not have any money to pay them for their work and that they should contribute as patriots for the good of the country. The workers complained that they had spent two days painting and had previously been told that they

would be paid for the job. Williams reiterated that there was no budget for paying them, and digging around in his pocket, grudgingly took out 50,000 GNF (approximately £6 at the time of fieldwork) to cover the team's transport and supplies.<sup>138</sup>

As the La Paillote example suggests, it quickly became apparent that, despite its rhetoric, the CNDD had no real structure, system or commitment in place to create and implement a new cultural policy. After an initial burst of enthusiasm and planning, cultural initiatives became increasingly chaotic and ad-hoc while all talk of a National Cultural Festival soon dried up. Although Jean-Baptiste Williams had spoken about the “restoration of the state's authority” in public life, these initiatives in fact seemed based on little more than the personal whims and memories of a small group of officials at the new Ministry of Culture. Rather than serving as reminders that “the state exists”, they revealed the incoherence of official policy.

McGovern observes that in Touré's Guinea, the state did not represent a monolithic force but rather was composed of various competing agencies, ministries and institutions, each with their own policy interpretations and ideas. Yet despite being weak, it managed to create an *effect* that “many Guineans experienced as a coherent national identity organized by a strong state” (2004: 43).<sup>139</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, Touré's success in this respect derived in part from his attempts to impose a particular version of the national story through which Guinean people could see themselves and others. Touré emphasized Guinean exceptionalism (and his own role within it) – the notion that the country had a special place within Africa and the world because of its glorious

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<sup>138</sup> Conversation with Camille Quénard, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>139</sup> McGovern borrows the idea of “state effects” from the political scientist Timothy Mitchell, whose work examines the ways in which the state is “represented and reproduced in visible, everyday forms” (1991: 81).

precolonial past and its courage in staking out an independent and revolutionary future. As I have argued, popular music was central to this process, encapsulating both the past and the future in one exuberant package.

By 2009, however, this idea, and the music which carried it, had lost much of its earlier potency. Guinean people today are increasingly cynical about the notion of their historical particularism, as the promises of independence have given way to prolonged economic and political crisis and disillusionment. While Touré's ideology celebrated a triumphant national past and revolutionary future, this story is challenged in the face of entrenched poverty and corruption. For many people today the Revolution is a reminder of an opportunity squandered – no doubt a glorious moment when Guinea rid itself of European colonialism, but one which did not ultimately fulfil its promise of development, justice and dignity. In this context, outside of La Paillote, the people I know in Conakry are largely unconcerned with the music of the Touré-era dance bands. When I asked friends and acquaintances about their feelings towards 'Armée Guinéenne', I was often met with indifference. In some cases, people suggested that the song related to the post-independence armed forces, and had no connection to the military today.<sup>140</sup> One acquaintance told me that the song served as a continuing reminder to the current army about its obligations.<sup>141</sup> For the most part, however, reaction to the re-circulation of the song was a collective shrug.

By turning to the music of the Touré era, the CNDD followed a long-established political instinct in Guinea to evoke the 'glorious past'. But while the music of the Touré era may evoke happy memories of youth and stability for a nostalgic few, many people in

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<sup>140</sup> Conversation with Hadja Diallo, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009; conversation with Diamadi Kouyaté, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Mohammed Camara, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2009

Conakry have decidedly more mixed feelings about the Revolution. Moreover, Guinean people are not concerned with endlessly celebrating the past. Instead, they are looking ahead towards new ideas and solutions, expressing a ‘nostalgia for the future’, to use Piot’s phrase (2011). Alongside an awareness of Guinea’s pre- and post-colonial history, people in Conakry today hold aspirations for political change and economic opportunities. They wish to participate in the modern world, rather than simply to relive past triumphs.

Svetlana Boym argues that in Russia, “Communist teleology was extremely powerful and intoxicating; and its loss is greatly missed in the post-Communist world. Hence everyone now is looking for its substitute, for another convincing plot of Russian development that will make sense of the chaotic present” (2001: 59). Similarly in Guinea, the Revolution created a sense of strength and centralized identity that is missing today. Yet, instead of proposing a new ‘convincing plot’ for Guinea’s future, the CNDD turned towards Touré’s ideas as a familiar fallback. In Touré’s rhetoric, notions of return and rehabilitation signalled the desire to in fact create a new national culture. The military regime instead revived this discourse as it cast about for means of self-promotion, understanding the Revolution as stable reference point. Yet, as changing popular tastes show, the musical symbols of Touré’s Revolution are losing their relevance in Conakry today. With minimal effort, the regime wished to return to a period it understood as one of optimism and collective effervescence. In the generation since Touré’s death, however, audiences in Conakry have moved on, while the structures to support state-sponsored music have long since disintegrated. The Revolution imposed itself through a tightly controlled set of symbols, including revolutionary language and songs. Since Touré’s

death, however, the particular idea of national culture that was promoted at that time has greatly fragmented, as ethnic identities and ideological differences have become increasingly articulated. Guinea's preparations for the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival illustrate this point.

### **2.3 *The Second Pan-African Cultural Festival***

While the CNDD's own initiatives fizzled out by early summer 2009, a lucky coincidence took place that greatly supported the regime's claim to be the natural heirs to Touré's legacy: in July the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival was held. In the following section, I will discuss Guinea's preparations for this festival, considering what they reveal about Touré's continuing hold on how to make music and imagine culture in Guinea today. I will first examine the current sounds of Guinea's most celebrated dance band, *Bembeya Jazz*, to show how close they are to the older model. I will then consider how this band and its music fit into official and unofficial representations of Guinean national culture today.

As discussed in Chapter One, the first Pan-African Cultural Festival took place in Algiers in 1969. At that time, the Guinean delegation was awarded the Grand Prize for its artistic contributions. Guinea also dominated the debates on pan-Africanism and revolutionary art during the festival's colloquia. For Touré, the festival represented a triumphant vindication of his ideology and rule, demonstrating Guinean soft power to the world.

Under the auspices of the African Union, the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival was also held in Algiers and aimed to showcase the arts and performance of

countries throughout the continent.<sup>142</sup> For the new officials of the Guinean Ministry of Culture, the festival provided a perfect opportunity for renewing the discourse of cultural nationalism. Jean-Baptiste Williams, in a radio address a few weeks after his appointment as National Director of Culture, announced Guinea's participation in the 2009 festival:

From the 5<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> July the Algiers festival will be held. The Ballets Africains and Bembeya Jazz are going to represent Guinea. It's a priority for us, and Guinea will be represented with dignity.<sup>143</sup>

In addition to the National Theatre Troupe and a travelling exhibit from the National Museum, the Guinean delegation to Algiers would accordingly be composed of the two most celebrated artistic formations of the Touré era: the Ballets Africains and Bembeya Jazz.<sup>144</sup> Forty years after the first Algiers festival, the national delegation in 2009 was almost identical to the 1969 model, which had consisted of the Syli Orchestre National (an amalgamation of musicians from the national dance bands), the Ballet Djoliba (Guinea's sole national ballet until the Ballets Africains was later nationalized), and the National Theatre Troupe.

Within Bembeya Jazz, expectations and excitement were high following the Ministry's announcement. Feeling a new role for itself in national representation, the group was energized in its preparations for the festival. As Bembeya's lead guitarist and chef d'orchestre, Sékou Diabaté said to me, "We won the first time, so anything other than first place is unacceptable."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> See <http://www.panafalger2009.com/EN/Pages/Index.aspx>, accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2010

<sup>143</sup> 'Espace Culturel', RTG radio, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2009

<sup>144</sup> Guinea's national representation to Algiers in 2009 also included the *Sosso bala*, the original *bala* created by Sunjata Keita's rival, Soumaoro Kanté, in the thirteenth century. The *Sosso bala* has been guarded for centuries by the same Kouyaté family in Niagassola, Guinea, and in 2001 was declared by UNESCO as one of the nineteen Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The *Sosso bala* is considered the original *bala*, and all others are its copy. It is the only *bala* that has twenty keys; most have twenty-one or twenty-two, while a recently created chromatic *bala* has twenty-five keys.

<sup>145</sup> Conversation with Sékou Diabaté, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2009

### 2.3.1 *Bembeya Jazz: Modernity's afterlife*

In the two weeks leading up to the Algiers festival, Bembeya Jazz held rehearsals every morning in Sékou Diabaté's courtyard, just next door to La Paillote. The rehearsals provided me with a wonderful opportunity to regularly observe and listen to the group off-stage. Each day's set-list included four or five songs, all Bembeya classics from previous albums. Recognizing most of these songs from recordings, I was struck from the beginning by how consistent the group's current sound was with its earlier style.

Bembeya rehearsals were a tangle of jokes, laughter, sometimes arguments, and instruments. As in its earlier form, the band was composed of twelve musicians, including a large brass section with trumpets, trombone and saxophone, two percussionists playing congas and drum-kit, bass and rhythm guitarists, and Sékou 'Diamond Fingers' up front and centre as lead guitarist. Three singers replicated the 'Trio Bazooka' of the 1970s, a formation put in place after Demba Camara, the group's first and much loved lead singer, died in 1973.<sup>146</sup> The Bazooka trio had been known for its vocal harmonies and tightly choreographed dance routines, a combination of rumba box-steps and James Brown-influenced slides and jumps. In 2009, the current trio's routines were rather more lop-sided, as the young singer Mamadi Diabaté danced energetically while his older counterparts Youssouf Ba and Alseny Doumbouya shuffled from side-to-side. The beat was still unmistakably Cuban, however, with many songs ending in rousing rumba rhythms in 6/8 time, despite the fact that this influence fell out of official favour in the 1970s and tends not to feature in newer Guinean popular music.

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<sup>146</sup> The 'Trio Bazooka' consisted of Salifou Kaba, Moussa Touré and Mory Kouyaté. This formation stayed in place until 1979 when Sékouba 'Bambino' Diabaté joined Bembeya Jazz as lead singer.

Furthermore, while there has been a recent resurgence of interest in traditional Guinean instruments (as I will discuss in Chapter Four), the orchestration remained firmly centred on electric guitar and brass instruments. Bembeya seemed to have returned to an earlier moment in Guinean pop, before *bala* and other traditional instruments had been re-incorporated and when Cuban rhythms were still prevalent. Other similarities to the past included song arrangements identical to those in the original recordings, with breaks and ostinatos occurring at exactly the same moments. Even the timbre of Sékou Diabaté's guitar, with its bright echo-y tone and characteristic reverb, seemed straight out of an early Bembeya album, nostalgically evoking the 1960s. Perhaps the only remarkable change was in the group's clothes, hairstyles and on-stage acrobatics. Old video clips I have seen of Bembeya often feature bell-bottoms and Afros, while Sékou Diabaté occasionally writhes on the floor, Jimi Hendrix-style, playing guitar on his back.<sup>147</sup> The 2009 rehearsals and performances were much more sedate, with Diamond Fingers often sitting on a plastic chair. Yet if I closed my eyes, note for note, I could hear the music of his youth.

With little apparent distance between the recordings of yesterday and the live performances of today, this strict adherence to an earlier sound has not gone unnoticed. In a recent comment on the website Guinée News, for example, one Guinean music fan wrote that

Since Demba Camara's death, Bembeya doesn't shine like it did in its day. I don't know that era myself, but what's certain is that I know Bembeya's repertory by heart because every concert is the same. Nothing changes. We have to

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<sup>147</sup> Through his work in the television and radio archives in Conakry, Graeme Counsel has compiled a number of these videos produced by the national RTG broadcaster in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which can be found on his website <http://www.radioafrica.com.au/Video.html>, accessed 27 July 2010

reinvigorate the group by adding new blood and dancers. The old musicians can't even dance anymore.<sup>148</sup>

Other accounts, however, celebrate and reinforce Bembeya's choice to stick to its old sound. For example, the music journalist H  l  ne Lee writes that, "[i]f Bembeya has hardly changed its style, it's because it opened up a way and continues to explore it. Can we ask the Rolling Stones to start playing rap or funk?" (1988: 82-83, my translation). Lee's comments suggest that the group cannot and should not deviate from its path if it is to retain its authenticity. As I will discuss in the next section, it is precisely this perceived authenticity which is of growing interest to European and North American audiences, while Bembeya's attempts to try different sounds, such as the use of keyboards and drum machines in the 1989 album *W   K  l  *, have been commercial and critical flops.<sup>149</sup>

Lee's account of the Tour  -era dance bands largely overlooks their entanglement with politics, focusing instead on prizes and accolades and emphasizing a narrative of a glorious post-independence moment. Yet the musical decisions of these bands, both then and now, must be seen within their political and historical context. For example, the trumpeter Mory Sidib  , formerly with Bembeya Jazz and today with the 22 Band, acknowledged to me that

The modern orchestras, we couldn't deviate too far from our sound [in the Tour   era] because if you did, you would be criticised. The Revolution didn't want that. The Revolution only wanted us to sing certain types of pieces.<sup>150</sup>

As in all my conversations with Tour  -era musicians, Mory refrained from any explicit criticism of the former president or any suggestion of authoritarianism. Yet his statement

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<sup>148</sup> <http://www.guineenews.org/articles/detail.asp?num=201141413052>, accessed 16 April 2011, my translation

<sup>149</sup> Banning Eyre (2002) 'Oh Bembeya!', *fRoots* 233; Chris Nickson (2003) 'Diamond Rich', *Seattle Weekly* [http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles\\_detail/project\\_id/102/article\\_id/1050.cfm](http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles_detail/project_id/102/article_id/1050.cfm), accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009

<sup>150</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009

here acknowledges the control that Sékou Touré attempted to exert over music as he sought periodically to rein in the dance band musicians. Mory replaces Touré's name with "The Revolution", reflecting Touré's own usage of the term as a means to deflect the suggestion of personal dictatorship, yet Touré's mark is clear. Although musicians pushed back against these strictures, as I described in Chapter One, Touré sought to regulate music within certain 'revolutionary' parameters. Today, almost three decades after his death, the sound of these musicians remains intimately linked to this moment in Guinean history while the musicians themselves are often seen as its living symbols. Yet while people in Conakry increasingly question the achievements of the Revolution and are often indifferent to its music, the decision makers in the CNDD's Ministry of Culture seemed unaware of these changes and reflexively turned to the Touré-era musicians to evoke what they understood was a stable point of reference.

When I asked the Culture Minister, Justin Morel Junior, about this situation, he reiterated that the new regime was committed to promoting music. He then proceeded to list all the (Touré-era) groups that they were supporting.<sup>151</sup> Fortunately, I was able to have a more open discussion with Jean Paul Cédý, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Culture at the time of fieldwork. For a government official, Cédý was highly unusual in his frank criticism of the Touré period and of contemporary policy. When I asked him why the CNDD associated itself with Touré-era dance bands, he explained that

We're still traumatized by the Revolution – there is still that hurt – we always take its ideas. The model still has an influence ... When you see the older musicians, Bembeya, for example, they're still doing the same thing... They were broken by liberalization. They were used to creating according to a certain model. But since [Touré's death in] 1984, they no longer have the motivation to create.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Conversation, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2009

<sup>152</sup> Interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2009

Although occupying a high-level position in the Ministry, Cédý told me that he disagreed with attempts to replicate the revolutionary model of culture. Cédý saw these attempts as proof that after a generation of authoritarianism, Guinean people had internalized Touré's way of thinking and still struggle to see beyond it. For musicians, he argued, this means knowing only one way to make music and consistently replicating it.

My own sense is that the creativity of musicians from the Touré-era dance bands is not simply 'broken'. On a number of occasions at La Paillote, I was surprised by the versatility of these musicians, such as for example when the *bala* player Youssouf Condé reacted to the news of Michael Jackson's death by improvising a medley of Jackson tunes on his instrument. Furthermore, Bembeya guitarist Sékou Diabaté has recorded two solo albums in recent years, *Diamond Fingers* (1996) and *Guitar Fö* (2002), both of which have been lauded by critics.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, creativity should not be conflated with change. Musical creativity in this sense can be understood not as auteurship, but as the making of meaning in music through creation, performance and reception (Toynbee, 2003: 103). Thus, Bembeya Jazz's decision to recreate its older sounds is itself a creative act, a way of making meaning in response to political events in 2009. While these musicians remain highly creative, however, I nonetheless agree with Cédý's suggestion that Bembeya Jazz and other Touré-era bands no longer have much motivation to *innovate*. Sékou Diabaté continues for the most part to replicate with lavish detail Bembeya recordings from forty years ago, despite having proven that he can still produce something new. To understand why, one must consider the ways in which musicians from the Touré-era dance bands

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<sup>153</sup> Banning Eyre labeled the album *Diamond Fingers* "exceptional" in a 2003 article, <http://womad.org/artists/bembeya-jazz>, accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2011. The BBC music critic John Lusk describes *Guitar Fö* as "breathtaking" in parts, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/mvbd>, accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2011.

remain attached to the post-independence moment. My argument is that Diabaté and other dance band musicians have been systematically encouraged to reproduce a certain kind of music and today have little incentive to deviate from this formula. The military regime in 2009 turned to them as an immediate point of re-entry into the post-independence period, and rewarded them for sticking closely to their old sound. In their ongoing strategies to ‘test the limits of the possible’ (Makhulu et al. 2010: 7), these musicians obliged.

Considering the economic chaos in which musicians in Conakry find themselves today, with no domestic recording industry or infrastructure for artists, it is understandable that Bambeya would choose to follow a proven successful formula from the past. The irony, however, is that Touré himself insisted on modernization, promoting young people in particular as the soldiers of his Revolution. His ideas were highly contradictory, as noted in the previous chapter, and Touré relied heavily on references to tradition and the past to support his rule. Yet he also sought to create a new culture, one which absorbed and re-shaped influences from the modern world. Moreover, as I have shown, under the Revolution, musicians pursued their own creative agency, playing with different genres and styles, while always contextualizing them within a Mande modern sound. In this way, they were able to reconcile local authenticity with global modernity.

By 2009, however, the music of the Touré-era dance bands is associated above all with the revolutionary past, rather than any other past or future moment. While the musicians from these bands are still tremendously talented – and the Bambeya Jazz rehearsals were a joy to attend – it was quickly apparent to me that they thus have a shrinking audience and impact in present-day Conakry. As noted, few people in Conakry

today attend performances at La Paillote, listen to recordings of these groups or even pay much attention to what they are doing. Nonetheless, in preparing for the 2009 Algiers festival, the state once again turned to Bembeya Jazz and its contemporaries to represent Guinea on this symbolically important international stage. Despite the emergence and success, both locally and internationally, of newer stars, the state continued to promote music from the Revolution as a key representation of the nation. While this choice fit into the CNDD's vague attempt to associate itself with the Touré era, it seemed to suggest above all a lack of ideas about the country's present or future.

For the musicians in Bembeya Jazz and other dance bands, the government's emphasis encouraged them to adhere to their past style and sound by offering the illusory promise of return to an earlier period of patronage, purpose and status. Many of the musicians that I spoke to expressed a sense of vindication in the government's efforts, saying that they could therefore continue doing 'what they did best'. Even though they received few financial rewards from the government, they felt "acknowledged and valued", as the guitarist Lansana Condé told me. Moreover, they framed their continued musical survival as an act of agency. As the guitarist Lamine Camara said to me, for example, "We refuse to die. We still consider ourselves as national bands, as patrimony, because you can't find better than us".<sup>154</sup> The perpetuation of their original sounds thus demonstrates this determination to remain present, to retain a place in public life.

Despite such statements, however, my sense was that these musicians realized that the military regime's efforts were fleeting and superficial – that times had undeniably changed and they could not recover the post-independence moment. Yet by continuing to deploy them as useful references to the past, the CNDD further consigned Touré-era

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<sup>154</sup> Interview, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009

musicians to marginalization in the wider popular consciousness. As the saxophonist Mamadou ‘Le Maitre’ Barry expressed to me with some concern, “If we always stay in our framework doing the same thing for forty years, it’s not obvious that people will listen today.”<sup>155</sup>

In this section, I have described how musicians from the Touré-era dance bands stick closely to the Mande modern formula of the post-independence period. In the next section, I will look more explicitly at the view of Guinean national culture which underlay this music. Considering Guinea’s delegation to the 2009 Algiers festival, I will show how this view is outdated today as the Revolution’s ‘one-man show’ has given way to a chorus of voices and identities.

### 2.3.2 *Symbols of national value*

Andrew Apter’s work on the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) reveals how the Nigerian state defined and assigned value to a national culture in a moment of booming yet unstable oil wealth. Flush with oil revenues, the state invested heavily in the festival and the showcasing of a Nigerian national culture. Yet, as Apter shows, the culture on display was an “abstraction” of various local and regional ethnic identities, one which reified ‘the people’ while excluding the very people of Nigeria it was supposed to represent (2005: 46). While the authorities presented FESTAC as a transformational project that would teach culture and patriotism to the

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<sup>155</sup> Interview, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009. Unlike many of the other dance band musicians, Barry has changed his style over the past few decades, experimenting with soul music and collaborating with younger Guinean neo-traditional groups rather than recreating his music from the 1960s and 1970s. In part this is due to his sponsorship by the French cultural agency and extensive contact with European audiences, both at the French cultural centre in Conakry and on tours in Europe. Barry is thus less dependent on state patronage than many of his contemporaries in Conakry.

population while cementing Nigeria's leadership in the pan-African world, Nigerian non-elites were ultimately barred from many of the festival's events. Apter also shows how objects and performances on display were often divorced from any local meaning and assigned a non-specific value as 'national treasures'. For example, crafts were often presented with little accompanying information, while the craftspeople themselves received "certificates of national merit" rather than actual payment (ibid.: 99).

Furthermore, much of what was celebrated as representing an 'authentic' precolonial culture was actually a colonial invention, such as the regatta, a boat exhibition featuring Niger Delta war canoes but which had originated as a mediating mechanism between African and early European traders in the delta region.

Such top-down invention and choreography of national culture is a common feature of official representations. What the FESTAC example reveals is how cultural symbols became commodified "as objects of national value", even while being alienated from their popular and productive base (Apter, 2005: 119). The value of the object was no longer pegged to its 'true' meaning but to one that was assigned by the authorities. Inevitably, this leads to their meanings becoming unstable, just as the value of Nigeria's currency, the *naira*, became unstable as the oil boom dried up and revealed a lack of underlying productive economic industry.

Apter's analysis provides a useful lens with which to consider Guinea's involvement in the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival. His study examines not just the festival but also its afterlife, looking at how the signs of national culture, wealth and development came to be seen as empty over time. In the Nigerian case, these signs had been underpinned by the nation's oil wealth and its promise of a better life for all. In the

Guinean case, it was not material wealth but ideology that invested the symbols of Guinean national culture with meaning. Music from the Touré-era dance bands promoted and was imbued with notions of Guinea's glorious past and revolutionary future. Yet as Touré's legacy is re-examined today, these dance bands no longer suggest a unified nation or national culture. Guinea's preparations for the second Algiers festival illustrate this disconnect.

In late June 2009, Bembeya Jazz and the Ballets Africains performed before President Dadis and other members of the CNDD at a high-profile event held at the Conakry venue, Les Cases de Bellevue, in celebration of the upcoming Algiers festival. Although I was not able to attend the event myself, I did manage to watch it on the RTG television station.<sup>156</sup> In addition to Bembeya and the Ballets Africains, three of the other former national dance bands performed (Horoya Band, Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis, and Balla et ses Balladins), along with the former national dance and percussion ensemble, the Ballet Djoliba, and the former national instrumental group, l'Ensemble Instrumental. There were also three newer groups, including a dance and percussion ensemble, Woï Loïny ('Soul of My People'), representing performance from the Kpelle ethnic group in south-eastern Guinea. For the most part, however, the event was dominated by all the major Touré-era bands and ensembles.

Considering this concert and the composition of Guinea's delegation to the Algiers festival, it is clear that Touré's idea of national culture continues to dominate official thinking. In a country of more than two dozen ethnic groups, it is almost impossible to delineate a national culture. Rather, as the theatre director Raliatou 'Fifi' Bangoura said to me, Touré "reinvented a Guinean or an African culture according to his

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<sup>156</sup> Observed on RTG television, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009

own vision of what the national culture should be.”<sup>157</sup> As noted, this version of national culture borrowed heavily from Mande traditions, adapting *jeli* praise-singing and emphasizing historical Mande figures such as the Almamy Samory Touré as national heroes. In 2009, Mande culture continued to receive a privileged place over other ethnic groups in official representations of the nation. In fact, I was surprised to hear that a Kpelle group was involved in the Bellevue concert, until I remembered that Dadis is himself of Kpelle ethnicity. Cécé Paul Kolié, the leader of Woï Loïny, told me later that it is only with Dadis coming to power that their group was suddenly invited to perform at official functions.<sup>158</sup> Until that time, *forestier* cultural groups – groups from the forest region – had been almost entirely excluded from official events in the capital. I had long observed that the same holds true for Fulbe groups, despite the fact that the Fulbe are Guinea’s largest and by some accounts economically dominant ethnic group.<sup>159</sup>

During the post-independence era, Mande culture dominated official representations of the nation, yet at the same time, Touré sought to overcome ethnic particularism in Guinea in order to create a cohesive Revolution. Thus, as Jean-Paul Cédý said to me, culture in the Touré-era involved “the same style, the same theme, in music, in theatre ... it was a revolutionary culture.”<sup>160</sup> Moreover, Guinean people, or at least those who actively supported Touré, were united under a shared ideological identity as *révolutionnaires*. Many older Guinean people told me that one consequence of Touré’s

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<sup>157</sup> Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>158</sup> Conversation with Cécé Paul Kolié, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2009.

<sup>159</sup> Musically, *forestier* and Fulbe traditions differ from Mande traditions to different degrees. Kpelle music, for example, is particularly distinctive for its vocal and instrumental polyphony (Stone, 2005: 26-7). Thus, Woï Loïny’s performance at Les Cases de Bellevue featured horn ensembles using short, interlocking motifs to produce hocketing patterns. Fulbe music is more closely related to Mande traditions, centring on solo vocal performance by hereditary court musicians who are believed to have been absorbed from neighbouring Mande groups. Song texts, however, deal with the Fulbe rather than Mande past (Arnott, 2001).

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

death in 1984 was that the nation has become fragmented as each separate region wishes to express its own identity. Such balkanization is commonly found in the aftermath of authoritarianism, and across Africa the last two decades have seen the emergence of “ethnic and religious differences that were formerly contained or camouflaged under socialism” (Pitcher & Askew, 2006: 11). In Guinea, this change has meant that the revolutionary version of a shared national culture has less resonance for younger people and those who were not brought up within Touré’s party system. Dadis Camara, for example, joined the army in 1990, during the Conté regime and several years after Touré’s death. The inclusion of Woï Loïny at the Bellevue concert and other official state events in 2009 suggests that he had not entirely subsumed his Kpelle identity for the Mande-centred national identity promoted by the Revolution.

Furthermore, at the Bellevue concert, held just a few days before the start of the Algiers festival, Dadis was impressed by the performance of the young and largely Susu gymnastic troupe, l’Ecole des Arts Acrobatiques, who were not included in the official delegation. The president decided on the spot that they should also represent Guinea in Algiers. The French attaché at the Guinean Ministry of Culture later told me that the next seventy-two hours were spent frantically trying to obtain passports and visas for the group, as well as re-choreographing the Ballets Africains’ routine so that the acrobatic troupe could be inserted into their performance.<sup>161</sup> Clearly, while officials at the Ministry of Culture had long ago selected the national delegation, their notion of the best representatives of Guinean culture was not shared by the younger president.

In promoting the Touré-era representation of Guinean national culture, Ministry officials revealed their own aesthetic and ideological biases. In part, the decision to send

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<sup>161</sup> Conversation with Anne Dubourg, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2009

Bembeya Jazz to represent Guinea in Algiers reflected the personal preferences and nostalgic memories of a small group of decision-makers. As noted, these officials were closely associated with the music of the Touré-era dance bands and continue to hold it in great affection. But in addition to these individual tastes, the decision also reflects the continued hold that Touré's Revolution has on official thinking today. In the three decades since Touré's death, Guinean national identity has become increasingly splintered and no subsequent government has succeeded in exploiting the country's symbolic resources to create the semblance of unity as Touré did. Other governments thus inevitably turn to the cultural capital of the Revolution to try to resuscitate the idea of the nation as a unifying concept and to cement their own political rule.

Yet this strategy is increasingly tricky to apply. Under the Revolution, groups such as Bembeya Jazz were hand-picked by Touré, whose voice alone sought to define national culture. While Bembeya and other bands pushed the boundaries of this culture, they nonetheless operated within Touré's revolutionary ideology. Today, however, multiple voices and identities challenge the notion that these groups represent the whole, or even that such a whole exists. Dadis Camara, as a non-Maninka and non-*révolutionnaire* from the Touré era, represented a powerful alternate voice, and ultimately, the Ministry of Culture was forced to amend its coherent and tidy idea of national culture, hurriedly assembling a patchwork in its place.

Even despite these changes, outside of La Paillote, most musicians and music fans in Conakry seemed largely indifferent to the Algiers festival, and, beyond the official media, it passed by largely unremarked. As Apter argues, once-powerful symbols of national culture can become unstable over time as they are alienated from their original

signifiers. In Nigeria, official representations of the nation effectively collapsed in the 1990s following extended political and economic crisis. While FESTAC attempted to present a cultured and civilized nation and leader of the black world, by the 1990s many observers equated Nigerian national identity with images of corruption, deceit and chaos (2005: 226-7). Guinea in 2009 was faced with a similar problem. Guinean national identity in the Touré era was associated with the myth of a glorious past and a revolutionary future, and the country presented itself at the 1969 Algiers festival as a leader of African decolonization and cultural nationalism. In 2009, however, most observers saw Guinea as a marginalized and chaotic corner of the region, caught in the grips of yet another military dictatorship. Perhaps aware of the country's PR problems, Bembeya Jazz chose not to play 'Armée Guinéenne' at Algiers, despite its ubiquity on the state airwaves at the time. This decision seemed to be one of the few concessions to contemporary realities – that a reminder of military rule in Guinea would perhaps not be well received by foreign audiences at a festival intended to dispel negative imagery about Africa. As Martin Stokes notes, considering changing political contexts, the recuperation of nationalist music can be “a rather cautious and selective affair” (2008: 325).

In the end, contrary to the expectations of Guinean musicians and officials, the Algiers festival did not include a judged competition and thus no national delegation came away with the top prize. Upon their return, the members of Bembeya Jazz told me that their performance at the festival was a resounding success, received enthusiastically by audiences and the Algerian authorities. Nonetheless, I noticed on the festival's website and in press coverage on the internet that there was no mention of Guinean performances and that news of the festival was instead dominated by larger countries such as Algeria,

South Africa and Senegal. Unlike its victory in 1969, Guinea seemed to have made little impact on this international stage.

Guinea's absence from the Algiers website and other press coverage seemed to reflect its loss of political and cultural prestige and relevance in the forty years since the first festival. Just as the choice of Bembeya Jazz and other Touré-era formations seemed out of step with popular tastes in Guinea, its reception in Algiers suggested that the rest of the continent has also moved on. With the festival theme of 'African Renaissance', audiences and organizers expressed an interest in looking forward to Africa's role in the present and future. The festival's foundation document explicitly stated that "[t]he youth represent the majority of the African population. The key resources for contemporary creation reside in the youth."<sup>162</sup> In this context, there was little vested interest in promoting an ideology and music associated with the 1960s.

While audiences at Algiers were almost entirely African, another international audience is increasingly interested in precisely this moment, however. In the past decade, a small but influential group of music fans in Europe and North America have turned their attention to the Touré-era dance bands. As I will discuss below, the symbols of Guinean national culture under the Revolution are thus today being commodified as 'objects of international value', abstracted and further alienated from local meanings and from the historical and political context of their creation. In the next section, I will examine the reception of Touré-era dance music in the contemporary world music market. I will consider how this market promotes a particular image of Guinea. In the

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<sup>162</sup> Charter for African Cultural Renaissance, Article 13, adopted at the Sixth Ordinary Session of the African Union, 23-24 January 2006

final section of this chapter, I will then discuss how this image fits into broader debates about Touré in Conakry today.

#### **2.4 *The marketing of nostalgia***

The quote with which I opened this chapter, by the Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango, relates Dibango's frustrations at what he sees as the constraints on musicianship in Africa. Having moved to Paris as a teenager in the 1940s, Dibango later returned to Africa in 1961, where he spent most of the next two decades performing, recording and touring. Yet while this return represented the fulfilment of a personal dream, Dibango also chafed against the expectations that were piled upon artists. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, he was taken under the wing of President Houphouët Boigny, but ultimately felt that this arrangement imprisoned his artistic freedom. Dibango resented having to symbolize tradition and perform within the strictures of cultural nationalism, the past or similar ideologically-laden concepts:

When Africa talks of ethics, it advocates a return to roots. This is a facile solution that goes nowhere ... We have never left our roots. Like all continents, Africa has its past; like others, it has been colonized. That time is over. Creativity is our only path to health. (1994: 112)

Manu Dibango presents an interesting example against which to compare the generation of musicians with whom I am concerned here. In contrast to the Malian musicians whom Skinner describes, Dibango *began* his career as a 'freelancer', in his case in France, and only later was he brought into the machinery of state-sponsored music. This proved a painful adjustment, as he found the functionalist approach of musical nation-building antithetical to artistic creativity. For Dibango, France and Europe represented the ability

to be any kind of artist he wanted to be, rather than one whose identity is mandated by a state ideology.

The example of Guinea's delegation to the Algiers festival shows how the African state deploys musicians as symbols of the past. This strategy serves to keep musicians bound to certain musical and ideological representations, as Dibango notes. Yet while Dibango sees Europe as an escape from these constraints, he overlooks the pressures that European and other global audiences of African music can inadvertently bring to bear. These pressures come from similar, yet less explicit, expectations about authenticity and 'roots', as I will show in this section.

In her study of a South African recording studio, Louise Meintjes writes about the ways in which "overseas" is imagined in local music-making. For South African musicians, the 1990s exploded with new opportunities for touring and performing internationally. At the same time, such opportunities come with demands. Meintjes notes that in seeking out international audiences, South African musicians "face a pressure to metaculturally mark their global participation as ethnically specific and emplaced" (2003: 220). Audiences in the Global North who seek an authentic and culturally particular experience from the music of elsewhere thereby categorize and confine musicians, both by place and time.

In the Guinean case, musicians from the Touré-era dance bands are aware that their music is a source of growing interest to consumers and taste makers in the world music market – often described locally as 'Europe'. In the past decade, record labels, music festivals and commentators on world music have paid increasing attention to these bands. Since 2004, for example, Sterns Africa has released compilations of classic songs

by the former national bands Bembeya Jazz, Balla et ses Balladins and Kélétigui et ses Tambourinis.<sup>163</sup> Although these bands are losing audiences within Guinea, a relatively small group of predominately European and North American music fans is embracing their sound, and along with it, evoking a nostalgic view of the Touré era.

Interest in the Touré-era bands reflects a growing trend in the world music market spotlighting groups of aging musicians in faded locales. The phenomenal success of the Buena Vista Social Club in the 1990s set this path. Buena Vista's success stemmed from the 1996 Ry Cooder documentary that 'discovered' the pre-Cuban revolution musicians still alive and performing in Havana. The documentary featured romantic images of the musicians in old-fashioned clothes and crumbling buildings, successfully commodifying their age and poverty and suggesting a 'salvage' film-making by which their music could be saved from obscurity. Thus a 1999 New York Times review of the Buena Vista film wrote of "Capturing a Cuban Sound before It Could Die Out".<sup>164</sup>

Since Buena Vista's triumph, music producers and fans have actively sought out similar stories. Under the umbrella of the World Circuit label, for example, the Senegalese group Orchestra Baobab re-formed in 2001 to record a new album. Orchestra Baobab, whose sound is largely based on Afro-Cuban music, had disbanded in the late 1980s as the neo-traditional genre *mbalax* became increasingly popular with Senegalese music fans. Shain notes that despite this move away from Afro-Cuban music in the 1980s, within Senegal the genre "underwent a minor revival in the 1990s, stimulated, in part, by the global success of the Buena Vista Social Club project" (2009: 204). Orchestra Baobab has mainly been marketed to the same type of European audience that supports

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<sup>163</sup> Sterns CD3029-30; 3031-32; and CD3035-36

<sup>164</sup> Peter Watrous (1999) 'Capturing a Cuban Sound Before It Could Die Out', *The New York Times* June 6, 1999

Buena Vista, however, and their 2002 album *Specialist in All Styles* even featured an appearance by the Buena Vista singer Ibrahim Ferrer.<sup>165</sup>

Similarly, the music producer Joe Boyd writes of the Congolese group Kékélé, “a Baobab/Buena Vista-inspired outfit of aging veterans, whose delicate 1960s’ style rumba goes down a treat with World Music audiences” (2009: 52). Kékélé is composed of musicians from a number of “mythical” Congolese rumba bands, as one music journalist writes.<sup>166</sup> The group’s sound features three inter-locking acoustic guitars, replicating the original Congolese rumba style of the 1950s and 1960s before drum machines and keyboards were later added (ibid.).

Within this broader context, Bembeya Jazz returned to the studio after a hiatus of thirteen years and has since been steadily garnering attention in the world music press. In 2002, the group recorded the album *Bembeya* under the French label Marabi and conducted a US and European tour the following year. As Banning Eyre wrote at the time, “Bembeya Jazz’s phoenix-like rise is part of a larger and long-overdue trend in African music today. The old guys are back!”<sup>167</sup>

Eyre’s comment reflects the general way in which the music of the Touré-era dance bands is received by and marketed in the world music industry.<sup>168</sup> Concert reviews, album liner notes and interviews with the musicians frequently emphasize the idea that

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<sup>165</sup> The World Circuit label is based in London and Orchestra Baobab has been particularly well played and received in Britain, as well as in France and Germany.

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.muzikfan.com/africaframe.html>, accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011

<sup>167</sup> fRoots 233 (2002)

<sup>168</sup> In an article on Congolese rumba, Bob White notes that at the turn of the millennium, and following the success of the Buena Vista project, there is an increasing demand for “tropical ‘world music’” amongst urban listeners in Europe and North America, who favour Afro-Cuban sounds. As he argues, much of this music rests on a “romanticized, essentialized notion of Africa and African identity as a selling point ... something that would have been unimaginable” for the earlier generation of African musicians who saw the Afro-Cuban sound as a marker of their cosmopolitanism and global modernity (2002: 679).

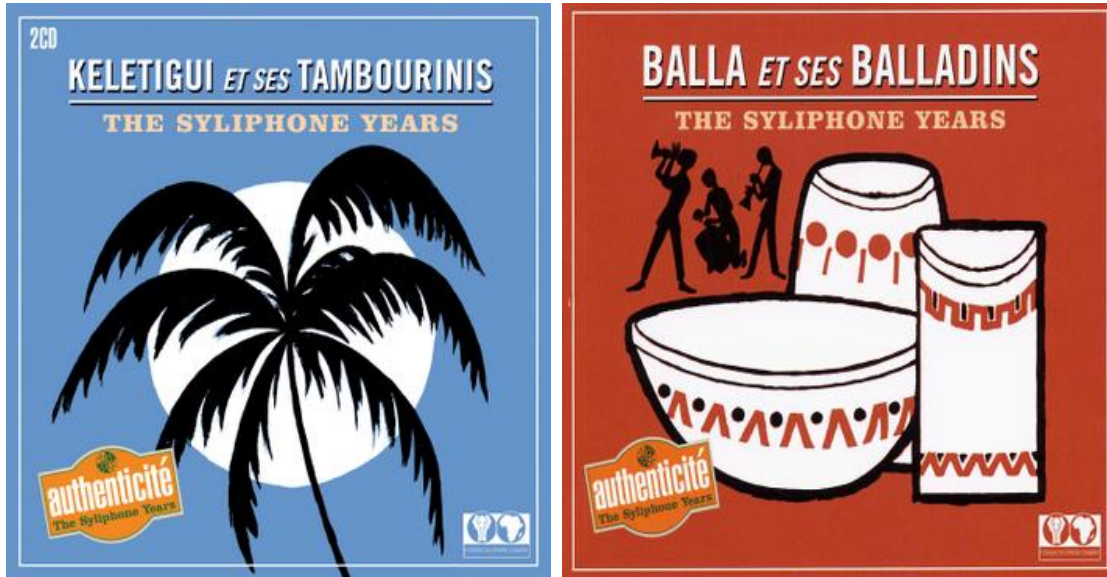
this music represents a ‘golden age’ of African pop.<sup>169</sup> Consumers today are offered the possibility of return to this moment, re-mastered and re-packaged to maximize its nostalgic appeal. For example, Figure 6 below shows the retro imagery used on recent album covers, suggesting an unspecified tropical destination and borrowing from constructions in 1940s and 1950s American pop culture.<sup>170</sup> Although these images were originally used by Syliphone in the late 1960s, they represent a tiny fraction of the Syliphone album covers, in contrast to the more common practice of using photographs of the musicians or of scenes of Guinean life, as shown in Figure 7.<sup>171</sup> The decision to use the stylized drawings rather than photographs suggests a conscious attempt to abstract the particular Guinean or African identity of these bands into a more generalized one.

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<sup>169</sup> See e.g. Banning Eyre’s 2003 interview with Eric Charry, [http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/49/Eric%20Charry%20\(on%20Bembeya%20Jazz\)2003](http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/49/Eric%20Charry%20(on%20Bembeya%20Jazz)2003), accessed 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012; Chris Nickson (2003) ‘Diamond Rich’, *Seattle Weekly* 30<sup>th</sup> July 2003 [http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles\\_detail/project\\_id/102/article\\_id/1050.cfm](http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles_detail/project_id/102/article_id/1050.cfm) accessed 19 April 2012

<sup>170</sup> *Kélétigui et Ses Tambourinis: The Syliphone Years* (STCD3031-32, 2009); *Balla et Ses Balladins: The Syliphone Years* (STCD3035-36, 2008). Thomas Turino writes that similar imagery was commonly used in South African jazz releases in the 1940s and 1950s. Turino notes that this imagery originally derives from Tin Pan Alley representations in the early twentieth century (2000: 142).

<sup>171</sup> The Kélétigui cover originally featured on the single *Famadenke – Cigarettes Allumettes* (SYL502, 1969), while the Balla cover featured on the singles *Diaraby* (SYL505, 1968) and *Soumouyaya* (SYL507, 1968). Graeme Counsel notes that political cartoons were also used as album covers, as was the case for three albums released after Guinea defeated Portuguese troops in an aborted mission to overthrow Touré in 1971 (2006: 112).



**Fig. 6** Two recent compilations of Guinean post-independence dance bands showing stylized cover art, © Sterns Africa

Musicians from the Touré-era bands have responded to these representations in the world music market by sticking closely to their past formulas. As discussed earlier, live performances of this music today retain the sound and feel of yesterday, from the timbral quality of Sékou Diabaté’s guitar with its characteristic reverb, to the use of brass instruments and the idioms of Cuban music. Touré-era musicians are keenly aware of the appeal of these historical references to international audiences. Linké Condé, guitarist and chef d’orchestre of the band KélétiGUI et ses Tambourinis, explained to me that while Guinean music changed after Sékou Touré’s death, market forces led musicians back to the sounds and styles they produced in the 1960s:

That music that was on the rise during the twenty-four years of [the Conté era], people didn’t consume it. Yes, it was consumed in the interior here in Guinea, but elsewhere, it didn’t move an inch. But during that time, in the FNACs [a chain of record shops] in France, little by little, that old Syliphone catalogue that those old musicians had recorded in the 60s, ‘64, ‘68, all that, when you go in the FNACs, it’s those records that are sold rather than the young ones ... So afterwards we

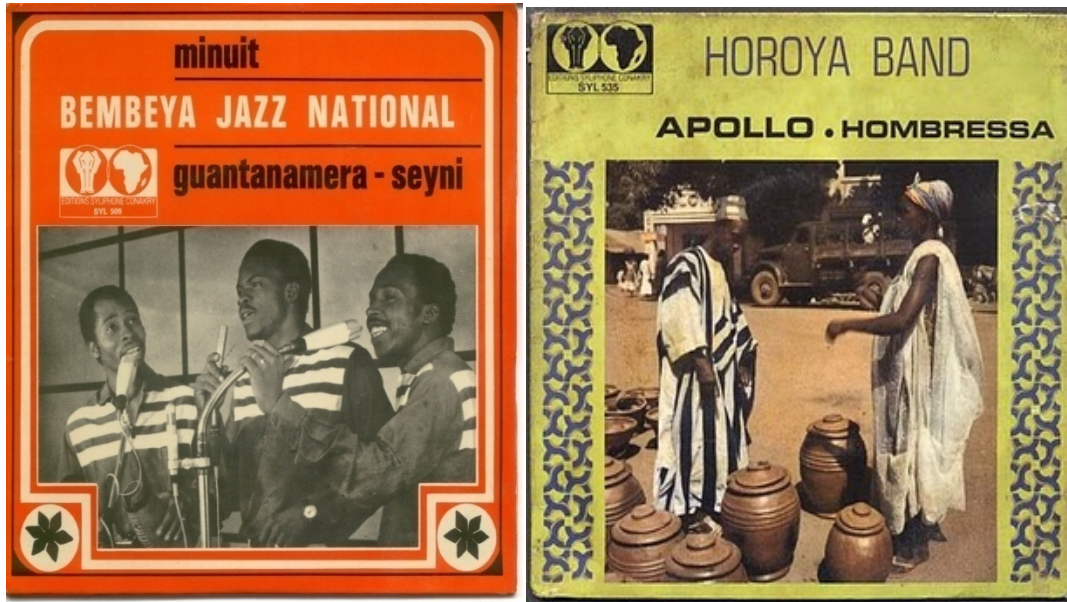
realised that, oh no, no, because the music of young people doesn't sell, we should return back to square one.<sup>172</sup>

Linké Conde suggests a trial-and-error experiment in which musicians attempted to change until external forces revealed that their earlier output was preferable.

Interestingly, while he admits that post-1984 music did find an audience within Guinea, the preference of French listeners who chose the older music is held as vindication that this music really is better. Condé overlooks here the very success of younger Guinean groups who have gained popularity in France and elsewhere in Europe. I will discuss some of these groups in more detail in Chapter Four. For now, it should be noted that Condé's statement reflects a common sentiment expressed by musicians from the Touré-era dance bands: that their music is better than music from the post-Touré-era. Almost all of these musicians were dismissive, and at times hostile, towards the newer generations of musicians who have succeeded them.

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<sup>172</sup> Interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2009



**Fig. 7** Syliphone releases for Bembeya Jazz (1969) and Horoya Band (1971) showing the more prevalent type of cover art imagery used. Images reproduced courtesy of Graeme Counsel.

It is clear that economics plays a role in creating these feelings. For musicians raised in a system in which the state provided everything, liberalization was an extremely bitter pill to swallow (see also Polak, 2006: 169). With an impoverished local recording industry, and with fewer audiences for their music in Conakry, Touré-era musicians are struggling financially today. While most have profited very little from world music markets, this renewed interest in their music has nonetheless encouraged them to turn back towards the past. Moreover, as Meintjes notes in her study, African musicians do not necessarily view ‘overseas’ as an oppressive force, but rather as representing a set of possibilities. Thus, Touré-era dance bands in Guinea have received the interest of the world music industry with great enthusiasm. Sékou Diabaté attributes much of Bembeya’s recent success, for example, to the French music producer Christian Mousset, who coaxed the band out of retirement in 1999.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Sékou Diabaté, <http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/47/>, accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2012

Yet, this process in turn shapes the sound of the music itself. As Meintjes notes, referring to the South African musicians with whom she worked, “the outmoded and the old were prized aesthetic qualities among musicians ... [who] anticipated that their foreign audience would value it” (2003: 229). Global consumers of South African music have particular expectations of musicians’ identities, which musicians in turn reinforce when seeking out these audiences. Thus in the recording studio, the *mbaqanga* singer Bethwell Bhengu produces a lion-like roar, referencing a tribal image earlier cultivated by the *mbaqanga* star Mahlathini. Bethwell similarly emulates Mahlathini’s younger voice, going for a “grittier, raspier, dirtier” sound than the star in more recent years (ibid.: 222). Yet, Meintjes argues, choices such as these ultimately keep musicians sequestered in particular places and historical moments:

In imagining overseas the way they do in sound, the music-makers are responding to foreign representations of themselves and to foreign senses of their place. The image of the lion and of African culture as tribal thrusts South African musicians outside modernity. This image is then mapped onto a second idea, which situates them remotely from cosmopolitanism: they sound outdated, as though they were stuck in the late 1960s or 1970s. (ibid.: 241)

In Conakry, the “sound stereotypes” (ibid.: 232) of the Touré-era, including rumba dance rhythms and reverb-filled guitar, attach musicians to the post-independence moment and to a continuing association with Sékou Touré. One consequence is that, while successfully cultivating new audiences overseas, these musicians have lost much of their relevance and interest for local listeners. As Boyd points out, the aesthetic preferences of the world music market are often contrary to those of audiences at home. While the Congolese rumba group Kékélé may be gaining audiences in Europe and North America, for example, Boyd raises a “doubt that they get any offers to play Kinshasa” (2009: 52). To many cultural insiders, this music is simply out-of-date.

In Conakry, furthermore, the sounds of the Touré-era dance bands reference a moment that people are increasingly moving beyond. In emphasizing a past golden age, however, world music representations often minimize the politics of this music and the brutality of the Touré regime. Thus on the BBC Radio 3 website, an article states that “[u]nder the forceful unifying leadership of President Sekou Touré, performing artists were subsidised and encouraged to take pride in their local folkloric roots”.<sup>174</sup> One music journalist describes Touré as “[a] poet before he was a politician” and “a music lover”, while another calls him “visionary”.<sup>175</sup> Touré is often celebrated as the force behind Guinea’s musical renaissance, and rarely is any reference made to the reign of terror he instigated.

In their tone, these representations all seem clearly to take their cues from the Touré-era musicians themselves. In interviews, these musicians resolutely refuse to be drawn on the subject of Touré’s politics, as quickly became clear to me during my own research in Conakry. This guardedness points to another aspect of the politics of silence that I have discussed, relating not to song texts but to the discourses surrounding music. How musicians from the Touré era speak, what they remember and what they choose not to say are themselves important expressions of their desires and aspirations. By remaining quiet on certain questions, by speaking of Touré in overwhelmingly positive terms, these musicians reveal a wish to control the terms in which they are presented. Musicians from the Touré-era dance bands are aware of their status as commodities on

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<sup>174</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/world/awards2003/profile\\_jazz.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/world/awards2003/profile_jazz.shtml), accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011

<sup>175</sup> Chris Nickson (2003) ‘Diamond Rich’, *Seattle Weekly* [http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles\\_detail/project\\_id/102/article\\_id/1050.cfm](http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.articles_detail/project_id/102/article_id/1050.cfm), accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009; Andrew Morgan (2003) Biography of Bembeya Jazz, <http://womad.org/artists/bembeya-jazz>, accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2011

the global market and have to balance fulfilling market expectations while protecting their own interests and maintaining their integrity. Caution, guardedness and silence thus become important means by which they can do both. In my conversations with Touré-era musicians, they tightly circumscribed their speech, stating that they would discuss art but not politics. At the same time, my sense from reading about these musicians in the world music press was a desire on the part of journalists and commentators to quickly skip over the uncomfortable political questions before getting back to easier topics. Interviews with the dance band musicians sometimes make cursory references to Touré's darker side, yet the journalist rarely presents any further discussion and is happy to accept the musicians' reluctance to talk. Yet to anyone who knows about Guinea's history, this silence hangs heavily in the air, and in contrast to the growing conversation about the past in Conakry today.

What is particularly ironic about these representations of Touré-era music is that so much world music discourse in fact insists on African music as a political and progressive force. African music is often framed as a site of resistance and oppositional politics (Englert, 2008: 8). I will discuss in Chapter Four some of the ways in which younger Guinean musicians have been encouraged by 'Europe' to present themselves as dissidents and critics. World music representations of the Touré-era musicians, on the other hand, suggest a historical amnesia to the politics of the Revolution. It seems to me that a particular discourse of world music privileges one type of political story, in which African musicians are resistance heroes. When the evidence suggests that music is less heroically linked to democratic struggle, commentators are often happy to gloss over the realities of the past in a hazy nostalgic glow. Such nostalgia becomes a selling point. In

the case of Guinea, the government in 2009 similarly tried to evoke an abstracted and uncomplicated nostalgia.<sup>176</sup> As I will discuss below, however, such feelings are not necessarily shared by the broader local population.

## 2.5 *History revisited*

At La Paillote one June afternoon in 2009, the conversation turned, as it sometimes did, to Sékou Touré. The bass player for 22 Band, Laye Diabaté, told a story. In the early 1960s, according to Laye, Touré travelled to Saudi Arabia to perform the *hajj*. As he journeyed along the route to Mecca, he noticed that there were no trees growing on the way. Turning to the Saudi king, who was accompanying him, he suggested that trees be planted to offer travelling pilgrims shade against the scorching sun. The king replied that he had tried, but that no tree would grow there in the desert. Touré considered the situation. He then found two saplings, one which he planted and one which he gave to the Saudi king to plant. The convoy then continued on its way. A few months later, as the king sat in his court, a (perhaps unfortunate) messenger came running to report that the king's tree had died, while Touré's was alive and thriving.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> As numerous commentators have shown, however, nostalgia is rarely uncomplicated (see e.g. Boym, 2001; Stokes, 2010; Stewart, 1996). Svetlana Boym argues, for example, that “[n]ostalgia works as a double-edged sword: it seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool” (2001: 58). Her analysis distinguishes between ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia, the first actively deployed as a tool for nation-building while the second refers to personal memories.

<sup>177</sup> Observed at La Paillote, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2009. This story can be linked to Touré's own writing and legislation regarding agricultural duties. In *Islam at the People's Service*, Touré writes of the Muslim duty to plant trees, a practice that traditionally took place in Guinea to celebrate the birth of a child. Here, however, Touré's particular aim is to contextualize the ‘Loi Fria’, a law adopted by his party that mandated the planting of fruit trees to celebrate not just marriage and the birth of a child, but also the anniversary of the PDG's founding and the anniversary of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday (1977: 75-6). Interestingly, in his autobiography of Touré, André Lewin notes that as a representative in the French West African territorial assembly in the 1950s, Touré had opposed colonial attempts to make the customary planting of trees a legal obligation (2009: 188).

Although few other stories that I heard in Conakry alluded to such mythical power, this account was representative of the legendary status that Touré has acquired in the memories of musicians from the former national dance bands. Conversations at La Paillote often involved praise for Touré or laments at his passing, with the musicians expressing unwaveringly positive and nostalgic views.

I did occasionally encounter oblique references to the terrors of the Revolution. Speaking to me about Touré's love for art and music, for example, the guitarist Lansana Condé implicitly acknowledged that Touré wielded power as a personal toy. The reiterated emphasis here underlines that musicians were an exceptional and favoured group:

The president had a particular affection for art. He didn't like anything bad happening to artists. During his time, artists never had political or moral problems. He never touched artists.<sup>178</sup>

Condé's careful response and repetition strongly suggests that others were not so lucky. When I asked the dance band musicians explicitly about the constraints of the Revolution, however, they uniformly declined to comment. For instance, the *jembe* (hand-drum) player Papa Kouyaté said to me, "There are certain things that I can't tell you because it becomes political."<sup>179</sup> As noted, these musicians were consistently guarded in their statements, often separating the categories of 'art' and 'politics' and declaring that they wished to express themselves solely as artists. Yet, elsewhere in Conakry friends and acquaintances I knew grappled with the contradictions of Touré's legacy.

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<sup>178</sup> Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2009

<sup>179</sup> Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2009

Memories of the Touré era are a complicated affair in contemporary Conakry. While Touré is respected for his leadership in securing Guinean independence, he is also blamed for setting the country on its downwards path. Like other African liberation heroes turned autocrats, he is seen simultaneously as having given to and stolen from the nation. In such a context, people often hold, and acknowledge, contradictory views on the former president.

Towards the end of the rainy season in September 2009, for example, I arrived at the house of my *kora* teacher, Demba Diallo, to find him and two friends from the neighbourhood watching a DVD of a Touré speech made in Paris in the 1970s. The three young men, all in their twenties, watched in rapt attention as Touré spoke at length about Guinea's relationship with France and as he defended his human rights record. Whenever he would make a particularly eloquent statement, Demba and his friends would shake their heads in admiration, laughing, and say, "Ah, there's a man who really could speak!"<sup>180</sup> This incident surprised me because I had long believed that support for Sékou Touré represented a clear generational fault-line in Guinean society. Only a couple of weeks earlier, I had sat playing *kora* in the courtyard with Demba and a neighbour while they spoke to me of the atrocities of Touré's regime, recounting horrific stories of political prisoners incarcerated at the Camp Boiro prison and executed by hanging off the *8 novembre* bridge in central Conakry. "It was butchery," Demba said to me.<sup>181</sup> And yet soon afterwards, here were those same young men celebrating Touré as a refined and articulate leader.

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<sup>180</sup> Observed on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009, Taouyah, Conakry

<sup>181</sup> Observed on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009, Taouyah, Conakry

Speaking to Demba on this subject over time, I came to realize that for him, as for many Guineans, Touré may have been a brutal tyrant, but he was also a man of culture. As noted, there is an abiding sense that during the post-independence period, and unlike today, Guinea occupied a place on the world stage. Thus, as Demba later told me, although Touré was ruthless, he also had certain priorities – art and music, for example – and wanted above all for Guinean people to reclaim a sense of dignity.

Considering Demba's statements, it struck me that young people in Conakry today are growing up in an ideologically-diffuse and complex environment in which it is permissible to say and feel many, perhaps contradictory, things. While Guinea lurched in 1984 from revolution to anti-revolution, with everything associated with the post-independence regime publicly repudiated overnight, there has emerged in recent years an attempt to historicize Sékou Touré in a more nuanced manner. This attempt represents not an outright rejection but rather an “undramatic accommodation” of the past (Appadurai, 1981: 218). The theatre director, Fifi Bangoura, daughter of the long-exiled writer Djibril Tamsir Niane, suggested to me that Guineans were until recently not ready to engage in this discussion because it was “too close”. But now, as she said, “We’re beginning to acknowledge that the good and the bad of the [Touré] period are very much mixed up.”<sup>182</sup>

This new discussion in Conakry appears to be taking place in both private conversations as well as in public, although unofficial, forums.<sup>183</sup> On the one hand during fieldwork I witnessed spontaneous conversations such as that between Demba and his

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<sup>182</sup> Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>183</sup> In a similar vein, the former French Ambassador to Guinea, André Lewin, spoke in Conakry in April 2011 about his recent biography of Touré. In attendance, one journalist later wrote of the speaker as a “friend of Sékou Touré, but not of Guinea”, <http://konakryexpress.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/guinee-m-andre-lewin-ami-de-sekou-toure-mais-non-de-la-guinee/>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> April 2012

neighbours. On the other hand there were events such as Espace Culturel, a series of public discussions in Conakry organized by the private cultural agency, Festi-Kaloum, and featuring prominent figures in Guinean cultural life.<sup>184</sup> The format allowed for audience participation, and two of the three events held in 2009 ended with a lively discussion focusing on Sékou Touré and his legacy. At the first event, for example, which featured the former National Director for Culture, Teliel Diallo, a question from the audience sparked a debate about whether, and in what light, Touré should be included in the history books today. While Teliel argued that Touré should be written about alongside other great African intellectuals such as Kwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela, a member of the audience countered that Touré could not possibly be equated with such individuals because of the crimes he committed within Guinea. Both sides finally agreed that there was a need to engage in precisely such public debate in Guinea today, and to reconcile the two faces of Touré's legacy.<sup>185</sup>

Such an open debate came as something of a shock to me, representing a new atmosphere of dissent and discussion that would not have been possible even a few years earlier when I first travelled to Guinea in 2002. McGovern suggests that this debate emerged in 2008 at the time of Guinea's fiftieth anniversary of independence (2010: 22). As conversation on the past coalesced around the fiftieth anniversary celebrations, public memories of Touré began to be actively redrawn – perhaps because there was finally

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<sup>184</sup> Festi-Kaloum is a private cultural agency founded by Amirou Conté, a former member of the Touré-era national theatre troupe and the former National Director of Arts and Leisure from 1994 to 2004. The aims of the agency are to promote Guinean culture and to organize performances and other culture-related events in Conakry, Kaloum being the name of one of the five precincts of the city. During the time of fieldwork, Festi-Kaloum's major activity entailed organizing three Espace Culturel events, which took place in May and June 2009.

<sup>185</sup> Observed on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009 at Espace Culturel, held at the Centre Culturel Franco-Guinéen. To my surprise, Sékou Touré's son, Mohamed, was actually present in the audience at the first two Espace Culturel events, although he did not publicly speak.

sufficient distance from the past, as Fifi Bangoura suggested was needed. Today, Sékou Touré's face is still widely visible in monuments and framed photographs in official buildings, but its meaning as a historical symbol is being disputed and reconsidered. For most of the people I encountered in Conakry, such a process seems necessary to come to an understanding about Guinea's recent past and the collective and personal traumas that it entailed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, musicians from the Touré-era dance bands are conspicuously absent from this debate. At times during fieldwork, these musicians seemed to me to be greatly nostalgic, remembering Sékou Touré as a mythical hero, as Laye Diabaté did. At other times, they seemed to me like most people in Conakry today, concerned with the social and political realities of the present-day – corruption, democracy, economic stability – rather than endlessly living in the past. It should be remembered that during the post-independence period, these musicians sought to carve out their own expressive space within the strictures of the Revolution, pursuing their careers and creative agendas as they could. Yet nonetheless, in their statements today they maintain unwavering loyalty to the former president. Spending time with them, it seemed to me that their nostalgia is not simply a defensive or wilfully blind gesture, however, but rather a way to reconcile their past with the present reckoning of the Revolution. As Maria Todorova writes about post-Communist nostalgia, this feeling represents a way for people to “invest their lives with meaning and dignity, not to be thought of, remembered, or bemoaned as losers or ‘slaves’” (2010: 7).

Both official and international expectations mean that the public image of Bembeya Jazz and the other dance bands remains explicitly linked to the Revolution.

Touré-era musicians recognize that they have a shrinking place in Guinean music and public life today, in light of changing tastes and memories. Choosing to meet the expectations of the government and the world music market thus represents a double-edged sword. Sticking closely to the past is an attempt by these musicians to reclaim the role and rewards they once enjoyed as symbols of the nation, yet by doing so they occupy a marginalized and morally shaky ground as they are further and inextricably joined to a contentious historical moment.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have considered how musicians from the Touré-era national dance bands attempt to find a place in the post-nationalist landscape of 21<sup>st</sup> century Conakry. As the examples discussed here show, Touré's Revolution continues to shape the popular and official imagination in Conakry, as well as the imagination of world music audiences in France and elsewhere. The post-coup moment of 2009 brought musicians from the former national dance bands once again to the official fore, as the new regime tried to evoke what it understood as a stable reference. By reconstituting Guinea's delegation to the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival, the military regime sought to recover an earlier effervescence and sense of national identity. Yet, as I have shown, audiences in Conakry, and at the 2009 Pan-African Cultural Festival, have since moved on.

The illusory promise of political patronage from the state and profits from the world music market nonetheless meant that musicians from the dance bands choose to remain closely linked to the Revolution as a means of economic and cultural survival.

Yet in so doing they are further associated with a controversial moment, and must further retreat into silence.

As Touré's Revolution is increasingly debated today, musicians from the former national dance bands are highly guarded in discussing their political pasts. As I showed in Chapter One, these musicians did not simply submit to Touré's rule; rather they sought to carve out their own expressive space, to build their musical careers and shape their identities as musicians. Today, however, their association with the period has become increasingly problematic as Touré's legacy is re-examined. Silence, guardedness and opaque speech represent an attempt to control the ways in which they are understood, and a means to reconcile their past memories with the present moment.

In this chapter, I have considered the ways in which the military regime in 2009 looked backwards to the Revolution to imagine Guinean national culture today. In the next two chapters, I will turn to two newer forms of music that have emerged since the end of the Revolution and Touré's death in 1984. In Chapter Four, I will examine a new urban traditional genre of Susu music, whose practitioners proudly distinguish themselves from *jeliya* and its historical relationship with the state. First, however, in Chapter Three, I will examine contemporary *jeli* pop music in Conakry today. While the music of the Touré-era dance bands adapted *jeliya* to a collective, 'revolutionary' form, *jeli* pop music today represents a more individualistic, capitalist interpretation of this tradition, one starkly in contrast to Touré's vision of national popular music. Under the new military regime, this genre reinvigorated practices of – and anxieties about – singing for the authoritarian state.

## Chapter Three

### Singing the State

“We burst out laughing. However, that’s really the way that griots behave. They’re never satisfied. Never are they happy with the gifts we give them. They have to ask for more, always more than what they receive.”

- Laye Camara, *Dramouss*<sup>186</sup>

#### *Introduction*

Following the coup d’état in December 2008, an explosion of musical homage greeted the new military regime in Guinea. Praise songs to the junta circulated widely in Conakry over the next several months, from cheap cassettes flooding the market place to music videos of dubious quality on the national television broadcaster, up through to gala soirées at the prestigious Palais du Peuple featuring the most popular artists of the day. Many of the musicians involved were hereditary Mande griots, or *jelilu*, who specialize in a prestigious yet controversial form of praise-singing. Others were musicians from different genres, including reggae and the Ivorian pop-style *coupé décalé*, yet who have absorbed the influences of Mande music.<sup>187</sup> Across genres and generations, these musicians sang in adulatory support of the junta, even as public views of the regime became increasingly angry.

In this chapter, I examine the widespread practice of praise-singing to consider why, despite the end of musical nationalism, musicians in Conakry have long continued to sing in support of the state. While praise-singing has traditionally been a feature of

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<sup>186</sup> My translation. Laye Camara is considered the greatest Guinean author and was branded a counter-revolutionary by the Touré government, eventually fleeing into exile to Senegal in 1965.

<sup>187</sup> *Coupé décalé* is an up-tempo dance music that emerged in Ivorian nightclubs in Paris in the 2000s, and has become popular in parts of West Africa.

music in this part of the world (see e.g. Barber, 1991; Finnegan, 2007; Waterman, 1990), the practice was tightly controlled in Guinea during the Touré years when musicians were employed by and could only sing for the Revolution. Since Touré's death in 1984, however, the landscape has greatly altered. Free market reforms have led to the professionalization of music and the emergence of a new culture of individual stardom or *vedettariat*. *Vedettariat* is central to the post-1984 economics of music in Guinea, in which powerful individuals tip singers in increasingly ostentatious displays. As an audible and visible manifestation of politics and economics, *vedettariat* is also the site of anxiety and debate about life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century West African state.

As I will discuss in this chapter, the musical culture of *vedettariat* derives from *jeliya*, the art of the Mande musicians known as *jelilu*. *Jeliya* involves the specialized performance of vocal and instrumental music, historical and genealogical recitation, moral lessons, advice and mediation. From all these features, it is the act of singing praise, or *fasa*, which generates the most excitement amongst audiences and commentators alike, particularly as a skilful praise-singer is often rewarded generously by the object of praise. Because of the seemingly transactional nature of this exchange, the practice is often described, both locally and within the literature, in moralizing terms (see e.g. Eyre, 2000; Keita, 1995; Schulz, 2001). Yet *jeli* praise-singing also remains highly popular and influential in Conakry today, as my discussion shows.

Recent scholarly studies examine questions of music professionalization and money, considering issues of marketing and entrepreneurship (Kidula, 2000; Laing, 2003; Meintjes, 2003; Stokes, 2004), politics and artistic agency (Lohman, 2010; see also Dibango, 1994). While the sociologist Howard Becker argued in 1982 that art is created

within a network of production and understanding, the notion of art's autonomy from political and economic life remains prevalent. In an article on blues music in Memphis, for example, Jennifer Ryan notes that contemporary discourses about blues often link poverty with authenticity (2011). Musicians are 'fetishized' for their economic marginality, while the importance of music as a form of labour is overlooked. As Ryan argues, such representations stem from anxieties about the draw of the tourist dollar and its impact on 'real' music-making. Yet, for the musicians that Ryan encounters, tourist venues form an important and stable source of income. Laura Lohman, in a recent work on the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, similarly emphasizes the importance of professionalization from the musician's perspective. Lohman examines how Umm Kulthum actively and carefully shaped her career to promote her image as a national icon. While Lohman primarily focuses on Umm Kulthum as an individual star, rather than her place within an encompassing 'art world', her study emphasizes the economic, political and cultural context in which Umm Kulthum sought to make her name.

Closely linked with questions of stardom and professionalization is that of money. In a recent article, Bill Maurer contends that the long-prevailing view amongst anthropologists remains that "Money's baaaaaaaaaad" (2006: 19). This view derives from anxieties of money's corrosive impact on traditional societies, anxieties that, as Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry argued more than two decades ago, are far from universal (1989). As they wrote, money may often be viewed as inherently amoral in Western societies, where moral rules are not seen to apply within the realm of the economy. In other places, however, there may be no such distinction between economy and society, and thus no dissonance between money and morality (ibid.: 9). Similarly, Arjun

Appadurai showed that even in Western economies, a ‘thing’ may move in and out of commodity status, rather than having a fixed economic – and moral – value (1986). Appadurai, Bloch, Parry and others have sought to interrogate the classic distinction between gift- and commodity-exchange, where the former is seen as personal and social while the latter is impersonal and amoral (Mauss, 1925 [1990]). Yet, as Maurer contends, despite their insights, concerns about money’s social and moral dangers survive.

In Conakry, these concerns are reflected in much of the discourse about contemporary *jeliya*. In such discussions, both locally and in the literature, urban *jelilu* are often presented as a unified group with a shared identity. In this chapter, however, I examine a diverse field of production in 2009 Conakry, in which *jelilu* varyingly responded to the particularities of the moment. Some of the musicians I describe here embrace stardom, siding themselves firmly with the military in exchange for considerable wealth; others distance themselves from this practice, while nonetheless engaging in it more quietly. These examples point to a broader argument in this thesis about the many and complex ways in which musicians in Conakry negotiate the politics of popular music. The examples in this chapter illustrate that praise-singers are not simply coerced or bribed into promoting state power-brokers. Rather, as I show, musicians engage in praise-singing as an act of artistic agency, in pursuit of careers and money as well as the pleasure of the act itself. Similarly, patrons and audiences derive pleasure and enjoyment from the performance of praise and are integral to its enactment. Looking beyond what people say, I thus examine here the spectacle and experience of performance to consider how participation in the moment helps “momentarily invert the verbalised norms” (Neveu Kringelbach, 2007a: 252). In the following sections, I will illustrate the dynamics

at work here, considering various aspects of and debates surrounding the practice of praise-singing. I will compare representations of *jelilu* in Touré's discourse with the place of the *jeli* star today, with particular attention to concerns of moral corruption. I will then discuss the role of money in *jeli* performance, with attention to the participation of both the audience and the patron. I will also examine ideals of truthfulness in Guinean music, through a close discussion of the song 'CNDD la mansaya'. As I argue in this chapter, as both a source of moral anxiety and a site for pleasure and sociality, praise-singing illustrates the complexities of singing for the authoritarian state.

### **3.1 Jeli variations**

As Jonathan Stock notes, cities are marked by the 'criss-cross' of musical networks, as different genres influence and borrow from each other and musicians travel constantly up and down the spectrum from traditional to modern, local to imported and old to new (2008). Conakry is such a place, a polyglot capital brimming with musical encounters. Musicians may perform acoustically in a traditional ensemble one day and amplified at a reggae concert the next, adapting their rhythms, dress and stage mannerisms accordingly. Hip-hop albums routinely feature local instruments such as *kora* or *jembe*, electric dance bands perform folk melodies from faraway villages and 'traditional' singers orchestrate their concerts with drum-machines and synthesizers. Yet, in this context of stylistic overlap and exchange, *jeliya* operates at the core, dominating local sounds and performance idioms because of its cultural prestige. While the literature on Mande music often distinguishes between rural and urban genres (Charry, 2000; Hale, 1998; Schulz, 2001), an examination of *jeliya* in Conakry reveals the variations and contours that exist

within the urban setting. In this section, I will introduce key musical and social features of *jeliya* in Conakry today, situating it within older and more recent moral discourses. In section two, I will then turn more closely to the particular variant of modern *jeli* pop, around which much of the discussion focuses for the remainder of this chapter.



**Fig. 8** Diaryatou Kouyaté

Early on in my fieldwork, a friend who was helping me find a singing teacher introduced me to the family of M'Bady Kouyaté. M'Bady's family represents four generations of *jelilu* and is one of the best known musical lineages in Conakry today. The patriarch M'Bady is one of the last surviving *kora* masters of his generation, while his nephew Ba Cissoko, also a *kora* player and leader of an eponymous group, is one of the most successful Guinean artists on the world music stage. M'Bady's fourth wife, Diaryatou, is well-known locally as a *jelimuso* (female *jeli*; pl. *jelimusolu*), specializing

in the vocal artistry of *jeliya*.<sup>188</sup> Across generational and gender lines, the Kouyaté family thus embodies many of the varied aspects that characterize *jeliya* today. Within Conakry, members of the family are widely seen as practitioners of ‘traditional’ music, largely due to their rural roots, extended family structure and their emphasis on *kora*. Yet the family also epitomizes many of the characteristics of modern, urban *jeliya*, as shaped through the experiences of the Revolution and the more recent influences of the world music industry.

Traditionally, *jeliya* is divided into speech (*kuma*), song (*dònkili*) and instrumental music (*fòli*). *Kuma* refers to the recitation of genealogies, proverbs, social wisdom and stories from Mande history, all based on the *jeli*’s deep and esoteric knowledge. In Conakry today, however, *kuma* constitutes an ever-shrinking part of what *jelilu* do, largely due to the increasing prominence of praise-singing (as discussed later). In fact, the only time during fieldwork that I heard this type of *jeli* speech was by a rural *jeli* family who had travelled from their village to Conakry for a ceremony. For the family of M’Bady Kouyaté, as for other urban *jelilu*, their art is firmly centred on song and instrumental music, and while songs do at times include spoken narrative sections, this type of speech is part of a broader musical performance. This trend in urban *jeliya* is true not just of Conakry but of other cities in the Mande world, where music has taken precedence over other parts of the *jeli*’s art (see Durán, 2007: 588; Skinner, 2009: 202). Such music may be performed at local ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms, at hotels and restaurants, or in more formal concert settings. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in the concert performance of *jeliya*, which provides the greatest opportunity for the political display of power, as I will discuss later.

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<sup>188</sup> Male *jelilu* are more specifically referred to as *jelike*, although I rarely heard this term used.

*Jeli* music traditionally features a husband playing an instrument while his wife, or wives, sing (Durán, 1995: 201). Depending on region, different *jeli* families are associated with different instruments, including *koni* (lute), *bala*, *kora* and guitar. The *kora* is the family instrument of M'Bady Kouyaté, who is descended from a long line of *kora fôlalu* (kora players) and learned from a young age by accompanying his older male relatives.<sup>189</sup> M'Bady and Diaryatou often perform together in the traditional *jeli* format, she on voice and he on *kora*. On the other hand, M'Bady's sons and grandsons play *kora* in neo-traditional instrumental ensembles, reflecting the influence of a new genre of urban traditional music that I will discuss in the next chapter. Many of these young men are accomplished singers as well, and even M'Bady occasionally sings while playing. But while male *jelilu* can be proficient in speech, song and instrumental music, women tend to specialize in singing alone. This gendered division is confused by the fact that on the national stage, men have long dominated singing in postcolonial Guinea. As is evident from the discussion in Chapters One and Two, popular music during the Revolution era was almost exclusively male-dominated and, with the exception of the all-female *Amazones de Guinée*, the national dance bands were composed entirely of men.<sup>190</sup> In a society in which women's moral worth is tied to the private sphere, it is understandable that a public, experimental form of modern music would be a male domain.<sup>191</sup>

Furthermore, even in more 'traditional' forms of national music, Guinea's most

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<sup>189</sup> *Kora* is particularly characteristic of Mandinka (western Mande) *jeliya* and is said to have originated in the Gabu region of Guinea-Bissau (Charry, 2000: 115). This is the home region of M'Bady Kouyaté, whose family moved to north-western Guinea shortly before his birth in 1934.

<sup>190</sup> In fact, *Bembeya Jazz*'s first singer was a woman named Djènè Camara, who eventually left the band to get married and was replaced by two male singers with "effeminate voices". Interview with Mohamed Camara, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2009. In their book on the band, Justin Morel Junior and Souleymane Keita write that Djènè Camara was the group administrator, who occasionally lent her voice to certain songs (2011: 44).

<sup>191</sup> Skinner notes that Mande concepts of shame and morality are shaped by understandings of gender roles. Women are seen as inherently shameless, and must overcome this attribute by acting with 'masculine' restraint (2009: 225-6; see also Schulz, 2001: 146).

celebrated singer was the 20<sup>th</sup> century *jeli* Sory Kandia Kouyaté, who led the Ensemble Instrumental during the Touré era. Today, the best known *jeli* singers remain men, although women are making important inroads, as I will discuss in the next section.

*Jeli* songs are traditionally based around fixed texts from a core repertoire of classics, in which all pieces have names and “some kind of story behind them”, often relating to a historical figure (Charry, 2000: 145). Lyrical themes address God, love, moral lessons and Mande history. Yet within these fixed texts, a skilled *jeli* will improvise, adding references to the contemporary occasion, the audience, the setting and praise to particular individuals. As Molly Roth notes, such praise to living individuals has become the most prominent feature of modern *jeliya*, although it is also the most contentious (2008: 82).

Praise-singing is a musical practice that exists throughout Africa, with musicians or other specialized social groups detailing the names, histories, deeds and qualities of individuals, often in exchange for some type of patronage. Ruth Finnegan notes that, in contrast to much African oral recitation delivered in prose, the art of praising usually incorporates musical elements to heighten its emotional resonance (2007: 80). In Nigeria, women specialize in *oriki*, a genre of Yoruba praise poetry often involving song, trumpet and drums (Barber, 1991: 11), and musicians in the urban traditional genre *jùjú* insert the names of potential wealthy clients into their lyrics (Waterman, 1990: 186). Congolese dance musicians similarly perform *libanga*, or ‘name-dropping’ to please audience members and secure tips (White, 2008: 173), while Rwandan praise poets sing to the accompaniment of the *inanga* lute (Kubik, 2010). Karin Barber notes that despite the widely-used term ‘praise-singing’, the practices to which it refers are not always geared

to flattery. Amongst Yoruba people, for example, a genre of *akija*, or ‘provocative epithets’, deals with “shameful, painful, ridiculous and embarrassing incidents” in a person’s past (1991: 13). Most commonly, however, musical naming serves to bolster one’s reputation, with patrons sometimes paying generously for the good publicity.

In Mande culture, *fasa*, the highest form of praise, is the sole provenance of the *jeli*. *Fasa* is traditionally sung by a *jeli* to his or her patron, a noble (*horon*), and involves the recounting of deep historical and genealogical knowledge of the noble’s family. The *jeli* recounts the patron’s family name (*jamu*), linking it back to his or her ancestors and tracing the lineage back to the founding figures of the Mande Empire. By doing so, the *jeli* affirms the patron’s place in the Mande social world, a deeply honorific act for which the singer receives material rewards and loyalty from the patron. Much of the literature on *jeliya* emphasizes this interdependence between *jeli* and *horon*, with *jelilu* relying on nobles for patronage while nobles fear and respect *jelilu* for their ability to create or destroy reputations through words (Camara, S., 1976; Newton, 1999; Roth, 2008; Schulz, 2001). As Paula Ebron notes, *jeliya* exists within the “economic and political webs of dependence and difference” that make up Mande social life (2002: 129). Praise-singing, with its exchange of words for patronage, illustrates this connectivity more than any other aspect of *jeliya*.

Yet this connectivity also leads to resentment, and sometimes hostility, towards *jelilu*, who are often accused of greedily exploiting their traditions. Such sentiments have been widely detailed in the literature (Charry, 2000; Conrad & Frank, 1995; Hale, 1998; Hoffman, 2000) and stem from a sense amongst other groups that *jelilu* are little more than ‘beggars’ (Ebron, 2002: 138). Dorothea Schulz notes that such criticisms emerged

from social transformation in the twentieth century, first as hereditary nobles were disenfranchised under colonialism, and later as a new elite rose to power in the postcolonial state. As *jelilu* adjusted their praise practices to the new political and economic realities, nobles often accused them of opportunism and “shamelessness” (2001: 86).

In post-independence Guinea, *jelilu* represented a particularly complex group for the Touré regime. In the early years of his rule, Touré had celebrated their role as guardians of African cultural memory. In 1960, writing (as always) in French, he described that

In the tranquility of our villages, in the shade of our forests, on the shores of our rivers, our griots patiently, lovingly rewrote our history and thus contributed to the greatness of the future Africa.<sup>192</sup>

In poetic and sentimental terms, Touré here associates *jelilu* with the unspoilt rural sphere, evoking Herderian images of folk patriotism. Yet, as Touré’s Revolution intensified over the next two decades, these “African poets” became a target for his reformist fervour. As noted, Touré saw local traditional culture as both a legitimizing popular force and a system of authority outside the modern nation-state. *Jelilu* represented a threat to his absolute power, and by 1968, the government was calling for “griotism”, which took on negative connotations of backwardness and moral corruption, to be abolished. Touré played on existing discourses on the social and moral inferiority of *jelilu*, vilifying them for their “greed, idleness and begging” (1972: 431; my translation). Evoking socialist rhetoric, he further added accusations of *jelilu* as anti-modern and anti-revolutionary, condemning their “unscientific” and “feudal” practices.<sup>193</sup> The regime also

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<sup>192</sup> Reprinted in *Horoya* No. 64, 4-10 April 1970

<sup>193</sup> *Horoya* 1968

took active steps to divest them of their traditional power. Thus, the regime attempted to ban praise-singing to individual patrons by denouncing the practice, while the best known *jelilu* were recruited into formations such as the Ensemble Instrumental National de Guinée, whose mission as Touré outlined in 1972 was to “give a collective form to musical expression” and to “kill griotism”.<sup>194</sup>

Yet despite these measures and attitudes, *jelilu* such as M’Bady Kouyaté are largely nostalgic for the post-independence period. As a young man in the early 1960s, M’Bady Kouyaté was living near the town of Koundara in north-western Guinea when he was visited by a delegation from Conakry scouting the area for local performers. M’Bady was recruited into the Ensemble Instrumental and later joined the nationalized troupe Les Ballets Africains, as did his third wife Mama. As I discussed in Chapter One, national groups such as these brought together musicians from Guinea’s different regions and ethnic groups, who re-orchestrated and adapted their traditions for stage-oriented performance contexts. For Touré, *jeliya* was thus reined in within the apparatus of the Revolution, as *jelilu* performed within groups alongside other musicians and in active support for the regime. Yet, from M’Bady’s perspective, this change allowed *jeliya* to be modern, while offering *jelilu* new security and opportunities. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, M’Bady toured Europe, Asia and the United States with the Ballets Africains, and in Conakry often performed for the president and visiting dignitaries. M’Bady was paid a salary from the state coffers and today the family still lives in a house provided by the Touré government in 1976. “Sékou Touré was a great man,” M’Bady often told me. “He gave me everything and he loved art.”

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<sup>194</sup> ‘Discours du chef d’état’, Reprinted in *Horoya* 1 March 1972, No. 1866: 4-5

Unlike musicians in the Touré-era dance bands, M'Bady retained a (greatly reduced) national role after Touré's death in 1984. The new government continued intermittently to fund the Ensemble Instrumental and the Ballets Africains, although musicians were much less celebrated and materially supported than in the previous period. M'Bady rarely speaks of Touré's successor, Lansana Conté, and told me on a few occasions that the years after Touré's death in 1984 were difficult for him. By the 1990s, however, as interest in the *kora* grew amongst world music audiences, new opportunities arose for the family. In large part this is due to the success of M'Bady's nephew Ba Cissoko.

Ba performs in a quartet, also called Ba Cissoko, composed of two *koras*, bass guitar or *bolon* (bass-harp) and percussion on either *jembe* or *horde* (half-calabash drum).<sup>195</sup> While *jeliya* in Conakry today increasingly emphasizes singing – as a vehicle for praise – Ba Cissoko's sound foregrounds the *kora*, with voice as accompaniment rather than lead. This sound reflects Ba's early collaboration with a French musician, Gilles Poizat, who was working in Guinea in the 1990s. At that time, *kora* was gaining international prominence through musicians such as Mory Kanté, whose 1987 song 'Yeke Yeke' was a number-one hit throughout Europe. With strong emphasis on *kora*, Ba Cissoko's sound has been enthusiastically received by European audiences and since 2000 the group has recorded two albums in France and spends several months of each year touring in Europe. At the same time, the group is relatively unknown in Conakry, where they perform infrequently. While many people in Conakry may recognize the name, few people have heard their music as it is mainly performed and marketed internationally.

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<sup>195</sup> The *horde* is a Fulbe instrument from the highlands region known as 'Moyen Guinée' (middle Guinea).

Nonetheless, Ba's success has opened up new possibilities for their extended family, both in Conakry and overseas. M'Bady and Diaryatou recorded an album on a French label in 2003 and, along with two of their sons, performed at the *Nuits Méritis* festival in Angoulême, France in 2006. Within Conakry, the couple and other family members often perform at concerts organized by the French Cultural Centre and the French Embassy. Their recordings and concerts, like Ba Cissoko's, emphasize *kora* over voice and keep praise-singing to a minimum. Music in these settings is billed as 'traditional', but it represents one particular imagining of *jeliya* – shaped by the experiences of the Revolution and the aesthetic preferences of world music audiences.

The Kouyaté family has come to occupy a particular niche in Conakry's *jeli* scene as both insiders and outsiders. While M'Bady and Diaryatou do engage in praise-singing, their performances overseas and at expatriate venues in Conakry mean that they are not economically reliant on the practice. For many of the younger men in the family, however, praise-singing represents one of their only reliable sources of income, as they accompany *jeli* pop stars in Conakry today. The emergence of such pop stars has made praise-singing more lucrative than ever, yet also stirs up familiar moral anxieties, as discussed below.

### **3.2 Vedettariat**

Towards the end of Ramadan in 2009, I accompanied my *kora* teacher, M'Bady's grandson Demba, to the home of the *jelimuso* Djeli Kani Fanta Diabaté. Djeli Kani Fanta lives in the Cité des Musiciens, just next door to La Paillote and near many musicians from the Touré-era dance bands. While most of these other musicians reside in small and

rather faded houses provided by the Touré government, her house is visibly distinct. Entering the walled compound, I noticed a brand new stucco structure with gleaming pink walls and a shaded courtyard to the side. On the day of our visit, the courtyard was filled with musicians and others who had come to speak about Djeli Kani Fanta's upcoming *sumu*, a *jelimuso* concert format popular in Bamako.<sup>196</sup> Djeli Kani Fanta was to hold a *sumu* at La Paillote to mark the end of Ramadan and had asked Demba to play in her back-up band. As Demba spoke to another musician about the arrangements, a regal woman in heels and a saffron-coloured *boubou* strode out of the house towards us. This was the *jelimuso* herself.

Djeli Kani Fanta represents a relatively new culture of *vedettariat*, or stardom, that has emerged in Guinean music over the past generation. While Touré-era musicians were 'poets of the Revolution' organized into ensembles and bands, the scene in Conakry today is dominated by individual stars, or *vedettes*, seeking their personal fortunes. This model borrows from the examples of other West African cities, notably Bamako and Abidjan, where music is largely supported by private sponsorship and the biggest stars have achieved considerable fame and wealth (see Durán, 1995; Eyre, 2000). The privatization of the arts in 1980s Guinea created similar possibilities as music-making was suddenly open to anyone who could crack the market, not just to those who met the approval of Touré and his party.<sup>197</sup> As I discuss in this section, this departure from past

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<sup>196</sup> Durán defines *sumu* in its earliest meaning as "a ritual or informal celebration, with music" (2007: 574). Today the term most generally refers to a concert featuring a *jelimuso* and a largely female audience (Roth, 2008: 103). These types of concerts are popular in Bamako, but have been relatively uncommon in Conakry until recently. Djeli Kani Fanta Diabaté's *sumu* represents a conscious attempt to import the vedette culture of Mali, in which *jelimusolu* are the well-remunerated divas of music, to Guinea.

<sup>197</sup> While popular musicians from the Touré-era express largely hostile views towards Touré's successor, Lansana Conté, for cutting off state support, Conté's regime claimed the professionalization of Guinean music as one of its successes. A 1999 article in the party newspaper *Horoya* states, for example, that

policies and ideology provokes old and new moral concerns relating to the corruption of musicians, excessive individualism and lack of consideration for the collective good. I argue, however, that like the popular musicians under the Revolution, *vedettes* today are expressing their agency by attempting to control their lives and livelihoods, and are able to do so to a degree that was not possible in the past.

As I discussed in Chapter One, in promoting his personality cult, Touré insisted on music-making as a collective activity of the People in post-independence Guinea. Touré was highly critical and suspicious of individual stardom, viewing it as a threat to his own authority. As he wrote, “African music is essentially collective, having no leaders responsible for distributing roles between individuals” (1972: 434; my translation). He thus discouraged the formation of public personalities and sought to diffuse the power of individual musicians by subsuming them within groups. Musicians were required to perform in ensembles and bands, which were filtered through the system of local and national festivals to ensure they conformed to the accepted ‘revolutionary’ model. While musicians did promote their own careers, they could only do so as groups, as the examples I described earlier show.

All this changed with Touré’s death in 1984, however. Individual musicians were now free to pursue solo careers without the encumbrance of a twelve-person band. As the state receded from cultural life, an atmosphere of individualism, competition and profit intensified as musicians sought to promote themselves to secure the support of wealthy

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The last 15 years have seen the emergence of a new wave of Guinean musicians, mostly composed of young people who are turning into *vedettes*. Amongst them, former members of the federal dance bands. Sensing the benefit of change and the State’s disengagement from the sectors of production, they’re trying their chance at solo singing.

Moreover, the article cites as proof of its success the emergence of a number of female *vedettes* since 1984, as well as the development of local hip-hop, resulting from the opening of Guinea’s borders and renewed contact with other cultures. (Abdoulaye Barry (1999) ‘Le 3 avril 1999: Changement de Cap pour les Artistes’, *Horoya* No. 5099, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1999)

patrons. Liberalization gave rise to a phenomenon of individual stardom that would have been impossible during the Revolution. *Vedettariat* signaled a new “informal’ economy of culture” (Skinner, 2009: 123), one which is provisional, chaotic, individualistic and, occasionally, extremely lucrative.

The new generation of Guinean vedettes includes internationally known stars such as the *jelilu* Sékouba ‘Bambino’ Diabaté and Mory Kanté, as well as ones known mainly to domestic audiences, including the *jeli* singer Kerfala Kanté and the *jelimuso* Djeli Kani Fanta Diabaté. In contrast to the generation of Touré-era musicians, the stars of today are celebrities in the modern sense: well-paid (by their patrons), easily recognizable and expensively dressed. They, as well as the countless aspiring stars seen and heard throughout Conakry, are most often from *jeli* backgrounds. Although successful musicians from other genres, such as hip-hop and reggae, have also achieved individual celebrity, they are often referred to as “stars”, while the term *vedette* tends to denote a modern, urban *jeli*, as well as non-*jeli* singers practising Mande praise-singing.<sup>198</sup> The music of *vedettariat* is modern *jeli* pop – Maninka vocals accompanied by electric guitar and bass, drum-kit or drum-machine, synthesizer and sometimes *kora*, *bala* and *jembe*. The musical accompaniment is usually minimal and emphasis is on the vocals. Songs are often newly composed rather than based on the classic *jeli* repertoire, while lyrics tend to follow traditional themes of love, religion and social advice, as well as extensive praise-singing. This music can be heard through radio broadcasts and cassette or CD recordings,

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<sup>198</sup> As with other generic boundaries, these terms are all extremely fluid and overlapping. Moreover, many Mande singers from non-*jeli* backgrounds now practice *jeliya* and *jeli* praise-singing, as hereditary occupational distinctions have become more blurry. Nonetheless, friends often stressed to me what an important and radical departure this is from past practice. As one friend said to me, “It’s as shocking as if Prince Charles suddenly became a rapper!” Conversation with Any Keita, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009

but live performance and music videos are particularly important, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Guinean *vedettariat* remains dominated by men but there is an increasing presence of women on the scene, reflecting the influence of musical culture in contemporary Bamako. While Abidjan was the capital of the West African recording industry in the 1970s, Bamako has exerted a growing influence on *jeliya* in Conakry since the 1990s, particularly with the phenomenal success of Malian stars such as the *jelimusos* Ami Koita and Kandia Kouyaté. As Lucy Durán notes, Malian men are particularly well-known on the world music stage, but women dominate the domestic music industry and have increasingly become the local ‘superstars’ of Malian music (1995; see also Schulz, 2001a). In large part, this is because men specialize in instrumental music, which has a wider appeal in the international market, while women specialize in singing, which has greater appeal amongst local consumers who understand the song texts.<sup>199</sup> As noted, the gendered division of *jeliya* is more mixed in Conakry, where men are equally prized as singers, largely due to the example of Sory Kandia Kouyaté. Nonetheless, in recent years, women have been encouraged to the fore due to the influence of Mali’s musical “superwomen” (ibid.) and the great fame and wealth that these stars have achieved – fame and wealth deriving from praise-singing.

As noted above, criticisms of *jeli* praise-singing are not a new feature of the Mande social world. *Jelilu* have long been stigmatized for their social inferiority and, since at least the colonial period, non-*jelilu* have viewed praise-singing with scepticism and disdain. These sentiments are continuously renewed through a discourse of

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<sup>199</sup> Schulz notes that these singers are particularly popular amongst urban Malian women, who varyingly appreciate the singers’ voices, fashion, demeanour and commentary on morality and modern femininity (2009).

“degeneration and disgrace”, suggesting an idealized past against which every new moment of *jeliya* is unfavourably compared (Roth, 2008: 82). Today, critics argue, *jelilu* are more corrupt than ever. In Conakry, the term *vedettariat* has become loaded with such types of moral judgements, particularly as *jeli* pop music is heavily geared towards praise of individual patrons. While praise-singing is traditionally a feature of *jeliya*, modern pop emphasizes this element while largely excluding older, historical song texts. As a result, *vedettariat* is used to distinguish music today from earlier practices. Its usage is often as a generic term, such as ‘doing *vedettariat*’ or ‘going over to *vedettariat*’, and *vedettes* are frequently seen as flashy pretenders, a breed apart from ‘true’ *jelilu* and lacking any real musical knowledge or artistry. As the guitarist Lamine Condé said to me, “Today you don’t need to know anything about our folklore, about Guinean culture as we did before. You go to *vedettariat* and you make your money. But those *vedettes* only care about themselves, not about the good of the country.”<sup>200</sup>

Such allusions to the past refer both to an unspecified precolonial moment as well as to the post-independence period of Sékou Touré. References to the Revolution add a sense of urgency to the problem, as people contrast the present day to a moment that is still within living memory. While the Revolution’s legacy is increasingly debated today, it is nonetheless commonly seen as a moment of musical morality, a moment when music served the collective good. An oft-expressed sentiment, even amongst younger musicians, is that during the post-independence period, musicians sang for *something* – the Revolution, the nation, the ‘people’ – whereas today they sing solely to earn a bit of cash. Critics of the Touré regime often likewise share this view. For example, Moussa Diakité, a film-maker who was arrested and imprisoned in Conakry’s infamous Camp

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<sup>200</sup> Interview, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Boiro prison in 1971, told me that musicians in the Touré era had a “sense of purpose” that has been missing since the 1980s. This idea corresponds with a general feeling that, while Sékou Touré may have been a brutal tyrant, his regime was nonetheless driven by a ‘purpose’, of Guinean exceptionalism, pan-African liberation and socialist development. As Moussa Diakité suggested, these ideologies permeated the music and culture of that time. In contrast, *vedettariat* is seen as representing a loss of meaning and honour in music, which has been professionalized and is pursued as an economic activity rather than for any greater national cause. *Vedettes* are criticized for their excessive individualism, their corruption, their self-promotion – all of which are seen as contrary to earlier values of a ‘purpose’ and a collective good.

Despite this discourse of collective good, however, my own sense is that *jelilu* and other musicians – just as the rest of the population – have always been concerned with their individual careers and livelihoods. As discussed in Chapter One, musicians with the national dance bands sought to build their careers and actively competed with each other to promote themselves and win over audiences. Moreover, when I spoke to musician friends at La Paillote, they routinely recounted to me what Sékou Touré did for them on a personal level rather than for the country as a whole. Thus, as the saxophonist Mamadou Barry once told me, “If a minister and a musician both knocked on Sékou’s door at the same time, he would receive the musician first. So when Sékou died, we [musicians] lost everything.”<sup>201</sup> Similarly, the *jeli* Youssouf Condé said that

The late president Ahmed Sékou Touré, rest his soul and may peace be upon him, gave Guinea its independence. People may say things about him today but he was there for musicians. They were treated as civil servants. They were given housing. They didn’t pay rent. They didn’t pay for electricity. They didn’t pay for water.

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with Laye Diabaté, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2009

At the end of each month he gave them sacks of rice, sugar, oil, soap, everything.<sup>202</sup>

In these and many other accounts that I heard, what musicians remember and regret most about the Revolution is their own financial security, material comfort, access to power and personal advancement – rather than any broader national or pan-African project. Youssouf makes references to other aspects of Touré’s rule, the ‘things that people say about him today’, but he is ultimately concerned with how musicians were treated. For Youssouf, Barry and others, Sékou Touré is vindicated because he helped musicians secure their livelihoods. It is entirely understandable that musicians would value such a source of financial stability. Yet, at the same time, the *vedettes* of today are criticized as being greedy and selfish for pursuing these same goals.

It seems that *jelilu* and other musicians are no more or no less individualistic today than they were in the past. While the circumstances in which they practice their art may have changed dramatically, their main concerns are closely related to those of the previous generation. *Vedettes* are able to express their individual agency and manage their careers to a degree that was impossible in the past, however. As noted, they make names for themselves as solo stars, pursuing degrees of wealth unheard of during the Revolution. This degree of agency is a source of bitterness for older musicians, however, who feel that they worked for a ‘purpose’ that has now vanished.

Criticisms levelled against *vedettariat* seem to allude to an anxiety with the broader economic and political environment in contemporary Conakry, not just the musical one. Friends and acquaintances in Conakry today often express discomfort with

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<sup>202</sup> Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2009. As McGovern observes, in Islam the phrase “peace be upon him” is usually reserved for the Prophet Mohamed, but in Guinea is sometimes used in reference to Sékou Touré (2010: 23).

the perceived individualism and selfishness of the present moment. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Revolution created an illusion of collectivity, an illusion based on an imposed ideology and imagining of national culture, but nonetheless one which retains an allure against the uncertainty of today. Economic liberalization, multi-partyism (at least in name), the articulation of ethnic difference and the loss of a coherent national story mark the present moment as fragmented, competitive and chaotic, lacking the seeming unity of earlier times. *Vedettes* become singled out for criticism, their perceived individualism, corruption and lack of consideration for the collective good standing in as symbols of a broader problem which is hard to name. In this way, musicians continue to play a long-standing role as scapegoats for anxieties about modernization.

Yet alongside these criticisms, there also exists an understanding of the harshness of current realities. Prolonged economic crisis in Guinea has meant that times are hard and almost everyone is struggling to stay afloat. In this context, praise-singing is seen as an unfortunate yet inevitable economic strategy for musicians to pursue in order to earn a living. With little organization or investment in the domestic music industry, musicians are dependent on the largesse of patrons to survive and must be entrepreneurial in their strategies. Yet, there is a sense of regret that music has become mixed up in the dirty business of money, a feeling that some things – music, culture, history – should be beyond such corruption (cf. Myers, 2001: 32). Yet monetization is a complex phenomenon. *Jeliya* in Conakry today is intimately tied up with the exchange of money for praise and discourses about *jeli* praise suggest moral unease at this practice. Looking beyond what people say, however, it becomes clear that money is also integral to the pleasure, appropriateness and participatory inclusiveness of praise performance. In the

next section, I will consider more closely the role of money in praise-singing. Returning to Djeli Fani Kanta's *sumu* at La Paillote, I will examine how money heightens the moment of performance itself.

### **3.3 Money and the pleasure of exchange**

As noted, money is at the heart of criticisms against the corruption of *jelilu*, the flashiness of *vedettes* and the opportunism of praise-singing. *Jelilu* are accused of debasing tradition by selling their praise for “easy money” (Keita, 1995: 185). Many *jelilu* that I knew in Conakry were sensitive to such criticisms, and often referred to the money they received as ‘gifts’ rather than payment, seemingly affirming Marcel Mauss’ well-known distinction (see also, Skinner, 2009: 205). Yet, while *jelilu* are widely accused of greed, audiences and patrons at once affirm their practices by actively participating in and deriving great pleasure from praise performance. Patrons willingly pay for the bestowal of *jeli* praise, while audiences respond with great enthusiasm to the exchange. In this section, I will look more closely at the three-way interaction between singer, audience and patron during praise performance. I contend that despite the moralizing discourse about praise money, such anxieties dissipate and give way to pleasure and enjoyment during the moment of performance itself. Looking beyond discourse to examine the event of praise performance allows us to understand the moral, aesthetic and political dynamics at play here which help perpetuate the practice.

### 3.3.1 *Pleasure and participation*

The ethnography of performance has captured anthropological and ethnomusicological imaginations in the past three decades because of the possibilities it opens up for understanding culture as interactive and dynamic. This idea developed in linguistic anthropology, where an emphasis on performance allowed for speech to be seen as an act involving an audience, a history and a cultural context. When considered from this perspective, the act of speaking is about an ongoing process of communication and interaction between speaker and listener (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 60). Similarly, understanding music as performance rather than text allows for an appreciation of listening, movement, emotion and participation. As Steven Feld suggests, a musical event involves “a special kind of ‘feelingful’ activity and engagement on the part of the listener, a form of pleasure that unites the material and mental dimensions of musical experience as fully embodied” (2005: 91). What is at work here is the interplay between the musical and extramusical features of the event, and the multiple and over-lapping feelings and interpretations that engage the listener at that moment. As Michelle Kisliuk observes, performance involves “choice, irony, contradiction, and surprise”, a series of “microconversations” between the participants that are expressed in unspoken ways (1998: 12, 14).

Building on these ideas, I wish here to consider praise performance as an interactive, emotional and participatory experience. While much work on *jeliya* focuses on song texts and surrounding discourses, praise-singing, particularly in its modern, urban form, involves spectacular performance, by the singer, the patron and the audience. Its aesthetic and social value is based on listening, feeling, seeing and participating, and

as I describe here, money is central to the entire show. In this section, I will consider the role of the audience in the performance, before turning my attention to the patron further below.

My approach here follows that of Bob White in his work on Congolese dance music (2008). Recent commentators have been sensitive to the stigma that praise-singing faces, and have sought to explain the exchange of money in functional terms as cementing social bonds (Ebron, 2002; Roth, 2008). The focus in such accounts is often on how *jelilu* are motivated by the desire to affirm relationships, rather than simply to acquire material reward. White makes a similar argument but goes one step further, considering *libanga*, or ‘name-dropping’, not just for its social purpose but also for its aesthetic work. He shows that these two aspects of the musical experience are related, that name-dropping

... gives the music a degree of liveness and warmth by placing musicians (and by extension their fans) in a live network of social reciprocity. In this sense, *libanga* gives people something to listen for, a series of expectations that make listening both predictable and pleasurable. (2008: 178)

White’s emphasis here is on the immediate moment of performance. While he discusses the sociality of the exchange, he describes what it would ‘feel’ like to a Congolese person participating in the show. The reader has a sense of ‘liveness and warmth’, of expectation and pleasure that the encounter brings for audiences. As White writes, the practice of *libanga* might seem morally dubious to foreign observers, but to Congolese people it is “a normal part of the music’s aesthetics” (2008: 178).

Ethnographic accounts such as White’s allow us to focus on the aesthetics of praise performance, considering the sensory experience for those involved. Such an experience involves not just words but sounds, music, colours, movement and emotion,

all of which create the value of the event. Furthermore, examining live performance allows us to understand the three-way nature of the exchange, between patron, singer and audience. While the literature on *jeliya* has largely focused on the exchange between patron and *jeli*, the role of the audience completes the performance and is integral to its success.

In Conakry, the line dividing audience from performer is extremely porous. Concerts most frequently feature a continuous flow of people moving back and forth from the stage to dance or to tip the musicians, often times leaving the singer entirely obscured. These interactions are key to the concert's 'liveness', a spatial call-and-response allowing deeper engagement in the show. The moment that makes the collective pulse most quicken, however, is when a patron responds generously to praise. At Djeli Kani Fanta Diabaté's *sumu* at La Paillote, for example, the *jelimuso* turned periodically to face a row of spectacularly-dressed women seated at the front of the open-air venue. These VIPs included wives of government ministers, and Djeli Kani Fanta knew exactly whom amongst them to single out for praise. At one point, she faced the group and, as the instrumentalists receded and a hush grew, raised her hands above her, her voice swelling out, "Soulo oooo... Iyè soulou ooooo". With this phrase, a *jeli* 'call to the horses' used to intensify the mood and power of the music, Djeli Kani Fanta captured the full attention of the quietly seated audience. A short while later she launched into a series of full-throated staccato declamations of family names, punctuated by instrumental flourishes from her backing musicians. The women in the front row looked on impassively yet with full attention, only their jaws moving as they slowly chewed gum. Finally a woman in brilliant yellow *bazin*, a highly-prized damask textile, subtly gestured to those around her

and the group rose. The woman in yellow, whom one of my friends named as Madame Sylla, the wife of a high-level CNDD official, slowly approached the stage. With her entourage circled around her, Madame Sylla moved forward, her face remaining coolly detached as she opened her purse. By this point, she and the *jelimuso* were facing each other, the *jelimuso* calling out her virtues as well as those of her husband. Camera-men swooped around, filming from every angle, their images simultaneously projected on a screen behind the stage. Madame Sylla began taking out bundles of folded Guinean francs from her purse, handing each one to a woman in her entourage, who in turn handed it to one of the *jelimuso*'s back-up singers. With her entourage swaying lightly to the music, Madame Sylla remained still while casually producing bundle after bundle, displaying for all the seeming endlessness of her generosity. The entire duet between *jelimuso* and patron lasted for several minutes until, finally satisfied that the praise had been sufficiently reciprocated, Madame Sylla and the other women turned on their heels and briskly walked off stage.

The *sumu* at La Paillote was a particularly refined occasion, with an audience composed primarily of middle-class women. As many commentators on Mande culture have noted, emotional restraint is a key signifier of social status and dignity here (Hoffman, 2000; Schulz, 2001; see also Neveu Kringelbach, 2007a). While *jelilu* are exempt from these expectations because of their low social status, nobles are bound by them and must maintain control over their bodies and speech (Schulz, 2001: 146). Thus, just as the patron herself displayed no emotion, audience members also sat in cool, reserved silence throughout, speaking quietly amongst themselves while nonetheless taking in every detail of the performance before them. Watching the stage and the

projected screens, the women around me noted exactly who had paid and how much, how the patron had behaved and what she and her entourage were wearing, and at the end of each exchange there was a palpable sense of satisfaction that things had been done correctly. As Madame Sylla emptied her purse, a woman next to me almost let her excitement get the better of her as she speculated that the amount may have exceeded 1,000,000 Guinea francs (approximately £120 at the time of fieldwork). In less refined settings, the audience will not be so careful in its reactions, however. Spectators may roar their approval as a patron generously tips the singer, perhaps tucking money into the *jeli*'s collar or showering the *jelimuso* with fistfuls of Guinean francs, which are quickly swept up by an assistant standing to the side of the stage. At large concerts, the MC may take the microphone to announce a patron's tip and, if it is particularly impressive, the cheers can be thunderous. Yet even in the elegant setting of the *sumu*, the audience's participation is an integral part of the performance, a public affirmation of the exchange.

Audiences participate in many ways: by listening and watching, dancing and clapping, goading a patron to respond to praise, cheering and stamping their approval at the response, discussing amongst themselves the amount and probably gossiping about it the next day. Just as much as the music itself, these reactions produce the performance.<sup>203</sup> While people listen to the *jeli*'s words, they also drink in the clothes, the colours, the sounds of the instruments and the visual spectacle of tipping. This tipping, or *jeli sò wodi* (*jeli* praise money), represents a climactic moment in which all three parties to the exchange are moved – the *jelimuso* intensifying her praise, the patron displaying her

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<sup>203</sup> In her work on East African *taarab*, Kelly Askew similarly foregrounds the role of the audience, noting that *taarab* performance constitutes a key site for the negotiation of social relations amongst female audience members. As Askew argues, *taarab* performance is first and foremost about the performance of social relations and disputes amongst audience members, who quite literally claim the performance space through their own tipping and dance, while “relegate[ing] performers to the sidelines” (2002: 128).

wealth, the audience signalling its approval in subtle or more direct ways. Money thus heightens the experience both quantitatively and qualitatively, producing what Roth describes as a momentary “mania of consumption that leaves everyone thrilled and exhausted” (2008: 103). While people criticize *jelilu* for taking money for praise, the performance and, in particular, the moment of giving *jeli* praise money, is one of pleasure and excitement.

When I asked friends why they respond so enthusiastically to tipping, I was frequently told that it is part of Guinean or Mande or African culture, that it is the right thing to do, that it makes people happy. The giving of *jeli* praise money is seen to represent the correct order of things, as the patron and audience affirm a shared Mande history and tradition that the *jeli* evokes. Yet alongside these responses, I often noticed a sense of embarrassment or sheepishness when friends spoke to me about it later. Outside the moment of the performance itself, it often seemed that friends were more aware of my perceptions and possible judgments as an outsider. These reactions brought to mind what Michael Herzfeld describes as cultural intimacy: aspects of cultural identity that are seen as “a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2005: 3). The exchange of money for praise does provide for such an assurance of a shared culture and identity for Guinean people, but it is also found within a discourse of moral corruption and anxiety about the loss of traditional ideals. During the performance itself, however, these concerns seem to temporarily fade as the pleasure of participation takes the foreground. At that moment, the giving of *jeli* praise money provides a way for the participants to collectively affirm a

sense of order and tradition, to suggest that things have not deviated so far from what they once were.

### 3.3.2 *Politics and power*

While concerns about the monetization of praise-singing most often blame the *jeli* for corruption and opportunism, the patron's involvement in the exchange is integral to the show. Unlike in European and North American performance, the musicians themselves are not the visual focus of the performance and instead are often hidden behind the dancing and tipping crowd. The photograph in Figure 9 illustrates. Taken from my seat at the Palais du Peuple during a praise performance to President Dadis in 2009, my field of view was dominated by women standing up to dance and tip, while a huge picture of Dadis, the absent but always present grand patron, stared back imposingly from the stage. For the audiences, it is not just the music but each others' participation that creates the event, as social roles are acted out, individuals and families are publicly acknowledged and a shared cultural identity is invoked.



**Fig. 9** A praise performance to President Dadis at the Palais du Peuple, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2009, with members of the audience approaching the stage to dance

Moreover, as the example of Djeli Kani Fanta's *sumu* illustrates, patrons often draw out the act of tipping, performing their role carefully and deliberately. From Madame Sylla's expensive clothes to the studied detachment of her demeanour, the spatial arrangement of her entourage and the slow and public production of money from her bag, she was presenting her wealth and status for all to see. This display was further heightened by the suffocating attention of the cameramen, who crowded in closer to capture the exchange, projecting it outwards for the seated audience. The patron's role is thus central to praise performance, as I discuss here, illustrating the aesthetics of power in Conakry today.

As noted previously, secrecy and guardedness are key social features in Guinea. Money, possessions, words and ideas are all things to be discretely guarded, in an atmosphere that often feels heavy with suspicion, fear and jealousy. At times, great effort is made to conceal the exchange of small amounts of money. A friend once handed me a

500 franc note (about six pence at the time of fieldwork) wrapped in a piece of paper, which was in turn wrapped in a cigarette packet. Such a desire to keep things hidden permeates everyday life in Conakry, stemming partly from the residual paranoia of the Revolution as well as from older cultural norms of secrecy. As noted, such norms hold that traditional power is maintained through esoteric practices, its sources hidden away behind the surface of the everyday. These ideas, both old and more recent, reverberate in Conakry today. Thus, even amongst friends, people often conceal from each other what their plans are, where they are going, whom they are meeting and what they hope to achieve from it. The Guinean social world is a precarious place, where people must protect their interests as best as they can.

Yet this ‘aesthetics of discretion’ (McGovern, 2004: 442) works alongside what Achille Mbembe has termed the “aesthetics of vulgarity” in the African postcolonial state (2001: 102). As Mbembe observes,

... the *commandement* must be extravagant, since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele; it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in dress and lifestyle, turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theater. (ibid.: 109)

The aesthetics of vulgarity is a marker of power at the top levels of society and politics, a case of flaunting what you have. While hiding the sources and instruments of their power, those at the top nonetheless reveal their strength through grandiose and public display.

Charles Piot argues that political power in West Africa realizes itself “through demonstrating its capacity to act – and through making itself visible for all to see” (2010: 42). Political leaders do not seek to identify themselves with average citizens. Instead, it is precisely the transcendence of the average, the sheer un-ordinariness of power that

actualizes it. Thus, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Conakry, government officials speed through the city in brand-new Land Rovers and Hummers, sirens blaring as they push aside battered taxis and crowded minibuses. Official functions are choreographed to maximize their theatricality, with speeches, praise-songs, dancing, VIP-seating areas and supporters wearing t-shirts of the leader's face. Through such display, the elite stake out their political, economic and social territory, spreading themselves out to occupy as much space as possible.

Entangled with the 'aesthetics of discretion' is thus the sense that power is also naturalized through its display, that it must be performed to be rendered real. Schulz argues that political power in the Mande world has always been "justified by and in itself" (2001: 59). Once one occupies the seat of power, it is seen as rightfully held. Moreover, this idea extends beyond political power. Those who are wealthy, for example, are seen as somehow rightfully so, even if there is gossip about how that wealth was obtained. Banning Eyre cites the example of the Malian businessman Babani Sissoko, whose almost mythic wealth is an enormous source of gossip and intrigue in Bamako, even while its rightfulness is never really questioned (2000). Similarly, in Conakry, it often struck me that it is not the most successful *vedettes* who are most criticized for their individualism or corruption, but rather the aspiring ones. While the big stars such as Mory Kanté and Sékouba Bambino are seen as occupying their deserved place, it is more often aspiring *vedettes* who are labelled as aggressive self-promoters and pretenders.

Political authority and social status in Conakry are increasingly made tangible through an aesthetics of showmanship, in which ostentatious displays of wealth and

influence are both expected and often rewarded with approval.<sup>204</sup> Praise performance encapsulates these dynamics through public display and affirmation of the patron's power and status. Thus at Djeli Kani Fanta's *sumu*, the patron Madame Sylla enacted her role in exaggerated gestures, stretching out the act of tipping both spatially through her entourage and temporally through her slow, deliberate motions. The praise was intensified by the sudden quiet of the instruments, as the *jelimuso* sang out her declamations. This was a moment to be savoured by everyone concerned, a moment of shared unspoken pleasure.

As Brian Larkin argues, each historical moment in Africa “generates aesthetic forms that are sites of symbolic intensity where peoples’ experiences of political and economic life are brought into being and made vividly legible” (2008: 170). In this way, cultural production finds ways of mediating the insecurity of everyday life. Larkin’s analysis centres on the Nigerian film industry, which dramatizes to fantastical degrees the everyday stories and fears about family conflict, corruption, betrayal and love. As he notes,

The success of Nigerian films lies in their ability to probe the fault lines of this insecurity in contemporary African urban life and to transform them into cultural productions based on pleasure and play as well as on anxiety... Comedy is as important a part of this genre as violence, and the inevitable moral at the end of the story cannot quite overcome the sense of play that takes place before. (ibid.: 182)

In 21<sup>st</sup> century Conakry, praise performance represents a similar site, in which participants recreate an intensified account of public life. The powerful and wealthy display their power and wealth in grandiose fashion. Yet, just like the successive

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<sup>204</sup> John William Johnson notes that old men in Mande society are traditionally treated with deference according to the principles of gerontocracy and patriarchy (1999: 11). Today, however, the Big Man is not necessarily an elder, or even always a man, but rather he or she who has the most wealth, the most status, the most political and economic power in any given situation.

authoritarian regimes in Guinea abruptly cut off by coup d'états, so the exaggerated and drawn-out performance of each patron ends swiftly and unceremoniously. Thus, shortly after Madame Syllah and her entourage returned to their seats, another group took the stage to play out the same ritual of power. In this way, as Larkin suggests, the political insecurity of coup d'états and dictatorships may be momentarily transformed into a pleasurable moment of cultural expression, in which *jeliya* provides continuity, stability and a reminder of a shared past.

In this section, I have considered *jeli* praise as a performance, not just by the singer but also by the audience and patron. As I have shown, the performance is an enactment of social ideals, reminding the participants of a shared history and culture, and affirming the various participants' social roles. The performance is thus a site of great pleasure. In the next section, I will consider *jeli* words and the ways in which they are interpreted. While audiences may enjoy the moment of praise performance, as I have described here, the praise-singer's truthfulness is another question.

### **3.4 To tell the truth**

Through the summer of 2009, a subject of intense political debate in Conakry was whether or not the junta leader Moussa Dadis Camara would stand as a candidate in presidential elections to be held later in the year. At the time of the coup d'état in December 2008, Dadis, as he is commonly known, had swept into office with the words that he was not "hungry for power" ("*je ne suis pas affamé de pouvoir*") He had proclaimed that he would oversee a transition to civilian rule, and would then step down. Over the next several months, however, it became clear to all observers that he was

increasingly settled in his seat. As a result, by the late summer opposition parties had begun to mobilize their supporters, while the CNDD and its supporters made repeated statements about their right to run the country.<sup>205</sup> A ‘Dadis Must Leave’ movement (Mouvement Dadis Doit Partir) was organised to put pressure on the government to hold free and fair elections. In return, CNDD supporters created their own ‘Dadis Must Stay’ movement (Mouvement Dadis Doit Rester) to encourage the president to remain in power.

In this contentious atmosphere, musical praise to Dadis and the military junta continued apace. As noted, musicians, both *jelilu* and others, had been composing praise songs to the regime since its early days. Songs such as ‘CNDD’ by the *jelimuso* Hadja Aminata Kamissoko, ‘CNDD’ by the Ivorian-style *coupé décalé* singer Aubin Thea, and ‘La Nouvelle Guinée’ by the reggae artist Johanna Barry, were released in quick response to the new government, offering messages of unwavering support. These songs featured not just adulatory texts in praise of the regime, but videos filled with militaristic imagery, matching the display of force to be found on Conakry’s streets. I will consider these music videos below before turning to a discussion of song texts themselves, and competing notions of their truthfulness.

In the previous section, I considered how praise performance encapsulates the visual aesthetics of power in Guinea. Such aesthetics are on display not just in live performance but also in music videos, which have become an increasingly popular vehicle for disseminating praise in recent years. Such videos are produced locally, on low budgets and with hand-held cameras, and are played every evening on the national RTG

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<sup>205</sup> At a press conference on 19<sup>th</sup> August, Dadis told a reporter that the decision of whether to stand as a candidate was between him and God. He also said that he didn’t want to be asked that question again and threatened to prosecute the next person who put it to him.

television channel. Most often, videos feature a *vedette* and back-up musicians singing in the grounds of a Conakry hotel or at the home of a wealthy person, with images of swimming pools, manicured gardens and well-appointed living rooms suggesting modernity, status and prestige.<sup>206</sup> The singer is typically expensively dressed and, in the case of *jelimusolu*, often appears in several different outfits and with elaborate hair-styles, make-up and jewellery. Such displays attest to the wealth and beneficence of the patron, who is able to generously reward the *jeli*. Beyond these tropes, videos to the CNDD added a further layer of meaning with their references to the machinery of state power. Thus, the video for Hadja Aminata Kamissoko's 'CNDD' featured the *jelimuso* singing in front of ministerial office buildings in Conakry, interspersed with clips of President Dadis and other officials at public functions. This video was in fact produced by Jean-Baptiste Williams, who was soon thereafter appointed as the new National Director for Culture. Images in the video included scenes of soldiers dancing with machine guns strapped to their chests. Similarly, the video for Aubin Thea's 'CNDD' features troops in red-berets and combat boots dancing and conducting drills. Aubin Thea is himself dressed as a soldier, and much of the video is filmed inside an army barracks. In this way, members of the regime are thus allowed to perform their power, much as they would during live performance. Furthermore, the imagery attests to the close relationship between singer and patron, as the *vedette* is allowed access to official spaces and symbols.

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<sup>206</sup> Such visual imagery stems in part from the regional influence of Hindi film music as well as from black American bling culture. Peter Manuel notes that while the vast majority of Hindi films are morality tales favouring the poor over the rich, the setting is invariably affluent and sumptuous – thus actually showcasing the capitalist values that the storyline purports to reject (1988: 161).

The best example of such reciprocity, and the song that made the biggest splash, was ‘CNDD la mansaya’ (CNDD kingship) by the popular *jeli* Kerfala Kanté. Kerfala Kanté became a star in the 1990s and, though not well-known outside of Guinea, is one of the biggest *vedettes* in the country today. His celebrity meant that the song was particularly well received by the regime – and well-played by state television and radio. The video for ‘CNDD la mansaya’ features images of the *jeli* meeting Dadis and other top-level officials of the regime in the presidential palace in Conakry’s military Camp Alpha Yaya. In one scene, Kerfala is shown being escorted into the palace, where he is filmed shaking hands with Dadis. Other scenes feature Kanté chatting with Vice President Sékouba Konaté and dancing with soldiers from the Presidential Guard in a plush office. The regime’s cooperation and enthusiasm for the song is apparent. Moreover, this enthusiasm was demonstrated in material terms. In late July 2009, Conakry was buzzing with the news that at Kerfala Kanté’s *dédicace*, or album release concert, at the Palais du Peuple, senior military officials rewarded the *jeli* with a brand new house.

Musically, ‘CNDD la mansaya’ (accompanying CD track 5) typifies many of the elements of *jeli* pop in Conakry today. The song is set to a 4/4 drum-machine beat, overlaid with synthesizer, which is seen as modern and, on a more practical level, is cheaper than using live musicians. Live instrumentation does also play a role, with bass guitar, *bala* and *jembe* adding to the background rhythm in a discrete repeating two-bar cycle. The overall emphasis, however, is strongly on the vocals, beginning with a female chorus.

*Kani Funye, Fama Alla da ki nye*

*Alla ba ko min ke wo te ti nya na*

*Sabou le moya, tunya fola, wo te ti nya la*

I say to you, God the all-  
powerful has done this  
No one can deny what God  
does  
Nothing happens without  
reason, the truthful man, that  
is clear

Kerfala Kanté joins in at one minute, coming in on B flat and maintaining a steady register and pace for the next two minutes as he sets out the lyrical themes. At 3m 14s, he suddenly leaps an octave as he launches into the song's climax, a praise section listing the names of the top officials in the CNDD and, in some cases, their wives. Such melodic contour is a commonly found aesthetic feature in *jeli* music, used to 'heat things up' and intensify the declamation of praise.<sup>207</sup> Kanté adds to this effect by elongating each syllable with vibrato. As the song draws to a close, Kanté cools down again, dropping to a lower register and allowing the chorus singers to join in, with vocal lines alternating until the song's end. Kanté's vocal timbre throughout is velvety and smooth, ranging in dynamics from quiet to powerful, and reflecting local ideas about what constitutes a beautiful male voice. As Charry notes, vocal aesthetics in Mande music prize both "a beautiful (and powerful) voice and a historically authoritative voice" (2000: 94). Here, Kanté exhibits the qualities that friends in Conakry suggested constitute beauty in the male voice – sweetness, warmth and power.

His voice here is not, however, historically authoritative. The Maninka lyrics of 'CNDD la mansaya' relate to common themes in *jeliya* of honour, responsibility and

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<sup>207</sup> Skinner makes an interesting analysis of aesthetics of 'hot' and 'cool' in Malian *jeliya* (2009: 189-91). As he argues, instruments must be 'cool' and calm during vocal passages as the spoken or sung word must be listened to and reflected on. The voice calibrates the instruments throughout the performance, calling them to order when they get too 'hot'. Similarly, in a study on Senegalese *sabar* performance, Hélène Neveu Kringelbach notes that emotion is often tied to degrees of heat in local discourse. Thus, "[a]n excellent praise-oratory performance by a Griot is said to make the blood of his or her patron 'boil' or 'run faster', with the implication that it is impossible for the patron to control his or her emotions" (2007a: 256).

God’s will. But the praise sections are distinct from traditional *jeliya* as the singer has no specific knowledge of Dadis’ family history. Rather than presenting deep historical knowledge, Kanté instead inserts the new president into the genealogy of past Guinean leaders. Thus he at once crafts a personal history for Dadis – whose ancestors he does not know – and legitimizes Dadis’ role as successor to former presidents Sékou Touré and Lansana Conté.

*Allou ma wouya fo, Fama Alla ba ko menfo*

*Wo te ti nya la, sebé Alla ye*

*CNDD la Mansaya, Alla le nö*

*President Sékou Touré ka mansa yake la Guinée,*

*Ala wati yan no, ami son yanfa ma fe*

*Général Conté ka mansa yake la Guinée,*

*Ala wati jan no, a fana mi son yanfa ma fe*

*CNDD la mansayami la Guinée, kobe na wati*

*Dadis, ko ate yanfa ke fewou*

You have not lied, what God  
the all-powerful says is done  
What happens, God has the  
means  
CNDD kingship, God wills it

President Sékou Touré in his  
reign in Guinea  
In his time, he never betrayed

General Conté in his reign in  
Guinea  
In his time, he never agreed  
to betray

The kingship of CNDD has  
now come to Guinea  
Dadis also does not want to  
betray

‘CNDD la mansaya’ was not a particularly big hit in Conakry, but its release did create a stir, mainly for the extravagance of the *jeli*’s reward. A few weeks after the *dédicace*, I sat in the courtyard at La Paillote when the song started playing on the radio. One of the men seated next to me, a non-musician, laughed derisively that Kerfala Kanté was only doing ‘*mamaya*’, a term signifying opportunistic shallow praise.<sup>208</sup> Mamadi Diabaté, a

<sup>208</sup> *Mamaya* is a Maninka group dance originating from the savannah region in northern Guinea. The term is now often used as derisive short-hand for praise-singing.

singer with Bembeya Jazz, jumped to his defense, saying that *jelilu* had no other choice but to sing praises today because they had been abandoned by the government. The problem, he argued, was that musicians were excessive today whereas during the Touré era, the government had “controlled” them (“not controlled,” the older Laye Diabaté interjected, “but organized.”) Mamadi continued that *jelilu* must sing for people because they have no other means of supporting themselves. “*Jelilu* are supposed to sing the truth,” the first man countered, “not just flattery.”

The conversation then took another turn as everyone began to speak about how music had operated in the Touré era, but this question of ‘singing the truth’ stayed with me. The idea of truthfulness is one that features frequently in discourses about *jeli* praise-singing. A common Maninka dictum states that *Ni jeli ma tunya fo, kuma da fa*: “If a *jeli* does not tell the truth, his words will eat him.” In conversations about music, both *jelilu* and other people often spoke to me about the importance of truth (*tunya*), while this idea features frequently in song texts. When I asked friends in Conakry about the notion, however, the responses I received were rather vague. Balla Kanté, a young *jeli* singer and the son of Mory Kanté, told me that singing the truth entailed “advising people, supporting the nation, unifying African people.”<sup>209</sup> The *jeli* guitarist Djessou Mory Kanté said that it meant “raising people’s awareness,”<sup>210</sup> while the *kora* player Soundjoulou Cissoko described it as “the reality, what’s good for the country.” In the same vein, the literary scholar Cheick Mahamadou Chérif Keita defines this truth simply as “an ideal” (1995: 190).

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<sup>209</sup> Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>210</sup> Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Yet despite this seeming vagueness, the notion of truthfulness is pervasive and deep-rooted. The *Kurakan Fuga*, a charter believed to originate with the founding of the Mande Empire in the thirteenth century and setting out the social codes for Mande people, states in its Article Two that

The nyamakalas [the artisan class, which includes *jelilu*] must devote themselves to tell the truth to the chiefs, to be their counsellors and to defend by the speech the established rulers and the order upon the whole territory.<sup>211</sup>

The idea of truth here has been interpreted as “immunity of speech”, which corresponds with other usages that I encountered.<sup>212</sup> Truth is thus associated not so much with factual accuracy or a lack of deception, but more with facing up to one’s duties rather than avoiding them, with not ‘skirting the issue’. *Jelilu* are charged with speaking plainly to leaders, giving honest criticism about the political, economic and social realities of their societies. They are licensed to say to the leader what other members of society cannot, and thus telling the truth in this context entails a moral responsibility not just to oneself but to the greater society. This responsibility can be dangerous for the *jeli* and thus serves as a test of his or her integrity. In a fascinating study of *ngaraya*, the most powerful and skilful display of *jeli* speech, Lucy Durán describes how such mastery is dependent on fearlessness. As the Malian *jelimuso* Kandia Kouyaté says, to be *ngara* is to tell the truth without concern of angering or offending one’s patron (2007: 581). Truthfulness is thus said to reside at the core of moral behaviour, signifying a concern with the social order and the collective good over concern with one’s own immediate interests. Moreover, the

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<sup>211</sup> The *Kurakan Fuga* is believed to have been created in the fourteenth century, and was fully compiled and written during a meeting of *jelilu*, historians and other scholars in Kankan, Guinea in 1998. The authenticity of the charter is debated, however (see Diakit , ‘Analyse du Discours, Tradition Orale et Histoire: Et Que la Charte de Kurakan Fuga Ne Date Que de 1998?’). I am indebted to Joseph Hellweg for drawing my attention to this clause.

<sup>212</sup> *Kurakan Fuga Charter*: 8, accessed at [http://www.wildaf-ao.org/eng/IMG/pdf/THE\\_CHARTER\\_OF\\_KURAKAN\\_FUGA\\_Anglais\\_1.pdf](http://www.wildaf-ao.org/eng/IMG/pdf/THE_CHARTER_OF_KURAKAN_FUGA_Anglais_1.pdf), 25 July 2011

idea of truth is closely linked with vocal aesthetics. As mentioned, Mande aesthetics value both a beautiful and a knowledgeable voice, but these two characteristics are not always present together. Thus, as friends in Conakry told me, a singer may have a ‘sweet’ voice (*i kan duman*) but that does not necessarily mean it is knowledgeable. Rather, a voice that is knowledgeable and authoritative has, above all, mastery over the unruliness and deception that words can contain. Voice is prized in large part on the ability to convey authority and ‘truth’.

How then can we understand the value placed on speaking plainly, in light of the ubiquity of praise-singing? It is clear here that there is a conflict between ideals of truthfulness and the politics of silence that has long characterized local social life. It is precisely for this reason that telling the truth – i.e. criticizing political leaders – is dangerous, as Durán notes. As I have described, throughout the postcolonial era, musicians have almost uniformly declined to speak plainly to political leaders. While *jelilu* are traditionally considered the ‘masters of the word’ (*kuma lafôlô kuma*) (Camara, S., 1976: 119), like other musicians in Conakry they have maintained silence in the face of authoritarian rule and violence. During my fieldwork, I never encountered an example of *jeli* criticism to the CNDD, despite the growing intransigence and violence of the regime over the course of 2009. Even as popular anger with the regime intensified, *jeliya* remained firmly adulatory. Moreover, the ‘beautiful’ voice is much more present in *jeli* pop music than the ‘good’ or ‘truthful’ one. As Christopher Miller observes, truthfulness is a condition of interiority in Mande culture, associated with the inner organs. The mouth and tongue, on the other hand, can produce sweetness and beauty but are viewed as untrustworthy (1990: 80). Thus, as a vehicle for truthfulness, male and female *ngaraya* is

characterized by a hoarse, gritty voice, rather than a smooth beautiful one (Durán, 2007). *Jeli* pop music in Conakry, however, is dominated by the ‘sweet’ voice exemplified by male *vedettes* such as Kerfala Kanté and Sékouba Bambino Diabaté. As Miller notes, such a voice comes from the mouth, rather than the inner organs, where the truth resides.

The politics of silence in Conakry, both during the Revolution and in 2009, is neither simply a response to violent censorship or coercion, nor is it a blind acceptance of state power. Instead, as I have argued in this thesis, silence, caution and accommodation represent forms of agency as musicians take a ‘coolly realistic’ view of the situation, to use Eagleton’s phrase. Musicians perform for powerful individuals in exchange for monetary reward, which provides a source of income and a means of advancing their musical careers. Furthermore, praise-singing exists within a broader political culture of showmanship, with audiences and patrons participating in and enjoying the spectacular display of power in praise performance. *Jelilu* thus must mediate between ideals of truthfulness and the expectations and constraints of their own positions within the “webs of dependence and difference” that Ebron describes (2002: 129). As Durán notes, they are faced with the competing obligations of honesty in exercising their voice with deference in respecting the social and political hierarchy (2007: 583). Honesty may lead to a sense of moral worth, but deference has more concrete rewards, and thus perhaps understandably tips the scale.

In this regards, musicians in Conakry are also silent on the subject of their truthfulness, deliberately maintaining vague definitions of the concept, as the statements I quoted above show. In this way, they attempt to reconcile their pursuit of careers and state patronage with the obligations of tradition and the social good. Audiences and

listeners are well aware of this position and thus do not seem to take praise-songs at face-value. When I asked friends in Conakry about ‘CNDD la mansaya’ and other praise songs to the regime, it was rarely suggested that the song texts were convincing or meaningful on their own. As Schulz argues, the value of praise-singing is based not on the perceived truthfulness of a song, but rather on the cultural knowledge that is shared by the “community of listeners” (2001: 157). Developing an idea central to performance ethnography, Schulz suggests that it is not the content of the words alone that matters, but rather the context in which they are delivered. As Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs argue, listeners interpret speech not as an isolated phenomenon, but as embedded within other, ongoing social processes of communication and performance (1990: 64).<sup>213</sup> Thus, for Mande audiences, *jeli* praise is not evaluated on the basis of the words themselves, but rather on its allusions and connections to the tradition and “prestigious past” of all people present (Schulz, 2001: 156).

As noted, *jelilu* are often criticized as opportunistic and morally corrupt. Schulz contends that these views derive from anxieties about social transformation during the colonial era, when *jelilu* began singing for new patrons rather than the noble families with whom they had long-term relationships in the past. As a result, she suggests, *jeli* credibility has long been put into doubt. Yet, as she acknowledges, and as the Kerfala Kanté example illustrates, *jeli* praise is still highly valued and demanded. Schulz suggests that this is because *jeli* praise is assessed not for its ‘truth’ but rather for the *jeli*’s references to a shared history and glorious past, as well as his or her skill as a wordsmith and a singer (ibid.: 156). Audiences and listeners are moved by the references to their

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<sup>213</sup> Bauman and Briggs argue for the notion of “contextualization”, which suggests an ongoing process of understanding the social world, rather than “context”, which suggests something fixed and objective (1990: 68-9).

own history, and the patron's reputation is enhanced by association with this broader event.

Building on Schulz's idea, I would also include the other sensorial aspects of the performance – the visual display of tipping, the colours and clothes, the instrumental melodies and rhythms that inspire people to dance and the overall sense of participation in the event, including through discussion and gossip. Moreover, as I have shown, even if a voice is not historically authoritative, truthful and 'good', it may still be beautiful and pleasing. Together, these aspects lead people to attend concerts, to watch music videos and to find pleasure in the performance. In such circumstances, the words themselves are often unimportant as cultural insiders understand the dynamics of *jeli* pop. As I have argued, praise-singing involves the performance of an idealized set of relationships and social codes. In the performative space of *jeli* pop, the words the *jeli* sings are kept at a distance as participants derive pleasure from the moment. This pleasure is equally shared by musicians, as I will discuss below.

### **3.5 Moral mapping**

*Vedettariat* has added a new term to an already crowded semantic field in Guinean music, in which different labels carry different political and moral connotations. Throughout my fieldwork, musicians and non-musicians delineated for me which individuals and groups were authentic, which were fakes, who was morally upright and who was a sell-out. Over time I came to see that the various lines drawn derive from older discourses about music, politics and morality, often centring on the question of what is and is not art. As with 'truth', the actual notions of art, authenticity and morality were often left vague.

Nonetheless, these discussions provide insight into why and how musicians sing praise for an authoritarian state. As Becker argues,

One important facet of a sociological analysis of any social world is to see when, where, and how participants draw the lines that distinguish what they want to be taken as characteristic from what is not to be so taken. Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world (1982 [2008]: 36)

Becker notes that the term 'art' conveys certain social prestige, and thus there is often competition about who gets to use it. Similarly in Conakry, praise-singing is an increasingly competitive field, as musicians across genres and generations engage in this practice, and disagree about their rights and responsibilities. Looking at how musicians position themselves within these discussions offers insight into the politics of praise-singing today.

According to the speaker, the term used to identify a musician may connote integrity or irresponsibility, or perhaps may require further sub-categorization. Thus, *jeli* or 'griot' may signify tradition, knowledge and history, or it may suggest opportunism and greed. In his writings, Sékou Touré often used the French term 'griot' disparagingly to denote "a colonial servant" and an "irrational" actor and in much current usage, the term still has a negative sense. In contrast, Touré preferred the term 'artist' to denote a revolutionary agent without historical or cultural baggage. In this way, Touré suggested a break from tradition and the past by introducing a new cultural actor, one he portrayed as future-oriented and modern. This was also an abstract actor, not tied to an existing social group but rather open to (Touré's) interpretation.

The term has retained its appeal and across genres, musicians in Conakry today commonly refer to themselves as artists. Other commentators on West African music have noted similar local preference for the label. Mamadou Diawara writes that, in Mali, the French term ‘artiste’ suggest prestige and sophistication (1997). Skinner notes that musicians in Bamako began using it in the 1950s in order to distinguish themselves from *jelilu* (2009: 65). In Conakry, musicians see the term as similarly free from cultural baggage. For example, Mohamed ‘Branco’ Camara, a young musician from the minority Susu ethnic group told me that

Griots just sing to please people. But now there are artists who want to tell the truth about what’s happening in the government, in the households, how to behave, how to raise children, things like that. It’s the new generation that tries to do that, to say ‘Stop that, it’s not good’.<sup>214</sup>

Branco sees artists as upholding their social responsibilities to speak plainly and ‘tell the truth’, while griots only sing praises. At the same time, many *jelilu* that I knew also referred to themselves as artists, distinct from money-minded vedettes. Closely associated with this distinction was that between ‘real’ or ‘true’ *jelilu* and other pretenders. Thus, the *jeli* singer Balla Kanté, son of the successful Guinean *jeli* Mory Kanté, said that

Today, there are *jelilu*, but they aren’t real *jelilu*. They’re there to sing for people. They’re there to show themselves off to people. They’re just interested in doing vedettariat. I can say that they are *jelilu*, but they’re not *jelilu* on the right course. They’re not on to the truth. Today there aren’t many great *jelilu*. The ones who remain with us are M’Bady Kouyaté, Mory Kanté, a few others. All the rest have their own objectives. So today, things have become mixed up.<sup>215</sup>

Balla’s youth and modesty prevent him from describing himself as a true *jeli*, referring instead to his father Mory Kanté. He identifies Mory Kanté here as a *jeli* and a ‘real’ one, distinct from others who are pursuing their own objectives. *Vedettes* are self-interested,

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<sup>214</sup> Interview, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>215</sup> Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009

while real *jelilu* sing for ‘the truth’. Balla’s statement reflects common ideas about *jeli* purity. Thus, a ‘true’ *jeli* is one who upholds the ideals of truthfulness and the collective good, while those who have become corrupted seek out money and fame. In an article on the twentieth century Malian *jeli* Banzumana Sissoko, for example, Keita refers to the notion of *saniya*, the state of being golden, i.e. the state of purity (1995: 185). Banzumana Sissoko, who refused to sing the praises of any living person, is a *sanun suman jeli*, a *jeli* with the purity of gold. Keita, from a noble background himself, states that Banzumana resisted the prevalent forces of commercialization and corruption to uphold the “moral patrimony” of his ancestors (ibid.: 190). On the other hand, *jelilu* who sing praises for money are seen as impure and inauthentic. Thus, as the Guinean playwright Emile Cissé once said, “Real griots are poor” (quoted in Rouget, 1956a: 109; my translation).

Many musicians and music fans acknowledge the contradictions in practice, however. Thus, beyond these discourses, most people I spoke with in Conakry seemed to accept the professionalization of praise-singing as a response to economic necessity. I spoke at length about this question with members of the Kouyaté family, who understood both sides of the argument as insiders and outsiders. My *kora* teacher and M’Bady’s grandson, Demba, explained the situation to me:

Demba: That’s just the way it is here. When you rise to power, everyone sings your name to have something. That’s how you can earn something through them.

ND: And if you or others don’t think that [the patron] is a good leader?

Demba: No, [musicians] only think about their personal interests. It’s not about whether or not it’s a right thing or a wrong thing. Because when I sing the name of the president, he gives me an envelope [of money]; I’m thinking about my own interests. Even if he isn’t good for the country, I support him so that I can have something.

ND: What if there’s a change in power?

Demba: Then they sing and dance for whoever rises to power as well. But if there's a change, all those albums [of praise to the former leader] won't be played anymore. Because political things like that, they don't last. As long as the regime lasts, they last. When the regime doesn't last, they can't last. You can't play songs from the CNDD for another head of state who's risen.

Demba acknowledges the financial draw of praise-singing, which for most musicians represents their only way that they can 'have something.' Yet he also understands the deeper impact on musicianship as songs become objects of ephemeral value. In a volatile and unpredictable atmosphere, the political is short-term, providing 'something' for today but not tomorrow. Demba worries about the demands on Guinean musicians, who must continuously produce praise-songs to earn a living at the expense of their creativity and artistic integrity. In a context of deep historical consciousness, in which people routinely reference events and persons from the thirteenth century, such ephemerality runs counter to the idea of *jelilu* as historians and 'living archives' (Hale, 1998: 12).<sup>216</sup>

Although Demba did not explicitly blame the government or patrons, other *jelilu* are willing to make the point. Djessou Mory Kanté, a guitar player from a *jeli* family, told me that the reasons that Guinean musicians did not like Sékou Touré's successor, Lansana Conté, was because unlike Touré, Conté did not respect the ideals of *jeliya* but used it for his political purposes:

[Conté] said to sing his name in the false sense, with lies. When you gobble up something or you displease the public, [you can't] tell artists to then go and convince people that it was right. Sékou Touré never did that.<sup>217</sup>

Djessou Mory argues here that Conté demanded praise to compensate for his corruption and unpopularity. Noting that praise in such circumstances is not rightfully owed, he argues that it is the underlying motive of the patron that determines whether praise-

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<sup>216</sup> Thomas Hale quotes the proverb "when a griot dies, a library burns to the ground".

<sup>217</sup> Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2009

singing is correct or not. Djessou Mory further suggested that Dadis seemed to be violating the social rules governing praise-singing just as Conté had:

Now Dadis has come in [Conté's] place. He also said not to sing his name, but he's more or less on the same route as Lansana Conté. That is, telling everyone to sing for the CNDD – that's propaganda.

Interestingly, these statements place the responsibility on the object of the praise, rather than on the praise-singer him or herself. Djessou Mory suggests that it is up to the leader or the patron to uphold the conventions of correct behaviour, while the *jeli* simply does whatever he is told. The Malian *jelimuso* Kandia Kouyaté makes a similar point about patrons' moral obligations, stating that “[e]ven nobles can be *ngara* ... it's not just the *jeli*. It's to have good qualities, to tell the truth ... There are nobles who are faithful, who say the truth” (quoted in Durán, 2007: 581).

Nonetheless, while the patron may bear responsibility and be at fault, such criticisms of the ruling elite are often difficult to pronounce within the norms of deference and hierarchy that I have described. *Jelilu*, however, are already the ‘marked category’ in Mande society (Ebron, 2002: 121) and are the object of a long-standing discourse of social and moral inferiority, both by non-*jelilu* and by other *jelilu* themselves. Unease at the broader economic and political environment in contemporary Conakry is thus most easily translatable within the existing discourse of anxiety about *jeliya*.

Yet, as I have shown in this chapter, this discourse conceals the pleasure and participation that others find in *jeli* performance, as well as the underlying acknowledgement of the precariousness of life in Conakry today. Despite the criticisms, *jelilu* and others continue to engage in praise-singing, as the examples I have discussed

here show. Moreover, my sense is that for *jelilu* this practice is not simply an economic strategy. Rather, alongside audiences and patrons, *jelilu* derive great pleasure from the performance of praise. This pleasure is linked with a sense of fulfilling one's prescribed historical role. Thus many *jelilu* stressed to me that it is their inherited right to sing praise, that it is an expression of their history and ancestry. Moreover, they are aware of the value and prestige of this act. As Youssouf Condé, a *bala* player from a *jeli* family, told me, "We [*jelilu*] guide people through our words. It's not just about singing. When we sing, people listen because they know the words are important." Similarly, Lansana Condé, Youssouf's grandfather, said that, "When a *jeli* sings '*Iyé, yama rou'o, silama nyara na* ["I call to you, my master, devout Muslim"], it's an expression of respect and dignity. The *jeli* know that not anyone can merit those words and so when they are sung, it's meaningful."<sup>218</sup> Mamadi Diabaté, a singer with Bembeya Jazz and with a newer neo-traditional Mande ensemble, *Jeli Den* (Children of the Jeli), said that "people don't have the right to criticize us for singing praise. It's our culture. It takes courage to live through music, and *Alhamdulillah*, I've been able to do it."<sup>219</sup> Youssouf and Lansana Condé express pride in the value that is accorded to praise-singing, while Mamadi adds that it is an expression of his culture and of his particular obligations as a *jeli*. By persevering to follow the examples of his ancestors, he fulfills his hereditary duty. These expressions underline the point that praise-singing gives *jelilu* a sense of satisfaction and pride in fulfilling their hereditary roles.

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<sup>218</sup> Interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2009

<sup>219</sup> Interview, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2009

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have examined a range of *jeli* practices within Conakry today, looking at the various ways in which musicians and others interpret the act of praise-singing for the state. In 2009, the military coup d'état was greeted with a prolific outpouring of praise-songs, as *jelilu* and others attempted to navigate the new terrain of patronage and power. These practices rouse familiar moral anxieties about monetization, individualism and corruption, and are unfavourably contrasted with music-making during the Revolution. Yet as I have argued, musicians in the past and today are equally concerned with expressing their artistic agency. As a means of promoting themselves and building careers, praise-singing today offers musicians a degree of control that was impermissible under the Revolution.

Moreover, *jelilu* see praise-singing as a source of great satisfaction and pride, through which they are able to fulfill their artistic and hereditary duties. As I have shown, the practice is also a source of pride and pleasure for audiences and patrons, who together with the singer create the event. As I have argued, praise-singing involves the performance of an ideal, as singers, patrons and audiences together enact a social code. Examining the performance, rather than just the song texts, allows for an understanding of the dynamics at play as participants seek to evoke a sense of shared history and culture, a sense of stability and continuity in an otherwise highly unstable moment. The examples I have cited illustrate how, despite discourses of *jeli* truthfulness, audiences at times keep the literal meanings of song texts at arm's length, while savouring other aspects of the performance. Yet, as I have also shown, *jelilu* are keenly aware of the

anxieties surrounding the practice, and attempt to draw identity boundaries to distinguish themselves from those who are seen as opportunistic and corrupt.

Praise-singing represents one particular form of the quiet accommodation of power that I have examined throughout this thesis, as musicians seek ways of negotiating life in an authoritarian state. In the next chapter, I will consider another form of silence and accommodation, looking at the ways in which musicians in Conakry largely refrain from dissent. My focus in Chapter Four is on a new urban traditional and youth-oriented Susu music, as I consider the various stances and performances of young musicians, both in Conakry and the diaspora, within the politics of silence.

## Chapter Four

### Silent Views, Distant Voices

“Politics can be strengthened by music, but music has a potency that defies politics.”

- Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

#### *Introduction*

As the political emergency in Guinea escalated by late summer 2009, the sounds of dissent became louder and more insistent. From angry callers on radio phone-ins to impassioned protesters marching in the streets to genial debates in neighbourhood courtyards, voices could be heard throughout Conakry expressing uncertainty about the country’s future and frustration at the military regime’s intransigence. Elections were to be held later that year, but no one knew whether the military would actually cede control to civilian rule. “Fifty years of misery,” was the popular refrain, “and now Guinea must move forward.” Yet, in this environment of contestation, as conversations on street corners and in the private media echoed the growing crisis, musicians remained largely silent.

In this chapter, I will consider the factors that lead musicians in Conakry to largely refrain from political critique and rarely express dissent. Representations in the popular and academic literature often depict music as a site for resistance, and it has recently been argued that, for musicians, “it is impossible to remain silent” in the face of conflict (Muršič, 2011: 95). Yet this is precisely what has happened in Conakry over the past half-century. As I describe here, musicians in the city, across genres and generations, largely maintain a cautious and conservative stance towards state politics. For young

musicians in particular, however, this stance is increasingly at odds with the expectations they face.

My focus in this chapter is on youth-oriented music and in particular a new urban traditional genre, which operates at the margins of Guinean politics largely outside the government's view. Young musicians in Conakry often position themselves as an alternative to the moral and political complacency of their elders. Their self-representations reflect ideals of youth culture as contestatory and innovative, ideals shaped by both local and foreign discourses. As noted, a new atmosphere of discussion and debate has recently emerged in Conakry, with people increasingly challenging the long-standing political culture of control. At the same time, the growing impact of the world music industry means that young musicians in Conakry are often presumed to be political, while migration, travel and the impact of new media mean that musicians and audiences in Conakry are increasingly in dialogue with those in the diaspora. In this chapter, I compare musical responses to political crisis in Guinea between young artists in Conakry and their counterparts in the Guinean diaspora in Paris. As I argue, young musicians in Conakry must contend with local values of silence and discretion, while musicians in the diaspora express dissent from both a geographic and cultural distance.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I discussed the expectations placed on Touré-era musicians from the world music industry, which frames their music in nostalgic terms of a faded golden age. While politics is largely glossed over in world music representations of the Touré era, however, music from younger Guinean artists is often, and misleadingly, labelled political. Such representations are not unique to Guinea. As Martin Stokes observes, the “romance of resistance” has often lead world music stars to present

themselves as political rebels on the international stage (2004: 61). Thomas Turino cites the example of the Zimbabwean guitarist Thomas Mapfumo, who has been celebrated in the world music press more for his politics than for his music. Political activism during the *chimurenga* liberation struggle in the 1970s became key to Mapfumo's international commercial success: "Worldbeat fans – white, liberal, college types – wanted a musical hero ... Mapfumo was quite possibly pushed to emphasize a political point in foreign interviews, largely due to the orientation of his foreign interviewers and his awareness of the desires of his worldbeat audience" (2000: 339).

'Musical heroes' such as Mapfumo capture global imaginations attuned to stories of African dictatorship and corruption. African people are often portrayed as the world's ultimate underdogs, and the story of political resistance by the weak against the powerful provides a seemingly irresistible narrative within which to contextualize songs. As Birgit Englert observes, African music is thus often framed as a site for activism and oppositional politics, even though most music from the continent is in fact in support of incumbent regimes (2008; see also Barber, 1987; Nyamjoh & Fokwang, 2005).

This is not to say that the desire to criticize and speak out is purely a foreign one. Young musicians in Conakry promote ideologies of resistance as a reflection of their own aspirations, as I argue here. Yet, despite their stated positions and aspirations, these musicians are overwhelmingly cautious and quiet, even in reaction to the brutality and violence of the military regime in 2009. The cultural norms of silence that shape music in Conakry do not similarly bind musicians in the diaspora, however. As their songs circulate, and as world music fans and commentators seek out stories of musical heroism, young musicians in Conakry find themselves increasingly expected to fill a political role.

In *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, Ingrid Monson notes that “traditional studies of the African diaspora have stressed first and foremost the condition of dispersion and exile” (2000: 17). Monson argues that studies need also to examine the role of contemporary society within Africa to understand how cultural authenticity is reimagined. Building on this idea, in this chapter, I am interested in the feedback between diaspora and ‘homeland’, as Guinean musicians in Paris respond to events in Conakry, in turn shaping the politics of music at home. My aim in analysing this situation is to move beyond oppositional categories of heroes versus collaborators, and instead to show how young musicians in Conakry play with competing expectations of voice and silence. In this chapter, I consider ideologies of youth promoted in Guinea during the Touré era, as well as those reflected in the statements and practices of young urban traditional musicians today. I then examine reactions to political violence in 2009, comparing musical responses both in Conakry and in the Guinean diaspora in Paris. As I argue here, young musicians in Conakry perform varying stances through their music, speech and style. Their practices are deliberately polyvalent, a creative and playful means by which they stake out their place in a context of violence and volatility.

#### ***4.1 Stars and Hopes: The emergence of urban traditional music***

Boulbinet is the name of a neighbourhood at the very southern tip of Conakry, home to a lively port and market where fishermen set off in wooden canoes to catch monkfish in the warm Atlantic waters. The neighbourhood is mostly populated by Susu people, a Mande-language group who inhabit the coastal region comprising Conakry and the nearby archipelago, the Iles des Los, and extending northwards to the lower edges of the Fouta

Djallon highlands. Also found in neighbouring Sierra Leone, Susu people represent the third largest ethnic group in Guinea, a group which existed at the fringes of the Mande Empire and over the past 500 years was pushed down to the coast by its more powerful northern neighbours, Fulbe and Maninka speakers (Thayer, 1983: 119; see also O'Toole, 1995: 151). While their culture and music are closely related to the Maninka and Mandinka speakers that I am referring to more generally in this thesis as Mande people, other features such as language and social organization set Susu people apart as a distinct group. For one, Susu society does not recognize the category of *jeli* and thus music-making is relatively more open to non-hereditary musicians, as the example discussed in this chapter shows. Nonetheless, it should be noted that as with musical genres, these ethnic categories are not rigid dividers and should not mask the many features which these various groups share.

Besides the fishing port, Boulbinet is best-known today for a new musical genre that has emerged on its streets over the past fifteen or twenty years. This genre, referred to either as Susu music or more generally as urban traditional, is closely associated with the popular group, Les Etoiles de Boulbinet (Boulbinet Stars). As friends in the area told me, a local Susu man and former ballet musician, Vieux Coca, had a long-standing interest in traditional Guinean instruments and in the early 1990s undertook to teach them to young people in his area. As the men would play, others would add songs or join in with percussion on *jembe* and rattles, and thus the group was born. Vieux Coca and his son, Kerfala Coca, organised this group of neighbourhood musicians into Les Etoiles de Boulbinet, which began playing locally and by 1997 had recorded its first album, *Wâa Mali*, in Côte d'Ivoire.

The emergence of urban traditional music contradicts the narrative often put forward by older people that younger Guineans are only interested in imported genres such as hip-hop and reggae. My own observations, from attending concerts and listening to local radio, speaking to music fans and following the monthly top-ten list,<sup>220</sup> suggested that urban traditional music is hugely popular in Conakry and beyond. Since the appearance of Les Etoiles de Boulbinet, at least ten other urban traditional groups have emerged over the past decade, all largely following the same model of young Susu men with mixed instrumentation and Rastafarian styling.<sup>221</sup> The most successful of these groups is Les Espoirs de Coronthie (the Hopes of Coronthie, also a Susu neighbourhood at the southern end of Conakry). While Les Etoiles de Boulbinet are considered the originals, Les Espoirs de Coronthie have the largest following and have found success on the international stage, spending several months of the past few years touring Europe. Their recent album, *Tinkhinyi* (a Susu word meaning ‘honesty’), provided much of the soundtrack to Conakry street life during my fieldwork period.

I attended performances and listened to recordings of urban traditional music throughout my time in Conakry, and since an earlier stay in 2005, had long been aware of the music’s popularity. Nonetheless, during the first few months of fieldwork I felt that the focus of my research was on *jeliya* and the music of the Touré-era dance bands, and it was not until my *kora* teacher Demba told me that he often played with Les Etoiles that I began to pay closer attention to this group and its musical genre. Demba is one of the

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<sup>220</sup> As compiled by the website Guinée News: <http://www.guineenews.org>, an independent site run by Guinean journalists in Conakry.

<sup>221</sup> Other groups include Linké Stars de Coléah, Bongo Stars de Yimbaya, Tempo Stars de Dixinn, Messagers de Boullbinet, all from Conakry and identified by their neighbourhood, as well as Bombay Stars de Kindia, from a nearby town. This practice of naming the groups according to locality is one that derives from the Touré era, when each district and region had its own dance band and ballet.

leading *kora* players of his generation, and as such, is often sought out by other musicians to add virtuosic ornamentation to their performances. Nonetheless, at the time I was surprised to hear that, as a musician from a ‘traditional’ *jeli* family, he was playing in a Susu group. I thus decided to see what the connections are between *jeliya* and this younger, popular form. Demba told me that he had recently recorded a single with Les Etoiles, and that he played with the group during their weekly performances at a neighbourhood bar, Glonglon, on Saturday and Sunday evenings. On a wet Saturday evening during the middle of the rainy season, I went along to see what it was all about.

Glonglon is a bar tucked away in the Manquepas neighbourhood of southern Conakry, just next to Boulbinet and around the corner from the flat where I stayed during the last half of my fieldwork. The venue is run by an Ivorian expatriate, and consists of a small, walled-in courtyard with a thatched bar on one end and a performance space on the other, partly covered by a corrugated tin roof. On my first visit to Glonglon, I arrived to find a dozen musicians playing under the leaky tin roof, while the rest of the courtyard was filled with customers sitting at plastic tables. Throughout the evening, as the rain burst out in intermittent flashes, everyone would pick up their chairs and dash under the tin roof, huddling inches away from the musicians and their equipment, until the rain subsided and the audience could once again retreat. This back and forth movement continued all night, the musicians barely seeming to notice the constant invasions of their ‘stage’.

Les Etoiles struck me immediately for the sheer variety of instruments they played, representing different regions and traditions from throughout Guinea. As noted,

the music of Susu people is closely related to the Mande music of Maninka and Mandinka people.



**Fig. 10** Demba Diallo (*kora*) and Alya Camara (*bolon*), two musicians with Etoiles de Boulbinet

The group thus featured the *jeli* instruments *kora* and *bala* (xylophone), alongside the Mande hunter's instruments *bolon* (bass-harp) and *jembe*.<sup>222</sup> At the same time, the Susu *kongoma* (lamellophone) from coastal Guinea and the Guerze *krin* (slit-drum) from the forest region added further percussive layers.<sup>223</sup> Unlike Mande drum ensembles, however, the group included neither *dundun* nor *sangban*, the large and medium-sized stick drums that accompany *jembe* in Mande drumming. In addition, three or four male singers took turns providing powerful vocal solos, mostly in Susu. I later learned that melodies are either newly composed or derived from traditional Susu pieces. As with other urban traditional groups that emerged later, most of the musicians tend to be young

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<sup>222</sup> While the *bala* is often played by *jelilu* and closely associated with *jeliya*, Durán notes that its origins are actually in Susu culture (1999: 545). According to the epic of Sundiata Keita, the original *bala* was created by Soumaoro Kanté, the Susu king who was eventually defeated by Keita at the battle of Siguiri.

<sup>223</sup> The local name for this Guerze slit-drum from the forest region, made from either bamboo or wood, is *kono*. *Krin* is the now commonly-heard name that has been adopted by musicians from other parts of Guinea. Interview with Cécé Paul Kolié, Sandervalia, Conakry, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2009.

Susu men, with some older men and collaborations with Maninka and Fulbe instrumentalists.

The group's real innovation, however, has been to re-invent and bring together precolonial instruments. While electric guitars and drum-kits are used, the sound is dominated by instruments representing all four of Guinea's regions, many of which had not been previously played together. Some of these instruments, such as the *kongoma* and *bolon* had largely been forgotten by popular musicians and audiences in postcolonial Conakry. While the national ballets and instrumental ensembles of the Touré era featured an amalgamation of instruments from around the country, such groups were largely reserved for concert performance. At bars, restaurants and other informal settings, popular musicians in Conakry have since the late colonial era most commonly performed with imported Western instruments, such as guitar, bass, drum-kit, brass instruments and later, keyboards. Even *jelilu* today tend mostly to perform with bands of modern electric instruments. Moreover, such instrumentation is true in popular music throughout Africa. As numerous commentators have noted, African music has often been modernized over the past century by adapting traditional melodies to Western instruments (Charry, 2000; Collins, 1992; Nyamnjoh & Fokwang, 2005; Turino, 2000; Waterman, 1990a). In postcolonial Conakry, this has meant that popular music has long been dominated by variants of *jeli* pop music, either by the Touré-era national dance bands or by the *vedettes* of today, and emphasizing imported instruments.

Through the foregrounding of local instruments, the urban traditional genre represents a departure from this overall development of Guinean popular music. The

sound and style of Les Etoiles thus came as something of a surprise to audiences in Conakry. As the manager of the group, Papa Yans, said to me,

At that time, everyone thought that it was strange that we were playing all these bizarre instruments. But we managed to re-introduce people to them.<sup>224</sup>

One such innovation that Les Etoiles developed in recent years was to adapt the *kongoma*, a large, percussive three- or four-key lamellophone from the coastal region, by playing it in a dried calabash gourd rather than in the heavy wooden resonating chamber in which it had previously been played.<sup>225</sup> This change in form allowed for cheaper distribution and easier transport of the instrument, which greatly increased its popularity amongst young musicians. In a recent video for the single *Cinquantenaire*, the group have further adapted the *kongoma* by electrifying it within a large, guitar-shaped resonating chamber, which the player holds at the neck with one hand while plucking the keys with the other. Such changes as these add visual excitement and modernise the group's style, while suggesting new uses for older instruments.

The sounds of Les Etoiles and other urban traditional groups signal a significant shift in the texture of popular music in Conakry, characterized by the distinctive timbres of *bala*, *kora*, *bolon* and various percussion instruments. Furthermore, the popularity of these groups has led to a recent surge of interest in traditional instruments amongst young musicians in Conakry. Guinean hip-hop and reggae musicians, for instance, regularly contract out *kora* and *jembe* players to accompany them in concerts and recordings.<sup>226</sup>

Today one is more likely to find traditional instruments in such settings than amongst the

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<sup>224</sup> Communication on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2009 at Wakili Kora Centre, Conakry.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Mohammed "Branco" Camara, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2009 Boulbinet, Conakry.

<sup>226</sup> Examples include the concert of the hip-hop group Degg-G Force 3 at the Centre Culturel Franco-Guinéen on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009, and the concert of the reggae star Takana Zion at Rogbané beach on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2009, both of which featured young *kora folalu* from the Kouyaté family.

dance bands at La Paillote or the many *jeli* ensembles playing on any given day around the city. While musicians from the Touré-era dance bands tend to describe their music as modern, many young musicians often stress their sounds as *musique traditionnelle*.

In this way, the traditional has become a marker of distinction for many young musicians in Conakry, who see it as a means of articulating an ‘alternative modernity’ from that expressed by the *vedettes* of *jeli* pop (cf. Shain, 2002). In part, the turn towards local instruments represents a practical solution to an economic problem. Many Touré-era musicians told me how difficult it is to find and maintain Western instruments in Guinea today. Brass instruments are increasingly rare, while electric guitars and bass are prohibitively expensive for most people. But besides the practicality of local instruments, made relatively cheaply and through easily-sourced materials, their use also represents an aesthetic and political choice. With their technology and materials, imported instruments suggest Western modernity, resources and wealth, while Guinean instruments – often made from vegetables, wood and dried animal skins – imply an older, local identity. Played together, these instruments create a thick, buzzy texture, distinct from the synthesized sound of *jeli* pop music. Many of these instruments, including *bala* and *kongoma*, have gourd resonators attached to achieve a buzzing effect, while shakers and rattles add to the percussive density. Such a drone is common in many types of African music, but often runs counter to European and North American preferences for a cleaner sound (Berliner, 1981: 11; Charry, 2000: 139, 217; Turino, 2000: 342). By retaining the buzzing resonance of traditional instruments, groups like Les Etoiles de Boulbinet distinguish their sound as ‘African’ and local.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Alya Camara, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Moreover, traditional instruments are closely associated with history, myth, social organization and a particularly local understanding in which many musicians take great pride. The *bala*, for example, is a legendary instrument at the very heart of the epic of Sunjata Keita, founder of the thirteenth century Mande Empire. According to the epic, Sunjata's rival, the sorcerer king Soumaoro Kanté, gained his powers through a magical *bala* that was given to him by *jinn*, or spirits. Only by gaining control of the *Sosso bala*, as this original instrument is known, was Sunjata able to vanquish Soumaoro Kanté. Today, the *bala* is still revered for its mystical powers, and after each new instrument is built a ceremony must be held in which a sheep is sacrificed in order to control the powerful forces of the *bala*.<sup>228</sup>

Not all young musicians with whom I spoke were aware of all the origins and myths surrounding the *bala* and other instruments. Yet, with their local histories and identities, these instruments were an enormous source of pride. As Alya Camara, a *bolon* player with Les Etoiles de Boulbinet told me, "I love the *bolon* because it is a traditional instrument. It speaks to us of our African customs, and today many people like that here."<sup>229</sup> Similarly, the *jembe* player Gali Camara said that "I prefer traditional instruments to electric instruments. They're what our ancestors used to play, even though the *orchestres* [Touré-era dance bands] mostly play guitar. But people, young people come to hear us. That tells you something." Statements such as these reveal an awareness of the creative and political potential of older instruments. Like most music in Conakry, the urban traditional genre is a seamless mix of old and new, local and foreign. Thus, when these musicians speak of their traditional sound, they are actually referencing a

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<sup>228</sup> Interview with Youssouf Condé, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>229</sup> Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2009

modern, cosmopolitan ‘tradition’ (cf. Waterman, 1990b). With their distinctive instruments, members of Les Etoiles and similar groups set themselves apart as young musicians doing something different from their elders. Moreover, while commentators have noted the popularity of traditional instruments and sounds from the Global South amongst world music audiences (Feld, 2006; Impey, 2000; Meintjes, 2003), these musicians are shaping and addressing a local desire amongst young people in Conakry to hear something different, something rooted in local experience yet new and distinct from the popular music of their parents. In the next section, I will consider in more detail the question of youth and youth-oriented ideologies before turning to the role of world music discourse in section four.

First, a brief return to Glonglon. The crowd responded with enthusiasm to Les Etoiles’ performance. Each piece started with a solo on either *kora* or *bala*, usually a fast, descending melodic line that would settle into a steady cycle as the other instruments joined in. The musicians would then alternate between slower, melodic passages during which a succession of singers would take the microphone, and loud, faster tempo passages during which a member of the audience, or indeed one of the musicians, might jump up to dance. As the music heated up, the singer would periodically shout “Climatiseur!” (“Air conditioner”) to cool down the musicians so that he could resume singing. By the time I left, well past 3am, the music, and the rain, showed no signs of abating.

## 4.2 *Ideologies of youth*

In their edited volume, *Resistance through Rituals*, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson write of the ‘moral panic’ that greeted the rise of youth culture in 1950s Britain (2006). As the markers of social order began to change in the post-war era, anxiety coalesced around young people, particularly working-class youth, who were seen to symbolize the degradation of traditional values and institutions. Hall, Jefferson and others describe the tension between ‘moral entrepreneurs’, who saw their role as protecting the status quo, and the youth whom they identified as responsible for social breakdown (Clarke et al, 2006: 56). Young people came to stand for the uncontrollable edges of society who were actively pushing against authority to transform the social landscape to their liking.

At around the same time that this discourse took hold in Britain, an inverse view was actively being promoted in Guinea. As in many socialist countries, the Guinean government carefully cultivated its relationship with young people, who were championed for precisely the same reasons that they were seen as a threat in Britain and the United States. Revolutions need transformative agents who are willing to overthrow the status quo in favour of a new future. In Touré’s Guinea, youth became the “key collective protagonist” of this narrative (Straker, 2009b: 37). Yet, unlike the spontaneous and decentralized youth subcultures of which Hall and Jefferson write, Guinean youth in the post-independence period were strictly organized and educated under party doctrine.

With the end of the Revolution, older people in Conakry today express concern that young people are increasingly undisciplined and delinquent, echoing anxieties familiar in post-war Britain and elsewhere. In both Guinea and Britain, ‘youth’ as conceived in this moral discourse is a category imagined by the state and dominant

groups (cf. Corrigan & Frith, 2006). In this section, I will consider these characterizations of youth in Conakry, examining attitudes from the Touré era and today. In the mass media as well as the academic literature, young people in Africa are increasingly portrayed as symbols of the continent's failure, a category in crisis that is alienated from the dominant social, political and economic forces in society (Richards, 2002: 33). Despite these discourses, however, the practices of musical youth in Conakry represent imaginative ways through which young musicians interact with the political culture within which they live.

#### 4.2.1 *Youth in Touré's Guinea*

Sékou Touré was thirty-six when he became the first president of Guinea, a young leader in a gerontocratic culture. Throughout Guinea, power and authority have traditionally been accorded to old men. In Mande society, the principle of *fasiya*, which John Williams Johnson translates as 'father-lineage-ness', obligates younger people to accord their elders respect and deference (1999: 11). Touré sought to subvert such age-based hierarchies by promoting young people and re-drawing the lines along which authority was understood. One of his first acts within months of coming into power was to create a party youth wing, the *Jeunesse de la Révolution Démocratique Africaine*, open to anyone "between the ages of 7 and 40" (Ministry of Culture & Education, 1979: 59). With such an inclusive age range, Touré hoped to create as broad an identification of youth as possible, incorporating all Guineans of a productive age. He devoted large portions of his books and speeches to this category, underlining their centrality to his programme. For example, in his 1967 work, *L'Afrique en marche*, he writes that

Placed at the centre of African history, African youth are not only the active hyphen between the continent's past and future, but also a vivid part of our common present, an important element of our fighting forces, the living symbol of our hopes, and the spokesperson of our people's legitimate aspirations. (1967: 556).

Through such flattering language, Touré framed youth in the post-independence period as icons of African revolutionary progress and modernity. Yet underneath this rhetoric of agency and action was a strategic assessment of young people as empty vessels ready to be filled with revolutionary ideology. As the group least associated with the past, young people were most receptive to the future and a rejection of older ways. Touré recognized their energy and zeal as the necessary engine of his Revolution, to be directed and appropriated to his reformist and authoritarian vision. Young people were charged with re-educating the older generation, thereby inverting traditional structures of power and removing the authority of the elders.

This role applied equally in the realm of music and culture, where young people were promoted in order to disenfranchise the old power holders. Touré sought to sweep away the guardians of traditional knowledge in favour of new ideals and understanding, and *jelilu* were a primary target. A 1979 report by the Guinean Ministry of Education and Culture reflects his aims:

The artificial walls that made art the preserve of a group of specialists called *griots* have been broken down, the myth of caste superiority has been extinguished ... Now the people themselves create culture, and through it achieve self-realization ... Art has become a weapon in the hands of young people and throughout Guinea has brought enlightenment. (1979: 79)

In the previous chapter, I discussed Touré's ambivalent attitudes towards *jelilu*, who were seen as both anchors of popular legitimacy and rivals for power, representing a system of

authority outside the authority of the state. The government report quoted here vividly illustrates Touré's rhetorical strategies in delegitimizing this power, pitting the backwards ways of 'myth' and 'caste' against the inexorable march of modernization and 'enlightenment'. Young people are depicted as soldiers, actively breaking down walls and using art as a 'weapon' in their battle for a revolutionary future. Furthermore, by using the past tense, the old ways and old power-holders are consigned to history, despite their evident survival.

Touré's evocation of young people as agents of change referenced not just revolutionary ideology, but also local social ideals. A number of commentators have described dialectics of power in this part of the world between young and old, in which gerontocracy exists in dynamic opposition with the constant challenge of youthful innovators (Bird & Kendall, 1980; Johnson, 1999; McGovern, 2004; Skinner, 2009). In Mande culture, this tension is framed in the polyvalent concepts of *badenya* ('mother-childness') and *fadenya* ('father-childness'). These concepts relate most directly to relations in polygamous households in which children share the same father but have different mothers. Beyond this context, however, these terms relate to broader social tensions between solidarity and loyalty to the group (*badenya*) and competition and rivalry (*fadenya*). Young people are obligated by principles of deference and loyalty to their elders, yet they are also expected to push at the social boundaries in order to innovate and challenge the existing order. According to Mande ideals, this dynamism creates both social continuity and change.

Touré sought to channel this dynamic opposition, at once allying himself on the side of young people and aiming to secure their compliance with his absolute rule. He

stressed young people's duty to discover their individual and collective talents, thereby appropriating their energies for revolutionary purposes. At the same time, through language full of paternal sentiment and counsel, he marked a clear hierarchical distinction between himself and his subjects.

Our youth has become a politically committed youth because it is aware of its responsibilities; an organized youth, a youth united around a revolutionary programme. It has become an impassioned youth, an active youth that knows that the value of its existence is measured by the sum of useful activities accomplished by a man or a people for the growth, the expansion of all the elements of the individual and the people's happiness. (1967: 582)

Sifting through the typically dense and florid rhetoric, what is clear here is Touré's paternalistic tone, aimed ultimately at keeping young people in check by reminding them of their duty. Moreover, by repeatedly affirming the undifferentiated category of 'youth', Touré makes them the object of his discourse, thus striking a careful balance between camaraderie and hierarchy.

In a study on youth in Touré's Guinea, Jay Straker notes that many adults from the forest region today remember their involvement in the Revolution with a degree of pride. Older *forestiers*, as inhabitants of the region are commonly known, are at times nostalgic about the past, despite – even due to – the physical and cultural violence inflicted on their region. Many of these people were recruited as youths into ballets and theatres, where they were alienated from their families and culture and, in the case of girls, often sexually harassed and beaten. For those who were students, draconian school regimes were imposed to ensure correct ideological education. As Straker observes, however, memories of their "youthful ordeals" allow adults today to feel satisfaction in

their personal and collective resilience to state brutality (2009b: 214). In contrast, they claim, today's youth are morally and physically untested and inexperienced.

I often heard similar claims in Conakry. As I have noted, former *révolutionnaires* in Conakry were extremely reluctant to criticize Touré's programme, largely due to their close personal relationship with the president. Yet, their statements did at times suggest a hint of the 'good and the bad' of the Revolution. For example, Hamidou Bangoura, the director of the Ballets Africains at the time of fieldwork, told me that

During Sékou Touré's time, to keep young people busy, after school children would go home, eat, rest, and at night they'd be with an artistic group. There wasn't time for unemployment or to be a delinquent. Children rehearsed until 7, 8pm, until 10pm. But today there aren't any more artistic troupes. That's why young people take drugs and smoke. There's total delinquency. That's why we're trying to make an effort to really bring back the old way of teaching children. Children don't even know what the Ballets Africains is. They don't know their folklore. They don't know their origin. So that weighs down really heavily on the Guinean youth.<sup>230</sup>

Hamidou's statement corresponds with the memories of the men and women whom Straker interviewed in the forest region, both attesting to the gruelling schedules imposed on children to ensure their full participation in the Revolution. While Straker's informants were explicit in their critiques, Hamidou Bangoura frames his memories in more positive terms. Both sides share the conviction, however, that young people at the time were engaged and busy, rather than 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 2006). Whether remembered as ordeals or duties, these views attribute the industry of the past with moral fortitude and wisdom.

In its expression of anxiety, Hamidou Bangoura's statement would be familiar to Hall, Jefferson and other chroniclers of contemporary British youth culture. 'Youth' here

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<sup>230</sup> Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009

is a constructed category through which moral discourses are sharpened. As Simon Frith notes, young people are thus ‘actively defined’ as a problem. Here, Hamidou describes young people as having lost their identity as Guineans and as inheritors of a rich legacy in a haze of drugs, smoke and ‘total delinquency’. Interestingly, a close reading of Touré’s texts reveals similar concerns during the post-independence period. In *L’Afrique en Marche* for example, Touré outlines the dangers of alcohol consumption on young minds and bodies (1967: 584). Touré’s strategy, however, is to recruit Guinean youth into the battle by framing alcoholism as a vestige of colonial rule. In this way, he reiterates the broader narrative of the Revolution as a struggle against the past and for the future, in which young people have a central role.

As McGovern argues, Touré sought to replace gerontocratic traditional rule with a “dictatorship of the youth” (2004: 435). His aim was not to ease intergenerational tensions in Guinea, but rather to exploit them. Young people were pitted against their elders in a transformative struggle to rewrite the rules of authority and power. This rhetoric has since become exhausted, however. The young ideologues of the Revolution are now the adults and establishment figures of today, and thus refigure the discourse by looking backwards rather than forwards.

My own sense is that intergenerational relations in Conakry are less fraught than the statements by Hamidou Bangoura and many older musicians suggested. While the Touré-era discourse was often framed as an opposition between old and new, past and future, young people today are growing up in a more diffuse environment in which there are many forms of power and influence. Respect for one’s elders is still a vital social principle, but young people in Conakry are not bound to the same degree by the

traditional patriarchal hierarchies that Touré felt threatened by. As I discuss below, musicians from the younger generation do set themselves apart from their elders and often frame their music as oppositional and anti-establishment. Yet a closer examination reveals both continuity and rupture with past practices.

#### 4.2.2 *Youth as critical voice*

Striking about the vast majority of young male – and occasionally female – musicians I met in Conakry was that, across genres, almost all wear their hair in dreadlocks.

Dreadlocks have become an important expressive form for these musicians, conveying a number of identities and messages.<sup>231</sup> As John Clarke argues, style is an important means by which to understand sub-cultural identity, embodying the ways in which a particular group sees itself and expresses its difference from others (2006: 151). Dreadlocks operate as such symbols. For one, they signal youthful rebellion with the social norms. In Guinea, short hair for men is a sign of respectability, cleanliness and health, reflecting Islamic emphasis on hygiene and personal grooming. In the past, one would only have seen social outcasts wearing their hair in long, matted locks. Today the look is common amongst musicians in Conakry, although less so amongst other young people. Young musicians thus set themselves apart as daring and rebellious.

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<sup>231</sup> In his article on ‘black hair’, Kobena Mercer notes that in African-American discourses, dreadlocks are associated with the 1960s ‘Black is Beautiful’ slogan, which celebrated ‘natural’ black hairstyles, both aesthetically and ideologically. As Mercer argues, “hair is never a straightforward biological ‘fact’ because it is always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally ‘worked on’ by human hands”, practices which serve to “socialize hair” (1987: 34).



**Fig. 11** Cheick Kouyaté, a *jeli* from the family of M’Bady Kouyaté and member of an urban traditional group

Dreadlocks also have another important signification, referencing Rastafarianism and reggae music. Young men and women with dreadlocks are commonly referred to in Conakry as ‘Rastas’, even though the vast majority of them are practicing Muslims. Moreover, most that I encountered were only incidentally involved in reggae, focusing instead on urban traditional Susu or Mande music. But the reference provides a key marker of identity for young musicians in Conakry today, serving as a visual link to a global black youth culture. In this regards, dreadlocks are often supplemented with reggae-inspired clothing – t-shirts featuring Bob Marley and frequent use of the reggae-favoured colours of the Ethiopian flag: green, yellow and red. Through such a look, young musicians allude to an identity well beyond Conakry, thus demarcating a break from a purely local and particular tradition. Like Cuban music in the mid-twentieth

century, reggae-culture provides an alternative way for young people to express their modernity, one with roots outside the Global North and in historical black global experience. While reggae and Rastafarianism evoke notions of return to the African motherland for black British and Caribbean youth (Hebdige, 2006), youth in Conakry value these references for their global cosmopolitanism beyond the continent's borders.

Although hip-hop suggests a similar draw on young people's imaginations, reggae is by far the more popular musical genre and reference point in Conakry today. Local hip-hop artists proliferate, but of the two, most young people in Conakry prefer reggae. When I asked friends why this is the case, I was often told that reggae music is 'about Africa' and 'about African problems.' People often cited songs such as Bob Marley's 'Zimbabwe' to show that the genre speaks directly to African people, while also evoking a wider diasporic identity. Despite its Jamaican roots, reggae is seen as pan-African rather than tied to any particular country, whereas hip-hop is considered to be first and foremost American. As Lisa McNee notes, this popularity for reggae exists throughout francophone West Africa. McNee cites the example of the Ivorian reggae singer Alpha Blondy, whose political lyrics have made him a hero of young people throughout the region. She argues that reggae resonates with West African youth because it is essentially a "contestatory music" (2002: 240). It is primarily the outspoken political stance of reggae music that makes it so popular.

This explanation certainly corresponds with the statements of young musicians in Conakry. Even though they do not necessarily perform reggae music, many readily identify with the politics of stars such as Marley or Alpha Blondy. In this way, dreadlocks suggest a political as well as cultural stance, linked to ideals of youthful

protest and resistance. Thus, as Mohammed ‘Branco’ Camara, one of the lead singers from Les Etoiles de Boulbinet, said,

Young musicians, young artists, we’re the real warriors for solidarity and peace in this country. When there’s a problem, we stand up. We tell people, ‘Stop. Ethnocentrism isn’t good. War isn’t good. We’re all Guineans’.<sup>232</sup>

Similarly, Balla Kanté, a young *jeli* singer engaged in urban traditional forms, told me that

I think that music can really help our country, can unify it, because there’s still ethnocentrism in our country and everyone wants power, so young people were divided. But today, thanks to music, music is beginning to ease young people ... Music is helping our country through the crisis. And that same music is undoing the political crisis.<sup>233</sup>

Branco and Balla both describe a landscape in which young Guinean musicians are able and willing to ‘stand up’ and express their views freely and for the collective good, echoing the ideals promoted by Alpha Blondy and others. Yet, while their statements reflect ideals of democracy, accountability and the political agency of young people, it is less clear that they represent lived reality in Conakry today. When I asked Branco and Balla for examples of songs or lyrics, for instance, both suggested to me that they were speaking ‘in general’ rather than in reference to specific cases. My own observations during fieldwork were that very few songs by local musicians, young or old, critically examined the political issues of the day. In contrast to the flood of praise songs to the CNDD, there were rarely any examples of musical critique or opposition to the regime.

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<sup>232</sup> Interview, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<sup>233</sup> Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009

This is not to say that the music of urban traditional and other youth-oriented genres is not topical. Besides the ‘bizarre’ instruments, most fans told me that they enjoy urban traditional music because of its relevance to everyday life in Conakry. While *jeliya* emphasizes history, the past and the high politics of the Mande Empire and modern state, urban traditional music and its closely related genres often speak to the low politics of the street today.<sup>234</sup> Many songs do offer praise to politicians and powerful figures, but others celebrate love, women and the vitality of urban life. Most notably, however, these songs also evoke the struggles of ordinary people. An example is the song ‘Törè’ (Suffering) by Les Espoirs de Coronthie (accompanying CD track 6). Recorded in Paris, the musical texture is cleaner than urban traditional songs recorded in Conakry, with a minimalist arrangement of *kora* and acoustic guitar reflecting European preferences. The Susu vocals, however, paint a vivid portrait of urban poverty in Conakry:

<i>Guiné dimédi sara mati bara gbo to sogué</i>	Today there are so many young girls who sell [in the markets]
<i>Guiné dimédi sara mati bara gbo to sogué, Y’Alla</i>	Today there are so many girls who sell [in the markets], oh God
<i>Kouyé nou yiba n’de plateau rafé marché</i>	Early in the morning they fill their trays to take to the market
<i>Kouyé na so sexy kangré sac tongo, törè gbalou</i>	At night, the ‘sexy’ take their handbags because of suffering [i.e. they prostitute themselves]
<i>Di ma bari ma, baba mé hebé, 10,000 khafé</i>	They have children without fathers for the sake of 10,000 [Guinea francs]
<i>Könö törè moufan</i>	Truly suffering is hard

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<sup>234</sup> Lucy Durán similarly notes the growing popularity of Malian genres such as *Wassoulou* and *Balani*, which are seen as an alternative to *jeliya* by their lyrical themes focusing on social issues, street life, etc. (Personal communication, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Similarly, the Etoiles de Boulbinet song ‘Cinquantenaire’ (Fiftieth Anniversary) expresses dismay at Guinea’s lack of economic development after fifty years of independence (accompanying CD track 7):

<i>Won ma économie, la Guinée 50 ans akhalan sonö</i>	Our economy, Guinea is fifty years old, things must move
<i>Nan féma fo khon kha pièce don né</i>	Why, because we have to use our coins
<i>Nan féma fo khon kha pièce don né utilisé</i>	Why, because we have to use our coins [i.e. our coins have no value because of inflation]

Songs such as these recount in vivid terms the hardships of poverty on the postcolonial citizen. Such portrayals would have been impossible during the Touré era, when music was required to convey optimism and pride in the Revolution. Today, however urban traditional musicians are not afraid to sing directly about social problems and the difficulties of life in Conakry. Yet, while they foreground questions of economics, these songs largely overlook issues of politics, corruption and violence. No one is named in these songs, no leader or party is singled out as accountable, and in this way the songs offer stirring critiques of the situation rather than of those who are responsible. In a highly personalistic musical and political environment, one in which musicians routinely sing the names and stories of individuals, these songs are deliberately left impersonal.

In this way, musicians from Les Etoiles de Boulbinet and other urban traditional groups reflect and shape the opacity and silence that I have discussed in this thesis, and that continues to dominate Conakry’s musical and political landscape today. Bob White notes that in Kinshasa, music often addresses social hardship through ““plaintive love songs, [which] enable musicians to show sympathy for the situation of the average *kinois*

without putting themselves at political risk.” (2008: 178). Similarly, in Conakry, urban traditional musicians connect with their audiences through songs of suffering while nonetheless keeping direct political criticisms unspoken. Despite their discourses of resistance, these musicians exhibit the same caution as their older counterparts.

Yet, there are also different forms of contestation at work here. For one, as noted, by singing about the hardships and joys of everyday life, these musicians directly speak to urban youth, rather than their parents or grandparents. This is not to say that young musicians do not engage in praise-singing. As noted in the previous chapter, across genres, praise-singing is the primary means by which most musicians in Conakry survive. But the songs of Les Etoiles, Les Espoirs and similar groups also provide voice to a generation of young people who are otherwise not directly represented in forms such as *jeliya* or the music of the Touré-era dance bands. Furthermore, the foregrounding of traditional local instruments represents a break from past practices, suggesting new sounds and ideas. While *bolon* and *kongoma* add a distinctively local feel to the music, visual references to reggae and Rastafarianism also add a global, youth-oriented outlook. In addition, urban traditional music is primarily Susu. While music in Conakry has long been dominated by the Mande genre of *jeliya*, the new urban traditional genre adds new references and voices to the city’s soundscape, offering an alternative to the political and cultural dominance of Maninka-speakers. Susu music incorporates Mande instruments such as *bolon* and *bala*, as well as *jeli* models of praise-singing, but it is also distinctly set apart – through language, style, instrumentation and the background of the musicians themselves. While *jeliya* and its variants are close to the political centre, as the examples

of the *vedettes* and Touré-era dance bands show, urban traditional musicians position themselves as an alternative to this ‘musical hegemony’ (White, 2008: 62).

The desire to be set apart and do something different has its practical limits, as I will describe in the next section. As noted, the politics of silence in contemporary Conakry is shaped in part by local norms of opacity and secrecy, found in both Mande and Susu culture and given new urgency under Touré’s Revolution. Thus, young Susu musicians were largely silent in the face of political violence in Conakry in 2009, as I will discuss. My sense is that in dressing like ‘rastas’ and speaking in oppositional terms, however, urban traditional musicians are engaged in performative play. These practices are expressions of aspiration from musicians who must contend with a long history of authoritarianism as the state controls both the politics and the economics of music. I borrow this idea from Lohman’s description of Umm Kulthum’s carefully presented image as a “performance of ‘self’” (2010: 8). Yet while Lohman describes Umm Kulthum’s self-presentation as a consciously public act, I see urban traditional musicians in Conakry as engaged in a form of play. With their long, matted hair, their old instruments and their rebellious speech, these musicians are imaginatively playing with conservative social and political conventions. As Makhulu et al. argue, scholars of African culture and politics must recognize the “capacity to fantasize” that shapes local responses to hardship and crisis (2010: 27). While it is difficult to say certain things out loud in Conakry, politics can be expressed in other ways. Thus I see the dress, sound and speech of urban traditional musicians as an expression of both political and stylistic aesthetics which push the boundaries of existing conventions. Emphasizing the style and aesthetics of these musicians allows us to understand the polyvalence and ambiguity of

their actions, rather than reading them simply as acts of resistance. This polyvalence becomes clear when we consider more closely musicians' silence in the face of political violence, as I will examine below.

### **4.3 *We sing about peace, not politics***

While the political situation grew increasingly tense over the summer of 2009, musicians in Conakry seemed to retreat further into a stance of silence, unwilling to speak against the military regime. At the same time, they further circumscribed their roles in relation to politics and art. As noted in Chapter Three, musicians in Conakry carefully define their rights and responsibilities in order to reconcile the contradictions between moral and political discourses and practices related to music. In light of the brutality of the CNDD in 2009, these attempts became more strained, while my own reaction was initially increasingly confused, as I will discuss in this section. As I argue, however, musicians accommodated the regime in an acknowledgement of the ongoing realities of everyday life.

By late August 2009, the sense of crisis was palpable in Conakry as Dadis remained defiantly silent on whether he would step down from office. Everywhere but the state media, the conversation seemed to veer towards the elections, the CNDD's plans, the rumours of total disorder in the army. Although it was still Ramadan, traditionally a time of no political or musical activity, the first protests against the regime were held in Conakry's suburbs. The government responded by blocking all text message services, which had been used to mobilize demonstrators. Liberia and Senegal sent their presidents to Conakry to negotiate with Dadis and reach a peaceful solution. The

government organized the Ballets Africains and other musicians to entertain the visiting dignitaries and show their unwavering support. Opposition politicians began making increasingly vocal statements about their plans to run against Dadis. The CNDD paid young people and women to march down the main thoroughfare in town while chanting pro-army slogans.

This pattern of political call-and-response intensified over the next few weeks as the regime grew increasingly defensive, and expectations were high that *something* would happen after the end of Ramadan. As the holy month drew to a close, four opposition parties announced plans to hold a joint rally on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, an important date in the Guinean calendar marking the anniversary of Guinea's vote of independence from France in 1958. The rally was to be held at the National Stadium, also named after the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, and opposition supporters were called to join together in a show of popular discontent against the military regime. In the days leading up to the rally, Conakry seemed caught in a fevered grip of anxiety, excitement, rumours, fear, weariness and the everyday concerns of earning a living. The government announced a national holiday on the 28<sup>th</sup>, in an attempt to keep people at home and off the streets, and many people warned me to stay indoors. In any case, two days before the planned rally there was a noticeable increase of military roadblocks and convoys throughout town, adding further obstructions to the already chaotic and gridlocked city streets.

On the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> September, I awoke to the sound of thirty or forty anti-government demonstrators cheering and marching on the street below, calling out '*Democracie!*' and '*Non à Dadis!*'. From the balcony of the fourth-floor flat where I was staying in downtown Conakry, I could see that the centre of town was quiet – shop fronts

closed, street vendors and taxis absent, no noise or movement except for the military vehicles that regularly sped past and the groups of youthful demonstrators marching towards the National Stadium. Thousands of people from across Conakry were converging at the stadium and, over the course of the day my flatmates and I heard reports of what took place there. As the rally was underway later that morning, government soldiers surrounded the stadium and opened fire on the unarmed civilians inside. At least 156 people were killed in the ensuing massacre, while countless others were beaten and brutalized by soldiers, who sexually assaulted women, arrested opposition leaders and allegedly gathered the bodies of the dead to be burned at their military camp.<sup>235</sup>

The massacre of 28<sup>th</sup> September left Conakry temporarily in shock. Over the next few days, as the markets slowly re-opened and people emerged onto the streets, the city felt eerily subdued. Many businesses remained closed and few people could be seen outside after sunset. Many friends living in the outer suburbs of Conakry later told me that they spent several days indoors, not wanting to encounter the soldiers who were rampaging through their neighbourhoods looking for those involved in the demonstration. Some expressed great anger and indignation at the army's actions; some seemed resigned to the situation; almost everyone was deeply anxious about what would happen next. Two friends from the Kouyaté family, Hadja and Diamadi, left the country in a bush taxi headed to Mali, while my singing teacher Diaryatou made arrangements to join her sister in Dakar. Another friend, a Liberian woman who had originally come to Guinea as a

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<sup>235</sup> 'Report of the International Commission of Inquiry mandated to establish the facts and circumstances of the events of 28 September 2009 in Guinea', United Nations Security Council document S/2009/693. The Commission concluded that the events constituted a crime against humanity

refugee a decade earlier, told me that she now wanted to return to her home country rather than face another war.

Alongside these anxieties and fears, however, normal life began to resume, much quicker in fact than I would have thought possible. Within a week, the city's streets were once again bustling with life. Moreover, the initial feelings of anger and shock that my friends had conveyed seemed to be quickly tempered. My sense was that everyone just wanted to get back to their day-to-day lives and leave the politics aside. While people were shocked and saddened by the killing of so many innocent civilians, there seemed to be little belief that the government could be removed from power – and in some cases even that it should. Some friends told me they doubted the government's responsibility for the attack. Rumours circulated that Dadis had recruited mercenary fighters from Liberia and Sierra Leone to bolster his forces, and it was argued that these recruits had committed the worst crimes.<sup>236</sup> Dadis himself claimed to have 'lost control' of the army, thereby containing the problem to a renegade group. A number of people told me that Guinean men could never sexually assault women, that foreigners must have been responsible because Guinean culture did not allow such things, even though I knew that of course such crimes took place. But through reasoning such as this, people in Conakry attempted to create distance from the atrocities of the day, to separate themselves – and their leaders – from the massacre. Yet where was the outrage and demand for accountability, I wondered. How could people be so seemingly complacent about what the government had done?

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<sup>236</sup> There is a historical precedent for such recruitment. During his regime, former president Lansana Conté recruited ex-rebel fighters from Liberia to quash Guinean anti-government demonstrations of 2006 and 2007 (McGovern, 2007: 141).

Musically, the long-standing practices of praise and accommodation for the military soon resumed as well. Less than a week after the massacre, I went to Glonglon to hear Les Etoiles de Boulbinet play at their usual Sunday night slot. The bar was as lively as always, with no hint of the turmoil that had hit the country. As the band played, I noticed that a table of soldiers in uniform sat near the stage. The soldiers were regular patrons and I had often seen them when I went to hear Les Etoiles, but on that night, I felt particularly uncomfortable at the sight. No one else seemed to mind, however, and as the music continued, one of the singers took the microphone and began singing in a mixture of French and Susu, “*I nu wali*, thank you, CNDD! Thank you, Guinean Army!” The soldiers cheered and danced, tucking folded Guinean francs into the singer’s collar. Demba, sitting with his *kora* behind the singer, caught my eye and began laughing, knowing how I struggled to understand such dynamics. “That’s just the way it is here,” he said to me later during a break in the music. “Everyone knows that the singer will earn his bread by singing for the soldiers.”<sup>237</sup>

That same week, there appeared on the state RTG television channel a music video for a new song. Filmed at La Paillote against a backdrop of a large Guinean flag, the song featured a number of Touré-era musicians as well as a few younger *vedettes*. Singing in unison to a synthesized backing track, the musicians delivered messages in Maninka and Susu for peace and unity in Guinea. These messages coincided with the CNDD’s call for a national unity government in the days after the massacre, an initiative that was rejected by opposition parties who demanded Dadis to step down. The RTG song seemed rather bare and functional, with no solo singing and none of the melodic leaps and contour that otherwise create heightened emotion in Guinean song. This was

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<sup>237</sup> Personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2009

music purely for putting forward a message. Moreover, no one was named in the song, either in praise or indirect reference, despite the presence of several musicians who had sung for the regime in the past.

The RTG song suggested to me that there was little public appetite for praise to Dadis so soon after the massacre. While the singer at Glonglon sang directly to the CNDD, the musicians at La Paillote declined to do so – most likely under government instruction. Such a public and high-profile declaration of praise and of the regime’s power would have been excessive at a time when the political situation was so tense, and my feeling was that the normal dynamics of praise performance, involving patron, client and audience, seemed slightly off-balance. The audience may have shrugged its shoulders at the low-profile praise at Glonglon, perhaps because of fear, or familiarity with the soldiers in an intimate setting. But audiences did not seem willing to participate in a higher-stakes performance at the national level. By limiting the RTG song to general themes of reconciliation, the government seemed to acknowledge this stance, knowing that it was not the time for an ostentatious display of power and prestige. In this way, the government familiarly deployed abstract and neutral language – in this case about reconciliation and peace – as a means of glossing over the particular facts of the moment. Nonetheless, the song’s implicit message was clear: Guineans should support the government and keep quiet for the good of the country, rather than engaging in further protest. And this is precisely what it seemed to me that most people were doing.

*Vedettes* and members of the Touré-era dance bands have never held themselves as protest musicians, and while I was surprised that they would wish to ally themselves with the government at so sensitive a moment, I understood that their participation in the

RTG song was part of a well-established practice. The reaction of Les Etoiles and other urban traditional groups, however, caused me much greater confusion. As noted, these musicians explicitly position themselves as activists firmly placed on the side of urban youth rather than the state. Yet through the praise song at Glonglon and the distinct lack of protest, they were accommodating the regime just like everyone else.

This reaction (or lack thereof) can be understood in a number of ways. For one, fear of violence in the immediate aftermath of the massacre undoubtedly led musicians and others to keep a low-profile. The days after the massacre were marked by sporadic protests and a two-day general strike, but these efforts did not generate momentum and quickly died down. On the one hand, and for the first time in my own experience of living in Conakry over three and a half years, I noticed a public sense of anger directed at the military. I remember walking down the main Avenue de la République in Conakry a few days after 28<sup>th</sup> September. A soldier in combat fatigues and boots stood in the middle of the street laughing at something, while around him passers-by turned to stare with unusual and unmistakable bitterness and anger in their faces. Yet the soldier was armed, a symbol of military force, and expressions of anger were pushed no further. Living with a long history of violence and repression, musicians and others in Conakry knew to situate their feelings within a broader strategy of survival.

Furthermore, a prolonged state of emergency was simply not economically sustainable for most people, who do not have savings accounts and guaranteed salaries to fall back on. The vast majority of people in Conakry rely on the informal economy – selling things at the market, doing favours for people, providing informal services. Thus, within days of the massacre, most of these activities had resumed as people attempted to

continue their economic lives and stay afloat. The feeling of wanting to get back to the day-to-day and leave politics aside was directly linked to this acknowledgement that people need to buy, sell, cook and eat in order to survive. Such a feeling was true for musicians as well. As information circulated about a general strike led by the opposition in early October, for example, a Susu percussionist friend of mine, Alya Bangoura, explained to me why he would not participate:

I don't go out in the street [to strike]. Other people will go out. Artists don't have anything to do with that. If there's a strike, we stay at home. We can't work. There's no music. That's not good for us. People speak about change, but artists don't care about that. What we care about is to do our work. It's not politics.<sup>238</sup>

What I had understood as complacency Alya explains as economic necessity in a precarious situation. For musicians who are paid by the performance, support for the status quo is a way to ensure ongoing work. Like most people in Conakry, Alya's pressing concern was to simply stay afloat, to earn enough money to survive and possibly a little more if he was lucky. 'Politics' for him was an intrusion, an interruption of the flow and familiarity of regular life. In a context in which political change has historically been achieved through coups and violent upheavals, people are understandably wary of such situations. Thus many people told me that it was only the unemployed who protest because they have nothing to lose, even though I personally knew professionals who had also taken part. But in Conakry, as everywhere else in the world, most people are concerned with their immediate stability and security, with ensuring a degree of certainty in their lives.

Alya's statement also resonated with a distinction I commonly heard drawn between art and politics as musicians attempted to separate the two domains. Described

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<sup>238</sup> Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2009

in abstract, idealized terms, the distinction was never really convincing yet over time I understood why musicians felt the need to distance themselves from the complexities of the political sphere. As noted, musicians in Conakry have responded to an increasingly vocal and critical public by tightly circumscribing their roles, framing themselves as apolitical artists who transcend the messiness and corruption of politics. In the days and weeks after 28<sup>th</sup> September, I heard this distinction more than ever. Thus, another Susu musician, Gali Camara, told me that he did not support the idea of protest:

Artists don't demonstrate because they love their country. If you're the president, all the artists are behind you ... Whether you're good [or] you're not good, that doesn't concern us. What concerns us is peace.<sup>239</sup>

This idea was further developed a couple of days later, as I sat in the courtyard at La Paillote with several musicians, some of whom had been involved in the RTG clip. The subject of conversation varied, from concerts and recordings to family life. After a while, a professional-looking woman appeared and asked to speak to some of the musicians from the Touré-era orchestras. She and her assistant were invited to join us, and she pulled up a chair and introduced herself as a journalist from the BBC. The musicians with whom I sat smiled welcomingly and began to tell her about their backgrounds. Within a few minutes, however, it became clear that she had not come to interview them about music, but rather to ask about their views on the 28<sup>th</sup> September massacre. She specifically wanted to speak to Bembeya Jazz's guitarist, Sékou Diabaté, the best known of the Touré-era musicians today, and someone stood up and volunteered to show her and her assistant to his house.

After the journalist had left, the remaining musicians all turned to face each other in disbelief about her reasons for wanting to speak to them. "But she's come to ask us

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<sup>239</sup> Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2009

about *the events*,” one of them said with indignation. Another responded that “in Guinea, we don’t comment on such things, and that’s the way it’s been since Sékou’s time.” As I listened, a heated discussion ensued on the proper role of Guinean music. The musicians all agreed that it was not their role to get involved in politics. As one said, “You can ask me to speak about art, but I’m not interested in the rest of it.” He argued that artists in Guinea do not criticise the government because their role is to support whoever is in power. The others all echoed this last statement, agreeing that Guinean art is about promoting peace. “We sing about peace, not politics” said one musician, “and we’re not going to get involved in other things.”<sup>240</sup>

Leaving La Paillote that day, and for a long time thereafter, I felt a great sense of disappointment and dejection at these attitudes. Across the board, musicians in Conakry – whether the young members of Les Etoiles de Boulbinet or the old men at La Paillote – seemed to me indifferent to the carnage of 28<sup>th</sup> September and even complicit in their unwavering support for the government. By separating art from politics, these musicians seemed to be relinquishing any moral responsibility to the broader public. As Gali had said, whether the president is good or not good, ‘that doesn’t concern us.’ Yet almost 160 had died at the hands of national army. How could it be that such an act was of no concern?

I have since come to understand, however, that in addition to the fear of violence and poverty, musicians and other people in Conakry act within the parameters of long-standing norms of silence and discretion. These norms do not exclude the possibilities of other emotions, such as anger or outrage. Rather, they act alongside them, yet require a

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<sup>240</sup> Observed on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2009 at La Paillote

necessary forbearance. In her work on Uduk-speaking people in Sudan, Wendy James writes that

The academic discourse on feeling tends to assume as a starting point a normal human being ‘in neutral,’ untouched by appetite, or memory, let alone love or worry. But real people are never in a state of *normal* emotionless abstraction, nor even of *average* fleshly comfort; they are always either hungry or satiated, optimistic or depressed, rested or tired. Nor are they alone; they are always entangled with others and infected by the social exchange of feeling. (1997: 116; emphasis in original)

James describes emotions not as distinct and isolable categories, but rather as utterly mixed up in the everyday experience of being human. Thus, like Uduk people, the emotions that people felt in Conakry in reaction to the 28<sup>th</sup> September 2009 did not suddenly burst forward from a previously neutral emotional state. Rather, such feelings have long been part of daily experience as the fear of violence and poverty and the ongoing import of silence has imbued the everyday. The resumption of ‘normal life’ did not mean that these feelings were not experienced, but rather that musicians and other people were able to situate them within their understanding of and strategies towards local realities. Thus, despite the discourse of resistance amongst young musicians, despite their self-identification as ‘warriors for solidarity and peace’, they also understood the need to keep the words inside them. As I have described, they adapt to the situation by circumscribing their roles, claiming art rather than politics as their domain.

Nonetheless, these attempts at framing themselves as apolitical seem to push musicians “inexorably in the direction of politics” (Stokes, 2010: 102).<sup>241</sup> By remaining silent in opposition to the CNDD, they were implicitly supporting the regime and the

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<sup>241</sup> Stokes discusses the Turkish musician Orhan Gencebay, who resists attempts to label his music from the 1970s as political, in part due to the implication that his later music is therefore ‘inauthentic’. As Stokes argues, Gencebay wishes to reframe notions of music and musicianship in Turkey by stressing older ideals of love rather than the more recent discourses of modernity and political responsibility (2010: 101-3).

status quo. Yet few people seemed bothered by this silence. While musicians are often criticized for praise-singing, they are rarely criticized for not dissenting or protesting. Rather it is understood that silence is often the best option.

These dynamics are not static but changing, however. As I have noted, a new atmosphere of dissent is emerging in Conakry, in which questions of governance, history and morality are being publicly discussed. The ‘spiral of silence’ (Noelle-Neumann 1974; 1993) which has so long kept public voices of opposition in check is beginning to reverse, as I will discuss in the next section.

#### ***4.4 Diasporic dissent***

The political theorist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argues that public opinion is often driven by a ‘spiral of silence’ (1974; 1993). According to this theory, people rarely express themselves against majority opinions, even if they disagree with them, because of a fear of social isolation. As Noelle-Neumann argues, people are constantly observing the behaviour of those around them to assess what society approves or disapproves of and to adapt their own behaviour accordingly. Thus, while a small ‘vocal minority’ may go against the grain and risk public disapproval by airing its views, the majority will remain silent even if this means that their views are not publicly expressed. In this section, I will consider this idea with respect to music and its role as public voice. As I argue, the spiral of silence is giving way to a ‘spiral of voice’ in Conakry today, yet musicians within Conakry seem, to date, one-step behind.

Two weeks after the 28<sup>th</sup> September massacre, as the protests and strikes had died down and things seemed to be slipping back to the status quo, the reggae star Takana

Zion gave a concert at Rogbané beach, a favourite meeting place for young people in Conakry. Takana Zion was at the time the most popular reggae musician in Conakry and a huge crowd gathered to hear him. Throughout the afternoon concert, audience members shouted out their requests for ‘Crazy Soldiers’, a song that Takana had released the previous year and that criticized members of the military for their daily abuses of power. Each time a yell could be heard for ‘Crazy Soldiers’, however, Takana demurred, repeatedly calling instead for the audience to “unite”.

That same month, three well-known Guinean musicians based in France released the song ‘Manguè Woulefalè’ (President Liar), a scathing indictment of the military junta (accompanying CD track 8). The song largely follows a reggae format, with slow, off-beat rhythm guitar, vocal harmonies and a bouncy bass-line. The reggae singers Alpha Wess and Alseny Kouyaté provide alternating solos in French, while the singer Bill de Sam adds a narrative section in Susu. His story recounts a traditional morality tale about a man named Moussa, adapted here to refer to the junta president Moussa Dadis Camara. While this section offers a veiled metaphorical critique, the passages in French are more direct, with forceful words against the military regime:

<i>Tu nous as dit que</i>	You told us that
<i>Tu es venu pour libérer le peuple.</i>	You came to free the people
<i>On ne te croit pas, on ne te croit plus.</i>	We don't believe you, we don't believe you anymore
<i>Un chef d'état qui tire sur sa population</i>	A head of state who shoots his people
<i>On ne le croit pas, on ne le croit plus.</i>	We don't believe it, we don't believe it anymore
<i>Il faut quitter le pouvoir.</i>	You have to step down.

The video for ‘Manguè Woulefalè’ features shocking images captured on mobile phones on the day of the massacre and in the following week, documenting the abuses committed

by soldiers outside the national stadium. Shots of bloodied bodies and corpses wrapped in white muslin are interspersed with clips of Guineans demonstrators in Paris, marching along the streets with anti-Dadis slogans and banners. With these incendiary images and lyrics, ‘Manguè Woulefalè’ offered a bitter attack against the government, directly addressed to President Dadis and using the informal personal pronoun ‘tu’ to reinforce its message.

The contrast between Alpha Wess’ song and musical responses to the crisis within Conakry is striking. While ‘Manguè Woulefalè’ pointedly denounced the CNDD, musicians in Conakry either continued to support the regime, as did Les Etoiles and the musicians in the RTG clip, or remained largely silent, as did Takana Zion. This difference is understandable when one considers the everyday pressures confronting local musicians to accommodate the regime. Musicians in the diaspora, on the other hand, sing from both a physical and cultural distance, in which not just the threat of violence and poverty but also the norms of guardedness exert less influence. From this distance, musicians have the space and the voice that they often lack in Conakry. As songs like ‘Manguè Woulefalè’ travel via YouTube and other media, however, musicians within Conakry face further expectations to similarly exert their voice. Young musicians in particular are caught between competing expectations as their fans consume music and culture from other, less guarded places and musicians. This process creates tensions for musicians and consumers alike. One Guinean friend told me, for example, that the images of violence shown in Alpha Wess’ video were from Rwanda, even though distinguishing features of Conakry life are clearly visible. Such a reluctance to accept the images as local resonates, however, with longstanding norms to keep state violence a ‘public

secret', to keep certain things opaque and unsaid. At the same time, the circulation of such images, and the direct and pointed criticisms against the regime, inevitably ups the stakes for musicians in Conakry.

The situation is further complicated by world music discourses. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, world music fans and commentators often tend to portray African music, and in particular youth music, as a site for resistance and political opposition. Representations of the urban traditional group Les Espoirs de Coronthie illustrate this tendency in Guinean music. As noted, the group is enormously popular in Conakry and has also achieved success in Europe, spending several months of each year touring the continent and recording. European commentators often fixate on the 'rags-to-riches' story, narrating a rather essentialised view of the group. A brief review of internet commentary on Les Espoirs reveals this preoccupation:

In their home country Guinea, the musicians of the band Les Espoirs de Coronthie are a phenomenon. In Coronthie, a slum of Conakry, music is a huge priority, offering one of the few chances of escape from poverty and misery.<sup>242</sup>

Similarly, the website for the 2011 Roskilde festival in Denmark writes that

In Guinea, hip hop is not the only soundtrack of the ghetto. The ancestors' instruments and musical patterns have been taken up by the poverty-stricken youth. Yet, the feeling is different. Just listen to Les Espoirs De Coronthie who make the ancient instruments vibrate. They play their spartan koras, balaphones and bongos with the same proud self-confidence and love as other, more privileged townsmen play their turntables. Three singers in front complete the impression of a new West African star ensemble with equal parts musical glow and social indignation.<sup>243</sup>

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<http://www.africafestival.org/main/index.php?webcode=openstage&PHPSESSID=125c5d07a3d242eaf087>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> October 2010

<sup>243</sup> <http://www.roskilde-festival.dk/uk/bands/singleband/les-espoirs-de-coronthie/>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> November 2010

Such descriptions are not entirely divorced from reality – most people in the Coronthie neighbourhood do live in poverty (although I could not state that they equally live in misery) and the music of Les Espoirs does depict the realities of the urban poor. But this music also speaks of love, religion and football. Of the songs on the album *Tinkhinyi*, there are as many praise songs to powerful and wealthy individuals as there are songs recounting the hardships and joys of everyday life. Praise songs to government ministers and businessmen do not fit the heroic narrative that draws in world music audiences, however, and these aspects of the music are largely overlooked. Instead, the poverty and alleged politics of these musicians is ‘fetishized’ and thus commodified (cf. Ryan, 2011). As Stokes and Turino observe, such representations often encourage musicians to promote a certain image and ideal. For example, when I asked Kandia Kouyaté, the *kora* player for Les Espoirs, about common descriptions of the group in the European media, he told me that “[o]ur music speaks of politics. People need to work honestly and African leaders need to stop manipulating the people.”<sup>244</sup>

Yet, as I have noted, Les Espoirs’ lyrics only occasionally speak of politics, and very rarely directly address ‘African leaders’ as do the songs of Alpha Wess and Alpha Blondy. Les Espoirs and other young musicians in Conakry are operating within a particular musical and political culture of discretion, silence and guardedness, yet they are keenly aware of another way of behaving musically. Their statements about their music reflect an ideal they aspire to, yet their lyrics demonstrate that these ideals are not entirely actualized.

A few months after the 28<sup>th</sup> September massacre, Les Espoirs posted the following announcement at the top of their MySpace page:

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<sup>244</sup> Personal communication, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2010

Les Espoirs de Coronthie sends their condolences to the families of the victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> September 2009 demonstration, who were bloodily repressed by the Guinean army. Conforming to its promises, the CNDD must cede power to civil society, protecting its citizens, and not the contrary.<sup>245</sup>

Unlike most musicians in Conakry, both young and old, Les Espoirs responded directly to the massacre. The words here are clear and confrontational, directed at the CNDD and siding firmly with the victims and their families. Yet the medium of this message is telling. Rather than delivered through song and in a local language, the message was written in French and disseminated through the group's website. The language reads rather more like a press release than poetry, and echoes the tone of international legal and political reports on the massacre that were issued around that time. It must be stressed that this does not suggest that the sentiments expressed here are insincere or inauthentic. Rather, my point is that the website offered Les Espoirs a safe place in which to air their views, one which would not necessarily jeopardize their position within Guinea. The few people in the country who would have access to such a message would likely be young, urban and affluent, and probably already fans. Like other local musicians, Les Espoirs were simply cautious in the face of local realities. Denouncing the regime through their website provided a means of balancing discretion with ideals of political voice. It should be noted that the impulse to speak out does not originate in Europe. As I have argued, Guinean musicians in Paris were able to sing against the regime because of the safety and distance that life in the diaspora affords, but their desire to do so is not therefore European or foreign. For one, as noted earlier, Mande social dynamics envision a push-and-pull between young and old as they vie to shape the social world. Moreover, the changing climate in Conakry today underlines the fact that local people wish to have

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<sup>245</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/espoirscoronthie>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2010

a say in their politics. While expressions of oppositional voice have long been silenced in Conakry, both through censorship and self-censorship, over the past few years people in the city have begun to publicly express opposing points of view. While the threat of political violence and instability remains, the recent flood of political commentary and oppositional voices on radio airwaves and private newspapers shows a public hungry for new perspectives and ideas. As McGovern argues, this change crystallized around the time of Guinea's fiftieth anniversary of independence, when public anger at government corruption hit new highs (2010). As the theatre director Fifi Bangoura suggested to me, perhaps there was finally enough distance from the Touré era for Guinean people to be able to critically examine their past and its legacy on the present. At the same time, new technologies such as the internet and mobile phones are allowing increased contact with Guinean members of the diaspora and the emergence of thriving political commentary through blogs, news websites and similar forums. In this new atmosphere of debate and dissent, the long-standing norms of silence and guardedness are being challenged.

Returning to Noelle-Neumann's theory of the spiral of silence, it seems to me that in contemporary Conakry, a reverse process is beginning to take place. After decades of silence, in which the media was controlled by the government and musicians only sang for the state, the 'silent majority' are now beginning to speak out in opposition. Perhaps, as Noelle-Neumann suggests, the threat of isolation is a motivating factor, although here it is on a larger scale than the individual. In the Guinean case, the country has a long history of isolation, a position that was secured by Sékou Touré through the systematic closing of trade and diplomatic ties and the blocking of information from in and out of the country as he became more paranoid in his rule. This historical isolation reverberates

today and, as I have noted, people in Conakry are keenly aware that their country is little known or understood outside its borders. There is a growing, loud urgency to the sense that change must happen now for everyday life to improve and increasingly, local people wish to be an active part of the process.

As I have argued in this chapter, musicians so far seem one-step behind these changes, however, continuing to adhere to the cautious and conservative lyrical practices of the past. As a result, music has seemed at times to be irrelevant to the current situation and, as I noted, few people criticize musicians for not protesting – largely because they do not expect them to. Yet a change is taking place in music as well. While the example of Les Espoirs’ statement on its website might seem timid, this statement speaks to a growing sense amongst young musicians that they cannot remain silent, particularly as they see others expressing their voice. Musicians such as the Paris-based Alpha Wess have emboldened those within Guinea to begin more directly tackling political issues, while the views on Guinean radio and in newspapers show that a new ‘spiral of voice’ is beginning to emerge.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have examined the intersection between the musical practices and expressed ideals of young musicians in Conakry today. Focusing on a new urban traditional Susu genre, I have discussed how young musicians within Conakry remain largely conservative and cautious in their lyrics, yet are contesting musical and social conventions in other ways. Thus, as I have described, these musicians express their

politics and perform their aspirations through their instruments, their matted hair and their rebellious talk.

Despite these stances, however, in 2009 as violence escalated under the military regime in Guinea, young urban musicians largely remained silent, instead quietly accommodating the regime much as other musicians in Conakry. In contrast, a group of musicians in the Guinean diaspora in Paris released an incendiary song condemning the regime for its brutality. These two musical responses – silence and dissent – took place across a cultural and geographic distance. Yet, as songs of protest circulate, and as world music commentators continue to frame African music in political terms, young musicians in Conakry face increasing expectations to raise their voices in protest, as the example of the group *Espoirs de Coronthie* shows.

The behavior of urban traditional musicians in Conakry does not fit neatly into the narrative of musical heroism promoted by world music commentators. As I have described, young musicians in Conakry largely accommodate the structures of state power, keeping a low profile and maintaining silence in the face of political violence. Yet, as I have argued, in other ways these musicians are also engaged in forms of play as they attempt to negotiate the precarious world in which they live. By so doing, they quietly push the boundaries of the politics of silence, signaling their aspirations, their attempts to balance expectations, their desire to make choices about their lives.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that popular music has long been intertwined with authoritarian politics in Conakry, Guinea. In the post-independence era, the former president Sékou Touré cultivated a political culture of secrecy and control, in which all perceived opponents were ruthlessly persecuted. Touré exploited local norms which value concealing knowledge and the instruments of power. A key component in his strategy was to shape the very language in which Guinean people spoke, and thus to exert not just physical but also psychological control. While Touré championed and generously supported new genres of music and performance, musicians were also expected to abide by the norms of ‘revolutionary realism’ in singing their support for Touré. Since his death in 1984, musicians have continued to ally themselves closely to the state as the legacy of the Revolution endures. As I have examined here, following a military coup d’état in December 2008, musicians in Conakry demonstrated their support for the new regime, either by singing in its praise or by remaining cautious and quiet in the face of state violence. Yet, as I have shown in this thesis, musicians have also pursued their own artistic and professional agendas, both in the Touré era and under the military regime in 2009. While musicians in Conakry sing in support of the ruling authorities and largely refrain from dissent, I have argued that these stances do not simply represent subjugation to state authority and ideology. Rather, musicians are engaged in many polyvalent practices and performances as they seek to balance their aspirations with the evolving political and cultural circumstances in which they live. In so doing, musicians in Conakry

are attempting to exert control over their own lives and livelihoods, as they push the socio-political boundaries in strategic and imaginative ways.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the dynamics I examine here are not static. Since the end of my fieldwork period in Conakry in 2009, there have been significant developments in the political and musical landscape. It can now be hoped that the CNDD regime represented a last gasp of Guinean authoritarianism. In late 2009, the regime's leader, Moussa Dadis Camara, stepped down from power following in-fighting within the military and an attempt on his life by one of his senior officials. A transition government headed by the CNDD's vice president, Sékouba Konaté, took over and paved the way for the country's first ever democratic elections, held in 2010. Although it is too soon to celebrate the success of Guinean democracy, the explosive burn-out of the CNDD regime suggests that such a model of governance is becoming harder to maintain today.

Changes can be seen in music too. In Guinea, the flourishing of private radio stations and nightclubs, the success of non-state-sponsored musicians and groups, the impact of the world music industry and the continuing influence of *jeliya*, mean that the state is no longer synonymous with Guinean culture as Touré tried to contrive. Moreover, lyrical practices are beginning to address politics more openly. In 2011, for example, the urban traditional group Les Espoirs de Coronthie released a song 'Justice' calling on Guinean leaders to avoid further crises and violence and bring the country forward. While the song did not directly name members of the regime, it nonetheless is indicative of a greater willingness to speak out in song. Similarly, the *jeli* singer Sékouba Bambino together with the Senegalese reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly recently released a song, 'Unité en Guinée', calling for politicians to unite their supporters rather than playing on

ethnocentric discourses. Songs such as these represent a significant shift from the heavily praise-oriented practices of the past, in which musicians avoided political critique.

Silence is perhaps becoming an outdated value in Conakry today.

It is important not to let these songs obscure a more nuanced understanding of popular music in Conakry, however. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the practices and stances of musicians in the city are deliberately involute as they seek to negotiate the volatility and possibilities around them. In a precarious environment, musicians simultaneously pursue a number of strategies to address both the threat of poverty and violence as well as the values of silence that have long shaped local social life. Rather than claiming popular musicians in Conakry either as heroic activists or helpless tools of propaganda, I have tried to show here that they engage in a wide and at times contradictory range of practices. My aim is to move beyond the commonly found representations of African music as progressive and political, and instead to show its complexity – and the complexity of the musicians who perform it.

In this regards, a number of questions remain unanswered and suggest areas for future inquiry. For one, while I discuss the politics of music in the diaspora in Chapter Four of this thesis, further research is needed to explore the practices and perspectives of Guinean musicians in Paris. While I have considered ‘diasporic dissent’ in response to the massacre of 28<sup>th</sup> September 2009, I was not able to interview the musicians involved and therefore could not comment on their perspectives, intentions or aspirations. Thus, more needs to be known about the exact nature of these musicians’ cultural proximity and distance from Guinea; how the politics of guardedness and silence shapes music-making

well beyond Guinea's border, such as amongst the Guinean diaspora in Dakar and Paris; and what sorts of expectations and pressures musicians in the diaspora face.

Related to these questions, further research is also needed on the role of France and its cultural agencies in shaping musical practice in Conakry since the end of Touré's Revolution. As I showed in Chapters Two and Three, the musical nationalism of Touré's Revolution continues to capture musicians' imagination – thus he is remembered as a 'man of culture' – while liberalization has dramatically reshaped the economics of music in the city today. In their search for new forms of patronage, many musicians have turned to sing praises for powerful individuals, a practice that is at once a source of pleasure and anxiety. At the same time, French cultural agencies and administrators have invested in certain types of local music, often involving young musicians such as the neo-traditional *jeli* group Ba Cissoko. The Franco-Guinean Cultural Centre (CCFG) is a key player here, providing performance opportunities, workshops and resources to these musicians, while also encouraging certain French-driven production values and aesthetics. In this way, world music has come home to Conakry. Research into these developments would consider more closely the role of the CCFG as well as the French Embassy in Conakry; the experiences and expectations of musicians who work with these agencies; and the impact on the sounds, styles and lyrical practices of other musicians in Conakry who are aware of the opportunities that French cultural agencies may provide.

Furthermore, as noted, dramatic political changes have taken place in Guinea since the end of my fieldwork, with the fall of the CNDD military regime and the installation of the country's first democratically-elected president, Alpha Condé, in December 2010. Research into music and post-authoritarian transition would examine the

ways in which long-standing practices of praise-singing, silence and the accommodation of power have been affected by these changes. In particular, research needs to be conducted on musical responses to the new government, as well as memories and interpretations of praise songs to the previous military regime. Moreover, more needs to be known about the developing ‘spiral of voice’ that I have described in Chapter Four, as the new atmosphere of public discussion and debate addresses and is further shaped by the transition to democracy. Questions about Sékou Touré and his continuing legacy would be central to this inquiry, considering how public conversation on the Revolution is evolving.

Ethnographic inquiry into music and authoritarianism in the postcolonial African state allows for an understanding of politics and power from the bottom-up, by foregrounding the experiences and subjectivities of musicians as they interact with state power. As I have suggested, such an understanding is essential to moving beyond both cynical discourses of Afro-pessimism and romanticized representations of African resistance heroes. Instead, as scholars increasingly contend, we must acknowledge African people as complex, ‘three-dimensional’ beings rather than as caricatured villains or victims.

In recent years, interest in applied scholarship has proliferated within ethnomusicology, with conferences, journal issues and books examining the ways in which music studies can actively serve the communities whom they examine. Like many people in the field, I am committed to finding and pursuing practical applications of scholarly knowledge. Yet in order for such applications to be truly effective, we must question our commonly held

assumptions about music's inherent tendency for social good. In a recent study on music and war in Kosova, Jane Sugarman details the ways in which music both promotes and strives to end conflict. Sugarman concludes with the following argument:

My sense is, however, that without a broader, concerted effort, musical productions are not sufficient to address problems such as endemic corruption or violence. In the short term at least, music would seem to have been far more effective in promoting the war in Kosova than it has been in promoting postwar peace. To understand why, we must turn again to the notion of national 'myth.' As elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, wartime productions were able to tap into a vast repertoire of nationalist imagery and discourses that have fundamentally shaped the beliefs that individuals hold regarding who they are. Productions such as 'Boll ma' [part of a campaign to end violence] have a far more daunting task: to prompt individuals to question those beliefs and to reimagine themselves and their societies through new images and discourses. Although music can play an important role in this process, it is a task that will ultimately require efforts far beyond musical production. But it is the most important task that national groups through the region currently face. (2010: 40-1)

Sugarman's statement resonates strongly with my own observations and feelings about music in Conakry. While recent songs such as 'Justice' and 'Unité en Guinée' challenge the long-standing norms of praise and silence in the city, these songs by themselves will change very little. Similarly, Bob White notes that in Kinshasa, critical songs in fact may have helped to further entrench authoritarian rule by keeping resistance "in the realm of the unspeakable and unsaid" (2008: 226).

My seeming cynicism comes in part from three years' experience as a humanitarian worker in West Africa. Working with refugees in Guinea, I organised and participated in numerous cultural events involving music and performance. Looking back at these efforts, however, it seems to me that such events had little to offer beyond a feel-good factor of the moment. The main problem was in maintaining a sustained level of action and attention, which was unfortunately never achieved. Instead, musical

performance offered a momentary diversion that suited the aims of donors and agencies, but did little to change things on the ground for the people whom it purported to serve.

This is not to say that music – and music scholarship – cannot play a meaningful role. On the contrary, I believe that music is fundamentally intertwined with the political and cannot merely be considered as superfluous to social life. As Sugarman argues, however, musical initiatives must be part of much longer and more extensive efforts. Ethnographic research on music leads to complex awareness of local social and political realities, essential for finding effective solutions. But work must be done collaboratively with local actors as well as scholars and practitioners from other fields, so that problems can be properly understood and solutions found.

In Conakry, as I have attempted to show in this thesis, local people have ideas about their history, politics, culture, moral values and music. Yet the politics of silence that I have described here has long served to ‘mute’ the expression of these ideas, as guardedness and opacity have become means for musicians and others to keep a low profile in a precarious situation. As I have suggested, silence is an act of agency for musicians in light of prevailing cultural and historical norms in Guinea. Yet, these norms are not fixed, and indeed the prevailing political circumstances have recently greatly altered. It remains to be seen how these practices and cultural aesthetics will evolve in Guinea in the coming years. Democracy is emerging in the country for the first time, while younger musicians are pushing the social boundaries, just as previous generations did before them.

My friends in Conakry are hopeful, overall. *Doni doni kononi da nya na*, Cheick Kouyaté said to me, quoting Bambeya Jazz's old song in a new context: Little by little, the bird makes its nest.

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