Guitari Foli: Stylistic Variation in Maninka Guitar Playing in Guinea and Mali

By

Samuel Dickey

Faculty Advisor: Professor Eric Charry

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Middletown, Connecticut May 2014
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I have to acknowledge the crucial role played by my advisor, Eric Charry, in guiding me through the process of writing this thesis. His thorough attention to detail and critical eye helped me immensely and always kept me honest.

I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to all my research associates in the U.S., France, and Mali: Moussa “Mafà” Diabaté, Aboubacar “Badian” Diabaté, Ibrahima Soumano, Mamady Kouyaté, Djelimady Tounkara, and Fantamady Kouyaté. Listening to and taking lessons from these guitarists was the catalyst for my course of study, and I am immensely grateful for the effect they have had on my life as well as for their patient instruction.

Furthermore, I thank Kassim Koné for his help and insight regarding linguistic questions, and Banning Eyre for helping with personnel questions and biographical info.

Finally, I thank my family for ceaselessly supporting me in this endeavor as they have in every other. I owe them everything.
Table of Contents

Introduction.........................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1- Guitarist Biographies and Thoughts on Maninka

Pedagogy.............................................................................................................................11

Chapter 2- Jeli Guitar Playing in Guinea.................................................................18

Chapter 3- Jeli Guitar Playing in Mali.................................................................28

Chapter 4- Comparative Repertoire Studies: Soundiata, Subaromaloya, and Toubaka.................................................................56

Conclusion..........................................................................................................................67

Bibliography.......................................................................................................................72

Discography.........................................................................................................................73

Interviews and Lessons........................................................................................................74

Videography.........................................................................................................................75
Introduction

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the music of West Africa has been steadily gaining international popularity. Today, with more and more West African artists making their way onto the world stage, the trend shows no signs of slowing down. More than any other instrument, the guitar has been the vehicle of choice for moving West African musical traditions into international music markets. However, the guitar has not only contributed to the dissemination of traditional styles, but has been seamlessly integrated into these traditions as well.

The focus of this study is on one musical tradition that has embraced and integrated the guitar to a remarkable extent: that of the Maninka musical-verbal artisan known as the jeli. More specifically, the focus is on the stylistic variations that occur among guitarists in Guinea and Mali, two countries encompassing the core area of the vast Mali Empire that dominated the region from approximately 1230-1600 c.e., and the countries of origin for the vast majority of notable Maninka guitarists. Through the process of integration the guitar has undergone in Guinea and Mali, virtuosic and unique styles of guitar playing have evolved, leading to “the acceptance of the guitar as a bona fide jeli instrument.”

---

1 Charry (2000: 304)
2 Possible reasons for this are too numerous to fully discuss here, but one is western perception of the kora as an aesthetically pleasing and “authentic” African instrument as opposed to the guitar.
3 Duràn (2013-vid)
4 For a detailed study of Cuban influence in Senegalese music of the post-colonial era, see Shain (2002).
5 He is also the son of the world’s most renowned kora player, Toumani Diabaté.
6 Knight (1973: 68-69)
7 Ibid (1973: 70)
8 One notable exception is the 1993 album featuring Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba
This integration process has involved jeli transferring the music and playing techniques of their three main indigenous melodic instruments onto the guitar. These three instruments are the *kora* (a twenty-one stringed harp), the *bala* (a xylophone with gourd resonators), and the *koni* or *ngoni* (a small spike lute, usually with 3-7 strings). The national border between Guinea and Mali established under colonial rule has resulted in fascinating differences in how jeli guitarists in the two countries have adapted these instruments to the guitar. While they share common heritage and a great deal of repertoire, the bala has been the primary force in shaping Guinean guitar playing, and the regional dominance of the ngoni and, later, the kora in Mali has been the primary influence on the guitar style of jelis there. These differences are not always clear-cut, as many guitarists from Guinea are aware of ngoni styles and able to approximate them, and many Malian guitarists, especially those playing in urban dance bands, draw heavily from the bala as well as the ngoni and kora. However, guitarists from Guinea and Mali acknowledge these distinctions in style along national and instrumental lines themselves, even as they are quick to point out the fluidity of these boundaries. While this fluidity demonstrates the transnational unity of Maninka culture, the question of what particular styles a guitarist specializes in can generally be traced to their nationality and personal experience of living in one country or the other.

An important consideration in the study of Maninka guitar, or any number of other African art forms, is international influence. In his dissertation on Benga
guitarists from Kenya, Ian Eagleson identifies shifting views on the influence of
colonialism and the West in African music scholarship:

Where work on African music had, until the 1980s, focused on documenting pre-colonial
indigenous tradition (and in the process contributing to its reification as static and primordial),
more recent work has taken an approach that considers music as a fluid expression of popular
culture. This has encouraged researchers to expand the narrowly defined scope of rural,
ethnic, tradition and to consider how musical practices have interacted with a number of
factors, including politics, globalization, mass media, and the construction of contemporary
cultural identities. (Eagleson 2012 : 13)

These issues are well worth remembering, especially since the institution of the jeli
itself invites the kind of reification Eagleson identifies in early scholarship. The
institution of the jeli dates back to at least the 13th century, and many jelis claim that
their lineage reaches all the way back to Surahata, a companion of the prophet
Muhammed. The mystique, prestige, and history of this class of professional,
hereditary musicians have helped contribute to inaccurate perceptions of Maninka
music as “static and primordial” rather than dynamic and cosmopolitan. Furthermore,
with their traditional dependence on powerful and/or wealthy patrons for
remuneration, jelis are sometimes characterized as a regressive cultural force.

There is some truth in this characterization of jelis as a relatively conservative,
traditional social institution. Although technology like guitars and drum machines are
readily embraced by jelis, their music tends towards change through subtle, gradual
shifts rather than dramatic, revolutionary movements. Furthermore, it must be
acknowledged that apart from Djelimady Tounkara’s work with AfroCubism and Bill
Frisell, the majority of collaborations with non-African artists have involved kora players rather than guitarists.\(^2\) While I acknowledge these limits to the cosmopolitanism of the music of Maninka guitarists, one of my goals in this study is to demonstrate the ways in which the guitar has contributed to opening the tradition up, both to western influence and to the development of new local genres. Although the music explored is exclusively from within the Maninka cultural sphere, the variety evident in Maninka guitar playing is a perfect example of the remarkable dynamism of African music. Rather than being a corrupting western influence, the guitar has been fully assimilated into Maninka musical practices while simultaneously re-shaping them. Offering a perspective on the guitar’s place in Maninka jeli music, Malian guitarist Lassi Diabaté says, “the guitar is the most difficult of all instruments because on the guitar you can imitate all the other instruments, but there are certain sounds that only the guitar can produce.”\(^3\) This indicates how thoroughly the guitar has permeated the music of Maninka jelis, serving as both a capable stand-in for traditional instruments and a foreign instrument with a unique voice. Other examples of this dynamism and hybridity in Maninka music include the urban dance orchestras of the post-colonial era that drew extensively on the music of Cuba\(^4\) and young musicians like Sidiki Diabaté, who holds a unique position as both a talented kora

\(^2\) Possible reasons for this are too numerous to fully discuss here, but one is western perception of the kora as an aesthetically pleasing and “authentic” African instrument as opposed to the guitar.

\(^3\) Duràn (2013-vid)

\(^4\) For a detailed study of Cuban influence in Senegalese music of the post-colonial era, see Shain (2002).
player and a notable beat-maker in Malian hip hop. The guitarists covered in this study include both older guitarists who pioneered these playing styles and younger guitarists who are taking these ways of playing in new directions. Through studying this group of guitarists, I aim to give a sense not only of where the tradition of Maninka jeli guitar playing has been, but also where it is headed.

In this study, I draw on my work with Guinean guitarists Ibrahima Soumano and Mamady Kouyaté and Malian guitarists Aboubacar “Badian” Diabaté and Moussa “Mafà” Diabaté. I also worked extensively with guitarist Fantamady Kouyaté, who presents an interesting synthesis of styles as a guitarist of Guinean origin who has lived and worked in Mali for decades, assimilating elements of Malian guitar styles in the process. My studies with these guitarists are supplemented by transcriptions of commercial recordings of Guinean guitarist Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté and Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté and Malian guitarists Bouba Sacko and Djelimady Tounkara.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the guitarists covered in this study. Biographical details and information on career trajectories are essential to understanding the music produced by these guitarists and how it fits into the larger context of Maninka guitar playing. I will discuss my own experiences studying with some of these guitarists and how they relate to pedagogical approaches among Maninka jelis.

---

5 He is also the son of the world’s most renowned kora player, Toumani Diabaté.
Chapter 2 is an in-depth look at how elements of bala music are adapted to the guitar in urban dance orchestras of Guinea. Mamady “Djeliké” Kouyaté, Ibrahima Soumano, Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté, and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté will serve as the exemplars of this style through interviews and transcriptions. Transcriptions of extended solos by Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté will be analyzed.

Chapter 3 examines Malian guitar styles and how Malian guitarists draw from the ngoni and kora as well as the bala. Guitarists studied as exemplars of Malian guitar style will include Djelimady Tounkara, Modibo Kouyaté, Bouba Sacko, Mamadou Tounkara, Foussenou Diabaté, and Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté. The distinction in style between the “orchestral” style of Djelimady Tounkara and the uniquely Malian acoustic bajourou guitar style played by Bouba Sacko, Aboubacar “Badian” Diabaté, and Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté will also be addressed. Interviews and transcriptions will be used to examine these guitarists’ styles. Two extended solos by Djelimady Tounkara on the piece Mansa will serve as a case study of the differences between the orchestral and bajourou styles, as well as highlighting the differences and similarities in soloing styles between Malian and Guinean guitarists.

Chapter 4 will directly compare transcriptions of selected repertoire to highlight the differences in approach and style between Guinean and Malian guitarists. The pieces studied are Soundiata, Subaromaloya, and Toubaka. Guitarists studied include Djelimady Tounkara, Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté, Ibrahima Soumano, Manfila Kanté, and Fantamady Kouyaté.
The conclusion offers some thoughts on the nature of the stylistic variations explored in this study, as well as the changing nature of Maninka music as a whole. An important issue in the latter discussion is the increasing role of producers in shaping the music as it continues to move into international markets. Lucy Duràn’s work as a producer is cited as an example of how this role can be effectively managed in a way that addresses both local concerns and foreign tastes, producing recordings that are popular both in West Africa and abroad.

A Note on Musical Terminology

I use the English terms “accompaniment” and “solo” frequently throughout this study, but doing so requires a brief discussion of their definitions and history of use in Maninka music. I have observed that the French equivalents accompagnement and solo are used regularly by jelis today, even when speaking in Maninkakan, Bamanankan, or other Mandé languages. These French nouns have come to function as approximate equivalents for the Senegambian Mandinka terms kumbengo and birimintingo, which are mostly associated with kora music. Roderic Knight defines the former as “a fixed ostinato, usually quite short (two to eight seconds), that is repeated with subtle rhythmic and melodic variations for the duration of the performance,” and the latter as “improvisatory passages containing ornamentation of the basic kumbengo, instrumental renditions of the donkilo vocal line, or unrelated melodic material that is part of [the performer’s] standard repertoire of formulas to be used at such points.”\(^6\)

\(^6\) Knight (1973 : 68-69)
Michael Coolen gives a similar description of these concepts in the context of xalam (the Wolof version of the ngoni) music, using the Wolof terms *fodet* and *tukull*:

The Wolof divide the music played on the xalam into two parts, the *fodet* (basic pattern) and the *tukull* (the solo improvisation). The *fodet* is a basic melodic and rhythmic pattern, of a given length, played repeatedly in accompaniment to a specific song and the story associated with that song. Sometimes the *fodet* is the main melody of the song, while at other times it is a paraphrase of that melody or even a countermelody to that song. The *tukull* is an instrumental improvisatory interlude which most commonly occurs between versions of the basic pattern. These interludes not only allow the xalamkat to display his prowess, but also permit the vocalist to rest. (Coolen 1979: 139, 141)

One can see how these terms could be switched out for *accompagnement* and *solo*, but the concept of extended soloing (perhaps brought in from some form of jazz) is still a somewhat new notion for Maninka musicians. As noted by Knight, the ability to provide an accompaniment that is rhythmically assured and smoothly executed remains the most important aspect of musicianship for jeli instrumentalists.\(^7\)

This is reinforced in the conception of “soloing,” which often refers to brief melodic departures from the accompaniment. As noted by Coolen these melodic departures are often played by an accompanist during the pauses in the singer’s phrasing.

This shift in terminology towards the use of “solo” and “accompaniment” reflects shifts in practice towards exclusively instrumental performances and the Western model of an extended solo improvisation. The beginning of this shift can be traced to recordings from the 1960s and 70s, when extended guitar and saxophone solos begin to appear on recordings by urban dance orchestras from Guinea and Mali.

\(^7\) Ibid (1973 : 70)
This trend has continued up to the present day with orchestras featuring mixes of western instruments (e.g., electric guitar, keyboard, electric bass, drumset) and traditional instruments (e.g., ngoni, kora, bala, djembe, talking drum). A foremost example of this kind of playing in the modern day is Toumani Diabaté’s Symmetric Orchestra, in which the vocals and extended instrumental solos are featured more or less equally, and the virtuosity of the soloists is pushed to the extreme.

Recordings of ensembles featuring traditional instruments accompanying a vocalist from the 1960s and 70s do not display extended solo playing, and even today these types of ensembles tend to favor the traditional model of instrumentalists filling around a vocalist’s phrases rather than extended instrumental solos. Nevertheless, a shift can be seen in modern ensembles towards a higher frequency of fills and a greater emphasis on instrumental virtuosity. In light of this history, the reader should bear in mind that the terms “accompaniment” and “solo” still carry different connotations and functions in the musical world of Maninka jelis. Depending on context, either the English “accompaniment” and “solo” or the Maninka *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* will be used in this study.

In order to express the polyrhythmic nature of the music covered in this study, the transcriptions contained herein are written to clearly show every pulse within a given beat, including rests. Due to the fact that much of this music can be felt and

---

8 One notable exception is the 1993 album featuring Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba Sacko accompanying vocalist Lanfia Diabaté (Bajourou 1993-disc), which features extended solos by both Tounkara and Sacko. This may be a reflection of Tounkara’s background as the bandleader and soloist for the Rail Band, Mali’s premier dance orchestra.
counted as both binary (two pulses per beat) and ternary (three pulses per beat), I have notated the majority of the beats as ternary in order to depict this more dense level of rhythm even when the notes played suggest binary beats. In rare instances, certain pieces (such as Taara) may be felt as quaternary (four pulses per beat).
Chapter 1- Guitarist Biographies and Thoughts on Maninka Pedagogy

Due to the important roles played by geography, early musical training, career path, and age in shaping the individual styles of Maninka jeli guitarists, a familiarity with a guitarist’s biography can give insight into how they have arrived at their style of playing. In order to give context to the music and guitarists covered in this study, this chapter functions as an introduction to these guitarists. I will also clarify the nature of my studies with some of them.

Ibrahima Soumano was born in 1952 in the Guinean town of Kankan. His musical training started in 1963 when he began learning the bala and, later, the kora. His family includes the famous singer and kora player Mory Kanté, and Soumano credits Kanté with motivating him to learn the kora. He began playing the guitar in 1967 as part of a local children’s orchestra. Soumano’s professional career began to take shape when he joined the Orchestre de Kankan a year later, playing the bala. He soon began playing guitar in the orchestra. In 1971, the orchestra was nationalized and moved to Conakry, taking Soumano with it. Since then, he has played guitar and done arrangements for a number of Guinean vocalists, including Sekouba “Bambino” Diabaté, Fodé Kouyaté, Kerfala Kanté, Oumou Dioubaté, and Missia Saran Diabaté. He also plays bala on Malian vocalist Kasse Mady Diabaté’s classic album Kela Tradition (1990-disc). He lives in Paris, but also frequently visits New York City. I studied occasionally with Soumano from 2011 to 2013 in New York City.

---

9 Soumano (personal communication- 2014)
Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté, born in 1944, may be the most widely acclaimed guitarist that Guinea has produced. Bembeya studied the guitar with Kerfala “Papa” Diabaté, who was a mentor to many great Guinean guitarists of the post-colonial era. From Papa, Bembeya learned how to use the full range of the guitar and play with a plectrum. All of these elements would be crucial to the Guinean orchestral style that Bembeya helped create. Bembeya played with the regional Orchestre de Beyla, which was nationalized in 1966, taking the name Bembeya Jazz National and moving to Conakry. Bembeya’s work with Bembeya Jazz National has defined his career, although he has also recorded and toured under his own name.\(^\text{10}\)

Mamady “Djeliké” Kouyaté was born in 1955 in Kouroussa, Guinea. He began playing the guitar in 1968, and joined a regional group in 1971. Around this time he also played with the Horoya Band in Conakry, and was a major force in the revival of Bembeya Jazz National in the 1990s. Around this same time, Kouyaté began to clash with the government of President Lansana Konté. Kouyaté felt that the government was not adequately equipping and paying the musicians of the national bands. Being seen as an agitator, Kouyaté went to prison several times, and finally fled to the U.S. in 2004.\(^\text{11}\) He currently lives in New Haven, Connecticut and leads a band called the Mandingo Ambassadors, which plays regularly in Brooklyn, New York. I played in the Mandingo Ambassadors from 2011 to 2013, learning Guinean guitar repertoire from Kouyaté in the process.

\(^\text{10}\) Charry (2000: 257, 260)
\(^\text{11}\) Kouyaté (personal communication- 2011)
Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté was born in 1938. It’s not clear exactly where he grew up, but it very well may have been in Faranah with his older brother Kerfala “Papa” Diabaté, who also taught him to play guitar. Docteur’s most notable work was with the national orchestra Balla et Ses Balladins. After leaving the band, he spent a few years in Abidjan with his brother Papa before returning to Conakry in 1986. He lived in Conakry until he died in either 2007 or 2008.¹²

Manfila Kanté was born in 1946 and grew up in Kankan. He moved to Abidjan as a teenager and then to Mali in 1969. Kanté became well-known through his role as lead guitarist and arranger of Les Ambassadeurs, collaborating with vocalist Salif Keita. Kanté stopped working with Les Ambassadeurs in the early 1980s, and later recorded a couple of acoustic albums under his own name.¹³ Kanté passed away in 2011.

Djelimady Tounkara was born in 1947 in Kita, Mali. He played the djembe, dundun, and ngoni briefly before becoming enamored with the guitar. Moving to Bamako as a young man, Tounkara played with the National Orchestra under the direction of multi-instrumentalist Keletigui Diabaté in the late 1960s before joining the Rail Band.¹⁴ It was with the Rail Band that Tounkara gained national and, eventually, international recognition. In addition to touring Europe and the U.S. with the Rail Band, Tounkara has recorded and toured with an acoustic project under his own name. He also participated in Afrocubism with some of the most celebrated

---

¹² Soumano (personal communication- 2014)  
¹⁴ Charry (2000 : 272)
contemporary Malian musicians, as well as Cuban guitarist and vocalist Eliades Ochoa of Buena Vista Social Club fame. Another collaboration that is particularly important in this study is Tounkara’s album with Malian bajourou guitarist Bouba Sacko. I studied with Tounkara in Bamako, Mali in 2010.

Bouba Sacko was born in either 1955 or 1956. His father was the director of the Ensemble Instrumentale du Mali, so he grew up hearing Maninka folklore and traditional instruments, as well as playing percussion in theater shows. When he started playing guitar he began attempting to emulate the sounds of the kora and ngoni. He went on to work extensively with vocalist Kandia Kouyaté, and also played with Ami Koita, Fanta Damba, his wife Djessira Koné, and many others. At a certain point in his career, he was the most sought-after guitarist for accompanying singers in the bajourou style, and was also a talented arranger. Sacko passed away in 2011.

Aboubacar “Badian” Diabaté was born in Mourdiah (278 kilometers northwest of Bamako), Mali in 1973. Growing up, he frequently moved between Mourdiah, where his maternal grandparents lived, and Bamako with his parents. During this time, he learned the taman (talking drum), ngoni, and eventually the guitar. In 1986 he moved to his father’s town of Kati just outside Bamako, and later attended the National Institute of Arts in Bamako. Since then, Badian has built a career accompanying many of the greatest female vocalists in Mali, such as Kandia Kouyaté, Bako Dagnon, Ami Koita, and his wife, Néné Soumano. Badian is one of

\[15\] Eyre (1993 : 1)
the most respected Malian guitarists in the bajourou style. I studied briefly with Badian in Bamako in 2010, and interviewed him in New York City in 2013.

Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté is Badian’s cousin. The two are related via their mothers, who are sisters. Mafa was also born in Mourdiah in 1973. Like Badian, Mafa learned the taman, ngoni, and guitar as a child and moved to Bamako in 1979. While not as high-profile as his cousin, Mafa has worked extensively as a bajourou guitarist accompanying vocalists, and the two have developed nearly identical styles of playing. Mafa moved to New York in 2010, and I worked extensively with him in my research on the bajourou style of guitar playing in 2013.

My studies with these guitarists usually took the form of private lessons for which I paid an hourly rate. None of the music I learned was written down. I was instead expected to watch my instructor play a repeating accompaniment for a piece, figure out how to reproduce the accompaniment as quickly as possible, and then steadily maintain the accompaniment until it was time to move on to another accompaniment or another piece. I never used notation as an aid in memorizing pieces. I would simply remember what I had been taught by playing it repeatedly, record the material from a lesson directly afterward, or record the lesson itself. In some cases, the use of a recording device allowed me to expedite my learning process by recording more accompaniments and pieces than I was capable of mastering during one lesson, then using the recordings to practice later.

The format of my lessons was in itself a little foreign to Maninka musical pedagogy. Growing up in families full of musicians, Maninka jelis tend to learn more
through total immersion and osmosis rather than formal lessons, although some jelis
do acknowledge individuals as being important in their musical education. I saw this
informality in action while studying with the guitarist Mama Sissoko, when boys
from the neighborhood came to play guitar with us as I was taking a lesson in front of
Sissoko’s house. Sissoko was fairly brusque with the boys, not giving them much
attention except to tell them when they were not playing an accompaniment correctly,
and occasionally taking a guitar from one of them in exasperation to demonstrate the
part correctly. While many mentorships within jeli families may be more hands-on, it
struck me that these boys most likely came to Sissoko’s house all the time and
pestered him for guitar lessons, and that over time it could be a part of an effective
learning process.

Furthermore, many Maninka jelis have gladly adopted the model of formal
lessons for an hourly fee when dealing with westerners, and this idea of formalized
instruction is even finding its way into pedagogy within the culture. Toumani
Diabaté’s school, located at one of his houses in Bamako, is an example of this shift.
Staying at Diabaté’s house, I saw a rotating cast of musicians come many days out of
the week to teach lessons on bala, kora, ngoni, djembe, and taman (a small hourglass-
shaped squeeze drum). Some of the students learning instruments traditionally
associated with jelis were also not of jeli background. In these ways, Diabaté’s school
represents both a shift in pedagogical methods as well as a shift in attitudes regarding
jeli ownership of certain instruments.
Regarding my decision to avoid notating any of the music I learned and instead rely on memory and recording devices, I chose this method mostly because it was how I saw the musicians around me learning. Although many contemporary jeli instrumentalists use solfège syllables to refer to notes, the ability to read and/or write music is still extremely rare. Apart from memorization through repetition, the proliferation of cell phones with sound recording capabilities allows many young Maninka musicians to use short cell phone recordings of accompaniments as references when learning.

In my opinion, this rote learning technique is the best way to learn Maninka music due to several factors. These include the rhythmic stability that comes from repetition of an accompaniment, the ear training benefits of learning by listening to a teacher or recording, and the limited utility of western notation in expressing the nuances of rhythm, articulation, and technique in Maninka music. This approach has been an essential part of my study of Maninka jeli guitar playing, and although I have transcribed and notated the music in this study, the limited capabilities of western notation in conveying the subtleties of the music are worth bearing in mind.
Chapter 2- Jeli Guitar Playing in Guinea

There is little documentation on exactly how the guitar first came to Guinea, but it may have been introduced by soldiers returning from World War I in the early 20th century. The first orchestras including guitar were formed in the 1920s and 1930s, and they played mostly European music. However, they would occasionally play adaptations of traditional music. Some musicians at this time studied with French teachers at the École William Ponty in Senegal, where there was a dance orchestra composed of students. Many alumni of the École Ponty would go on to play vital roles in Guinean music, starting groups such as Les Ballets Africains and performing in government orchestras. When commercial recordings of Maninka musicians began appearing in the 1950s, acoustic guitar was present on many of them. However, the electric guitar would not find its way into Guinean music until after independence.16

The national and regional orchestras formed after independence were charged with promoting a national identity tied to indigenous culture, and thus folkloric material became a much more prominent part of the repertoire than it had been in the pre-independence era.17 Both the coastal location of Conakry, Guinea’s capital, and the prevalence of the bala in upper Guinea had an effect on how the guitarists in these newly formed orchestras went about adapting this folkloric material. Guinea’s coastal region is home to the Susu people, another sub-group of the Mandé family who have

17 For an in-depth history of the national and regional bands of Guinea, as well as a look at the cultural politics of the post-independence era, see Counsel (2006) and Cohen (2011).
a strong historical association with the bala. Many lead guitarists in these post-colonial bands, such as Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté of Balla et Ses Balladins and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté of Bembeya Jazz National, come from families with history in upper Guinea and also worked in Conakry. As a result of the dominant bala traditions in both of these regions, these guitarists developed styles that drew heavily on the bala for both solo and accompaniment playing.

The bala has a distinctive style of playing associated with it, one that is marked by steady polyphonic activity. Many accompaniments feature uninterrupted patterns of even strokes that outline the rhythmic and harmonic structure of a piece, often using a form of dyads (harmonic groupings of two notes that may be either sounded simultaneously or sequentially). The interplay of the two hands in these accompaniments often creates complex cross-rhythms and multiple melodic lines. Many of these characteristics can be seen in the bala accompaniment played by Ibrahima Soumano on the traditional piece *Kaira* (Figure 1). The accompaniment can be heard either as two separate melodic lines moving polyphonically or as a composite whole. The harmonic scheme of *Kaira* is shown above Soumano’s accompaniment for reference. *Kaira*’s harmonic cycle is built on the dyads A/E, F/C, and D/A. The final harmonic area is a bit more ambiguous with four possible notes, which are usually rendered as dyads of G/C, F/B, or G/B. I have never seen this harmonic area rendered as F/C. Soumano articulates the dyads A/E and F/C, and anticipates the move to D/A. The repeated high F is established as a constant.
Soumano omits the A in the D/A dyad and doesn’t play a B or C in the final harmonic area, instead implying the area with a repeated G.

Figure 1: Kaira. 1. harmonic scheme. 2. Ibrahima Soumano bala accompaniment on Kaira. From Kasse Mady Diabaté (1990-disc)

Guinean jeli guitarists, many of whom begin their musical studies on the bala, are able to create these same musical effects by using two fingers or a plectrum to play across string sets in a way that is unique to Maninka guitar playing. For example, an unsigned review (posted on the record label Sterns website) of a Bembeya Jazz National compilation referred to a bala accompaniment on the piece Armée Guinéenne, even though the accompaniment in question (Figure 2.2) was actually played by an electric guitar. This error on the part of the reviewer shows how precisely Guinean guitarists are able to reproduce bala music on the guitar.

A straightforward example of how accompaniments are shared between the bala and the guitar is the part played by guitarist Mamady Kourouma accompanying lead guitarist Mamady “Djeliké” Kouyaté on Kaira (Figure 2.1). When I accompanied Kouyaté in concert settings, he would also play this accompaniment

---

frequently, and it seems to be widely played, at least amongst the musicians in his circle such as Guinean bala players Abou Sylla and Famoro Dioubaté.

The upper melodic voice in this accompaniment falls exclusively on the offbeat, and the dyads A/E, F/C, and G/C are melodically outlined. With this interplay between high and low melodic elements and constant articulation of dyads, this accompaniment is in the classic bala style. The accompaniment’s origin on the bala was confirmed to me when I heard it played by Andy Algire, an American bala player who has studied extensively with Abou Sylla and Famoro Dioubaté in addition to working closely with Mamady Kouyaté. Algire stated that this accompaniment was the first thing he learned on the bala during a lesson with Abou Sylla, and agreed that it is shared with the guitar.19

All accompaniments shown in F major for ease of comparison. Figure 2: Kaira, two accompaniments. 1. Mamady Kourouma guitar accompaniment. From Mandingo Ambassadors (2012-disc). 2. Mamady Kouyaté (from Mandingo Ambassadors 2012-disc) and Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté (from Balla et Ses Balladins 1967-disc) guitar accompaniment.

Figure 2.2 depicts another bala-influenced accompaniment played by Kouyaté on the guitar in the same performance of Kaira. This same accompaniment is played

19 Andy Algire (personal communication- 2012)
by Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté on the Balla et ses Balladins version of the piece. Given Kouyaté’s experience working in a variety of orchestras during Guinea’s post-colonial era, it’s possible that he learned this accompaniment from Diabaté. The accompaniment is played in a higher register than the accompaniment played by Mamady Kourouma, and the dyads A/E, F/C, D/A, and G/C are clearly articulated in the accompaniment. In one variation, the F/C dyad is replaced with a descending melodic line (shown in the transcription as hollow diamond-shaped note-heads). The accompaniment also uses a high A (on the offbeat, just as in the previous accompaniment) as a kind of pedal point against the upward motion of the lower voice from A to B. Just as the lower voice reaches C, the high A descends to a G, creating the dyad of G/C. Just as in the previous accompaniment, this leads back to the dyad of A/E at the beginning of the cycle.

Another example of bala influence on guitar accompaniments, but also the versatility of some Guinean guitarists who can reproduce ngoni styles on the guitar is Ibrahima Soumano’s rendition of the piece *Souaressi*. Figure 3 shows three accompaniments played by Soumano on the guitar. In the first accompaniment, there is once again an interplay between a lower melodic voice on the beat and a higher voice on the offbeat, and the dyads F/C, D/A, G/D, and A/E are outlined, this time with some added notes that add melodic interest and further define the tonality. With the added notes, the harmony articulated by this accompaniment could also be analyzed in terms of triads, with F major, D minor, B-flat major with the sixth (G) added, and A minor all outlined.
The second accompaniment is reminiscent of certain bala accompaniments that make use of dyads sounded simultaneously and a lot of offbeat emphasis. The harmonic density is twice that of the previous accompaniment, with shifts between dyads occurring every two beats rather than every four beats. The sequence of dyads outlined is F/C, A/E, F/C, A/D, B-flat/F, G/D, and C/G. At the end of the cycle, the pattern of dyads is interrupted by an arpeggiated A minor triad, which is more or less a substitution for an A/E dyad. All of the dyads are sounded on the offbeats of beats one and three and alternate with a constant low F on the offbeat of beats two and four. This is similar to the constant high F in Soumano’s bala accompaniment for *Kaira*.

The third accompaniment is the outlier in the group, as it is Soumano’s version of the ngoni style that is so prevalent in Mali. He suggested that it could be played with the other two accompaniments as a contrast. While Soumano doesn’t use the alternate tunings favored by many Malian guitarists and plays with a pick rather than his fingers, he clearly understands the melodic gestures that make up the style. He plays low on the neck to take advantage of open strings, articulates the harmony in a more ringing, leisurely fashion, and uses legato flurries of notes to connect the harmonic areas.\textsuperscript{20} This shows that while Guinean guitarists have distinct tendencies and specializations, they may also be familiar with ngoni-influenced styles from Mali, particularly if they are as experienced and skilled as Soumano. As he told me in a lesson, “there’s an ngoni style in Guinea as well.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} For Malian guitarist Moussa “Mafà” Diabaté’s interpretation of *Souaressi*, see Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Soumano (personal communication- 2012)
Figure 3: Souressi, three guitar accompaniments by Ibrahima Soumano (2012,perc).
Soloing Styles: Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté on *Soumbouyaya* and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté on *Lefa*

In Guinean guitar music, the bala informs not only the accompaniment, but also the approach to soloing. Two quintessential examples of soloing in this style are Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté’s guitar solo on “*Soumbouyaya*” and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté’s guitar solo on “*Lefa*.” Figure 4 shows the accompaniment figure played by Kemo Kouyaté as well as Sekou Docteur’s solo. The accompaniment is relatively triadic, outlining two harmonic areas of C major and G dominant seventh. One reason for this relatively western harmonic scheme is the influence of Cuban music, which exerted a huge influence on Guinean and Malian music in the 1960s and 70s. This kind of tertial harmony tends to be more common on the bala than on the ngoni or kora. The accompaniment also bears a rhythmic similarity to bala music.

Sekou Docteur’s solo consists of a call-and-response with a repeated vocal refrain. He makes the most of this framework by playing repetitive phrases around the vocals while subtly varying each cycle. The brackets in the transcription mark the areas of repetition within the solo. Usually after two or three cycles working with one phrase, Docteur moves to another, sometimes adding some transitional melodic material in between. This repetitive kind of playing within a solo is a hallmark of Maninka music, and the melodic material and articulation are purely in the bala style. Docteur ends his solo by slipping into a driving bala-style accompaniment (bracket g).
Figure 5 depicts both Mamadi “Vieux” Camara’s accompaniment and Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté’s solo on *Lefa*. With its steady flow of pulses, Camara’s accompaniment is easily identifiable as a bala part, and provides a solid framework for Bembeya’s solo. Bembeya’s guitar solo is full of bala devices, starting with the ascending melodic phrases that float and weave over the time, consisting entirely of flammed notes. Bembeya creates these flams by rapidly re-articulating each note with his plectrum. While challenging for the right hand technique of a guitarist, this is executed on the bala in the same way as a drum: by simply using consecutive stick (or mallet) strokes to quickly re-articulate a note. Bala players often create a similar effect by flamming the same note in separate octaves, frequently stretching the rhythm just as Bembeya does here.

After these two ascending phrases, Bembeya tosses off a brief descending melodic sequence, then moves into an accompaniment-like pattern typical of the bala style of soloing. Bembeya jumps across two octaves to set up a constant low C on the sixth pulse of the measure and a high C on the downbeat (bracket a). He then moves directly into a repeated pattern of four pulses that creates a cross-rhythm against the underlying meter of six pulses, while still reflecting the harmonic scheme of the accompaniment (bracket b). This kind of cross-rhythm is characteristic of Maninka music, and especially common in bala playing. Bembeya then returns to the ascending flams that started his solo, before quickly descending to begin another repeated pattern in thirds (bracket c). Although tertial harmony is rare in Maninka music, bala players do occasionally harmonize melodies in this fashion. Thus, this
pattern can be seen as yet another echo of the bala in Bembeya’s solo. Diabaté closes his statement with a climactic ascending series of flams and then descends to drop right back into an accompaniment.

As illustrated above, all of these characteristics of the solos of Sekou Docteur and Sekou Bembeya, the flams, the repetition of accompaniment-like patterns, the polyrhythm, and the tertial harmony, can be traced back to bala playing styles. Furthermore, the formal constructions of these two solos also bear the bala’s influence, with what Eric Charry has described as an alternation between “static repeated accompaniment-like patterns, usually played for several cycles…and more dynamic descending melodic lines.” This contrast of repeated patterns with more improvisatory melodic lines also shows how, even within the context of an extended guitar solo, the aforementioned concepts of kumbengo and birimintingo are still expressed. In their solos, Sekou Docteur and Sekou Bembeya “speak” the language of Maninka music beautifully. The overall structure and specific rhythmic and melodic devices they employ mark their solos as quintessentially Maninka and heavily influenced by the bala.

22 Charry (2000 : 304)
Figure 5: Lefa. 1. Mamadi “Vieux” Camara guitar accompaniment. 2. Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté guitar solo. Both from Bembeya Jazz Nationl (1972-disc).
Chapter 3- Jeli Guitar Playing in Mali

The story of the guitar’s arrival in Mali is, like that of how it came to Guinea, somewhat unclear. However, it is likely that the guitar spread to landlocked Mali from Guinea sometime after its introduction there in the 1910s or 1920s. Recordings from the early 1950s of the Malian singer Koni Coumaré are believed to be the first commercial recordings of a Mandé singer, and she was accompanied by her husband Fotiqui Diabaté on guitar.\(^\text{23}\) A photo of the Diabaté family from Kela, Mali taken in 1949 shows the guitar in the context of a jeli ensemble that also includes bala. This clearly indicates that by this time, the guitar had not only been introduced to Mali, but also accepted into the music of the jelis.\(^\text{24}\)

After independence in 1960, Mali did not develop modern dance orchestras as quickly as Guinea. This was once again due to Mali’s more isolated status as a landlocked country as opposed to Guinea with its coastal capital of Conakry. Nevertheless, the modernization process was in full effect by the 1970s, with the Rail Band, Les Ambassadeurs, and National Badema coming into their own as the great bands of the post-colonial era. Some of the key members of these bands would go on to successful international careers, such as Salif Keita (Rail Band, Ambassadeurs), Mory Kanté (Rail Band), Djelimady Tounkara (Rail Band), Kasse Mady Diabaté (National Badema), and Boncana Maiga (National Badema).\(^\text{25}\)

\(^{24}\) Charry (2000 : 251)
\(^{25}\) Ibid (265-266)
One of the major differences in the musical landscape of post-independence Mali as opposed to that of Guinea is the prevalence of jeli ensembles composed of traditional instruments, guitar, and a vocalist (typically female). These ensembles represent a distinct musical genre from the dance orchestras, and were focused less on re-arranging traditional songs and drawing from western or Cuban influences. The presence of these two genres in Mali has resulted in two parallel yet distinct styles of guitar playing: the *bajourou* style, played in the smaller jeli ensembles, and the *orchestrale* (orchestral) style played in the dance orchestras. While the bajourou style of guitar playing is uniquely Malian, the orchestral style bears a degree of similarity to the guitar style of Guinean jelis, which is also primarily rooted in dance orchestras. Malian jelis recognize the macro-level distinctions between Guinean guitar playing and Malian guitar playing, as well as the micro-level distinction between bajourou and orchestral styles within their own music.

**Bajourou Guitar**

The term bajourou is something of an enigma. Looking at existing research and usage, the term seems to have a multiplicity of meanings depending on who is doing the talking. It is typically translated as “mother’s tune” (*ba =* mother; *jourou =* string or tune), and refers not only to a style of music or guitar playing, but to a specific piece also known as *Tutu Diarra*. Given *Tutu Diarra*’s status as one of the most important pieces in the repertoire of many Malian ngoni players and guitarists, it is possible that the genre takes its name from the piece. The piece is associated with

---

26 Charry (2000 : 276)
the story of a childless woman in the Bamana kingdom who was eventually able to give birth with the help of a snake (the Bamana word for snake is tutu). She named her son Tutu Diarra, and he would go on to be a king of the Diarra lineage. In this story, the meaning of “mother’s tune” makes sense for obvious reasons, but it is also musically appropriate considering the wealth of variations and melodies that can be played as part of Tutu Diarra/Bajourou. In this sense, the piece is a “mother” to many variations and new songs of praise. Furthermore, the thickest and lowest-pitched string on the ngoni is typically referred to as bajourou, and the thinnest and highest-pitched as denjourou (child string). This would suggest that bajourou in this case could mean “mother string.”

However, Badian Diabaté, an exponent of the bajourou style and one of the most prominent jeli guitarists in Mali, gives an alternate interpretation of the term. He believes it means “the length of the river.” This interpretation comes from the fact that ba can mean either mother or river, depending on tonal inflection. Furthermore, jourou can refer to either a piece of music or a string. Diabaté seems to take a bit of a metaphorical leap when he suggests that the conjunction of the two suggests the length of the river. Indeed, he heavily qualified his explanation by saying, “I don’t know who created this name, but in my small conception I have understood that bajourou…we can say it’s the length of the river.” Bassekou Kouyaté has a similar interpretation, as his debut album features a version of the piece with the English title

---

27 Charry (2000 : 154)
28 Diabaté (personal communication- 2013)
The River Tune. His interpretation also fits metaphorically with the nature of the piece as a wellspring of new material and a seemingly endless collection of variations, a connection which Diabaté acknowledges.

Yet another interpretation is given in Banning Eyre’s In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali. Eyre recalls asking Malian guitar legend Djelimady Tounkara about the term’s meaning, and in response, “he told me that the name literally meant ‘big string.’” This interpretation initially struck me as curious, as ba usually takes the meaning of “big” only when used as a suffix in the Maninka and Bamana languages. This is the case with words such as ngoniba (big ngoni), and would suggest that the term for “big string” should be jourouba. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, Tounkara occupies a unique position as a guitarist who is flexible enough to move between orchestral and bajourou contexts. He can be considered an authority on bajourou music, even if his own guitar style is not typical of the genre. Tounkara’s interpretation of the term shows up again in his collaboration with legendary bajourou guitarist Bouba Sacko and vocalist Lanfia Diabaté. Ben Mandelson, the project’s British producer, called the trio Bajourou and titled their album “Big String Theory,” a reference to the same interpretation Eyre encountered.

Furthermore, linguist and anthropologist Kassim Koné suggests that, despite the odd grammar, this interpretation may be the most credible. He also acknowledged the possibility of “mother’s tune” as an interpretation, but suggested that “river tune” or

---

29 Bassekou Kouyaté & Ngoni Ba (2006-disc)
30 Eyre (2000 : 47)
31 Bajourou (1993-disc)
“length of the river” could be misinterpretations resulting from different inflections on the word ba (or baa).32

These varied definitions make it clear that the origin, meaning, and usage of the term “bajourou” are extremely ambiguous, and present many questions to be answered through future research. However, the guitar style associated with it is a unique and identifiable signature of many Malian jeli guitarists. It draws extensively from the ngoni and the kora, and is closely tied to Mali’s musical history.

The bajourou guitar style typically uses alternate tunings to directly recreate the sounds of the ngoni and the kora. The ngoni holds particular importance as the instrument of origin for the piece known as Tutu Diarra/Bajourou, as well as an important cultural symbol of Mali itself. The bala also has a strong presence in Mali, especially along the border with Guinea. The kora has become extremely prevalent since players like Sidiki Diabaté and Batourou Sekou Kouyaté popularized it in the 1950s, even rivaling the ngoni as a national cultural symbol. However, Malian musicians agree that the ngoni remains the country’s musical signature. The early stages of integrating the guitar into ensembles featuring traditional instruments can be seen in a remarkable 1949 photo of the Diabaté family from the village of Kela (Figure 6). We can see an acoustic guitar being played alongside a bala. This shows that even under colonial rule the guitar had become adopted into the music of the jelis, and the foundations of the bajourou guitar style were being laid. Since Kela is

32 Koné (personal communication- 2014)
known for producing a great number of ngoni players, it’s possible that the process of translating ngoni melodies to the guitar would have started in villages like Kela.

**Figure 6:** The Diabaté Family of Kela, Mali circa 1949. From Diabaté Family of Kela (1994-disc).

Vocalist Fanta Sacko was known for popularizing bajourou as a genre of music that addressed contemporary issues. The most notable example of this is her popular song *Jarabi*, which is based on a traditional piece called *Tita. Jarabi* is featured on her 1972 debut album, featuring guitarists Foussenou Diabaté and Mamadou Tounkara. Even in this relatively early recording, the ornamentations of the ngoni and kora can already be heard clearly in the guitar playing.\(^{33}\) While this album

---

\(^{33}\) Fanta Sacko (1972-disc).
is usually credited with putting bajourou on the map, guitarists Bouba Sacko and Modibo Kouyaté further developed the style in the 80s and 90s. Modibo Kouyaté has provided a brief, but informative discussion and demonstration of how the guitar can be used to evoke the sounds of the ngoni and the kora in Mark Kidel’s 1991 film *Bamako Beat: Music from Mali.*

The piece *Taara*, dedicated to the Fula leader El Hadj Umar Tall, is a staple in the repertoire of bajourou guitarists. Like *Tutu Diarra*, the piece originates on the ngoni, making it well-suited to the bajourou style of guitar playing. Three accompaniments for the piece, the last with solo-like fills, are shown in Figure 7. *Taara* can be felt and counted in a number of ways, depending on the rhythmic nature of the accompaniment. The first accompaniment comes from Fanta Sacko’s album, and is played by either Foussenou Diabaté or Mamadou Tounkara on the guitar. The 24-pulse cycle is divided into six beats of four pulses. While the accompaniment is relatively sparse, the leisurely pace and legato articulation of the ngoni are still present. The second two accompaniments come from a performance by Tata Bambo Kouyaté and Modibo Kouyaté on guitar (in Kidel’s *Bamako Beat*). Kouyaté’s playing is busier and more complex than the Fanta Sacko version of the piece, showing how the style developed in the 1970s and 80s. The cycle in Kouyaté’s rendition is more naturally felt as four beats of six pulses rather than six of four. Kouyaté also alternates between variations from one cycle to the next, creating accompaniments that span two cycles of the song. His first accompaniment is limited in range and played in the lower register. This kind of playing strongly evokes the ngoni, as the instrument
generally has a range of an octave, sometimes with some extra intervals added. The legato runs are also characteristic of the ngoni. Kouyaté’s second accompaniment is wider in range. This, along with its ringing texture, is reminiscent of the kora. The fill that interrupts the accompaniment on beats three through five of the accompaniment’s first cycle is typical of both the kora and ngoni. It is clear from these two accompaniments why Kouyaté is still held in high regard by younger bajourou guitarists.


The traditional piece *Jawura* comes from the town of Kita, west of Bamako, and has possible origins on the bala.²⁶ It is one of the most important and frequently-played pieces in the repertoire of bajourou guitarists, along with pieces like *Lamban*

---

and Tutu Diarra. The four accompaniments shown in Figure 8 are drawn from two performances of the piece on the album *Big String Theory*, featuring Bouba Sacko and Djelimady Tounkara on acoustic guitars. Accompaniments 1 and 3 are from the version of the piece titled *Hakilima*, while 2 and 4 are from the version titled *Sora*. The first two accompaniments are played by Sacko, whose guitar is tuned (low to high) F-A-D-G-C-E, a common bajourou tuning, with a capo at the seventh fret. His first accompaniment features a quickly-muted F-sharp leading into a G that is typical of both ngoni and kora music, as is the use of double stops on the offbeats of beat three and seven of the cycle. This is rare in bala-style guitar playing, which tends to use exclusively single notes. The wide registral span of this accompaniment is also a reflection of the kora’s ability to cover multiple registers with one accompaniment, and is facilitated by the alternate tuning. It should also be noted that bajourou guitarists use a right hand technique of plucking with the thumb and forefinger, which is identical to the technique used to play the ngoni and kora. Sacko’s second accompaniment is more ambiguous. The ringing articulation of the harmonic scheme could be drawn from the kora, but the pulses are also steady enough to suggest the bala. The piece does have bala origins, and while it is rare for bajourou guitarists to draw from the bala, many are able to incorporate elements of the bala style into their playing.

The latter two accompaniments are played by Djelimady Tounkara, who is covered at length later in this chapter. While Tounkara is best known for his work in the Rail Band, he is also comfortable in the context of bajourou. His first
accompaniment is a little ambiguous in origin, seeming to suggest the bala, although the ringing articulation used by Tounkara brings it closer in sonority to the kora.

Tounkara’s second accompaniment is one of the most fundamental accompaniments for Jawura. Like the piece, it may have bala origins, but it is played on the ngoni today. It is extremely rare for the bala and ngoni to share accompaniments due to their divergent playing styles, but this accompaniment may be an exception.

Figure 8: Jawura, four guitar accompaniments. 1. Bouba Sacko. Under the title Hakilima. 2. Bouba Sacko. Under the title Sora. 3. Djelimady Tounkara. Under the title Hakilima. 4. Djelimady Tounkara. Under the title Sora. Bouba Sacko’s accompaniments are in F-A-D-G-C-E tuning with a capo at the 7th fret. Djelimady Tounkara’s accompaniments are in standard tuning. All accompaniments are shown in C major. Both guitarists are tuned down one and a half steps on the record, making the accompaniments sound in A major. All accompaniments from Bajourou (1993-disc).

Moussa “Mafà” Diabaté’s playing is a great example of the bajourou style as it is played by contemporary guitarists in Bamako. His two accompaniments on Kaira, as well as an example of birimintigo, all played in the F-A-D-G-C-E tuning, are shown in Figure 9.
The first accompaniment imitates the kora with its ringing high F on the offbeats on beats one, three, five, and seven of the eight-beat cycle and use of multiple registers. Double stops are on the downbeat of beats one and five, and a comparison of this accompaniment with the *Kaira* accompaniment played by Mamady Kouyaté (Figure 1) shows that the dyads of A/E and F/C are present in both, the difference being that A/E is expressed as a double stop in Mafa’s accompaniment rather than melodically outlined by two voices as in Kouyaté’s. Furthermore, the move to D at the beginning of the second measure is here expressed as a double stop of A/D rather than a repeated D. The two accompaniments express the same harmonic scheme but do so using different approaches to harmonic/melodic texture and register, reflecting the differences between the bala and the kora.

Mafa’s second accompaniment moves the rhythmic feel from duple to triple in a way that is particularly reminiscent of the kora. A cross-rhythmic relationship is also set up between the dominant three-pulse feel of the accompaniment and the two-pulse feel of the low voice’s F-C-F movement from beats two to four and the two Bs and F on beats six to eight. These rhythmic gestures and relationships between voices are typical of kora music, where the use of both thumbs and index fingers allows the player to set up complex cross-rhythms.

The ornate fills that interrupt the accompaniment are typical of ngoni and kora music. In examining a similar example of this kind of playing by Modibo Kouyaté, Eric Charry notes the “quick grace notes and trills that explode out of the more
leisurely unfolding of the piece,” as well as the contrast between “the slow, spacious, and regal quality of Maninka music from Mali, and the faster, busier quality of Maninka music from Guinea.” These distinctively Malian characteristics are clearly discernible in this rendition of Kaira.

**Figure 9:** *Kaira*, two guitar accompaniments and *birimintingo* by Mafa Diabaté. All in F-A-D-G-C-E tuning. (Diabaté 2013-per). Originally in A-flat major. Transposed to F major.

One of the clearest examples of ngoni music transposed onto the guitar in the bajourou style is the collection of variations Mafa plays on *Souaressi* (Figure 10). Mafa uses the same tuning as on *Kaira*. The first variation outlines the tonic leisurely, before moving into a line composed almost entirely of grace notes. The line lands on B-flat on beat nine of the sixteen-beat cycle, pausing to establish the new harmonic area before repeating itself with a different rhythmic placement and quick ending that leads back to the F at the beginning of the cycle. This extreme use of grace notes is a hallmark of ngoni playing, and the remaining variations further bear out the

---

34 Charry (2000 : 298)
connection. Similar rapid flurries of notes interrupting the spacious accompaniments can be observed on beat twelve of the second stave, beats seven through twelve of the third stave, and beats eleven and twelve of the fourth stave. While Mafa’s fills on Kaira were more ambiguous in their relation to both the kora and ngoni, many of the melodic gestures in this version of Souaressi are unique to the ngoni.

Furthermore, the use of a flattened seventh scale degree (E-flat) interchangeably with the natural seventh (E) is all but impossible on the kora and bala. These instruments are tuned diatonically, requiring a choice to be made in the tuning between the flat seventh or natural seventh. The ngoni is unique among the three in its ability to play chromatically, and this is reflected in this example of ngoni-style guitar playing.

Finally, the limited range of these variations further suggests the ngoni. The entire set of variations takes place within an octave and a third (F–A’). On a five-string ngoni, this is more or less the available range, depending on how the instrument is tuned. When contrasted with the broad ranges of the kora-style accompaniments of figure 8, the difference in use of range between these two manners of playing becomes clear.

These performances by guitarists Bouba Sacko, Djelimady Tounkara, and Mafa Diabaté are exemplars of the bajourou guitar style. In their playing, we can see use of alternate tunings, creative use of range, melodic ornamentation, and rhythmic variation that make this style unique to Malian jelis and tie it closely to the kora and ngoni. The bajourou style does not uniformly adhere to one ensemble configuration, neither does it by definition require a guitar. Badian Diabaté clarifies bajourou’s
existence, as both a style of music and a piece of music that originated on the ngoni,
prior to the arrival of the guitar:

Bajourou was first played with the ngoni...Even before the kora, it was the ngoni. Bajourou
music was played only with the ngoni. It was after the arrival of other instruments that
everyone tried to imitate or everyone tried to play in one fashion or another. The way in
which we played the kora or the ngoni, the guitarists imitated that...It's nothing else but the
ngoni and the kora. Even the kora, when it plays, it imitates the ngoni When we talk about
where we’re from, bajourou is the ngoni...When you talk about bajourou, you will talk about
the ngoni. Inevitably. (Diabaté, personal communication- 2013)

While Diabaté doesn’t mention specific ensemble configurations, he makes the
ngoni’s importance in both bajourou music and Malian culture abundantly clear.
Traditionally, ngonis are played in pairs, with one larger and lower-pitched ngoni
playing accompaniment and one smaller, higher-pitched ngoni playing in a more
soloistic fashion. Eric Charry points out similarities between guitar duos in bajourou
settings and the traditional ngoni duo:

When two acoustic guitarists play together, the accompanying guitar might tune to F capoing
low on the neck (e.g., second fret, sounding G), and the lead guitar might then tune to C
capoing high on the neck (e.g., seventh fret, sounding G). The opposite might also occur,
where the accompanying guitar plays in C capoing low or not using a capo at all and the lead
guitar plays in F capoing high (e.g., seventh fret sounding C). These arrangements duplicate
the relative tuning of a koni duo where the lead koni is in the higher ardin tuning. (Charry
2000 : 291)

In practice, a bajourou ensemble typically consists of one or two guitarists and some
combination of traditional instruments such as the ngoni, kora, and bala, all
accompanying a vocalist (typically female). Having two ngonis is also not unheard of
for a bajourou ensemble, given the ngoni’s traditional duo configuration. While kora and bala duos are not uncommon, it is rare to find two of either instrument in the context of a larger ensemble. The ensemble may also simply be guitar or ngoni, either alone or in pairs, accompanying a singer. While it is becoming more common for bajourou guitarists to perform instrumentally in duo or solo settings, this is the exception rather than the rule, especially in music aimed at local audiences. Bajourou may be the most overtly traditional style of Maninka jeli guitar playing, due to its development as a way to integrate the guitar into traditional ensembles and accompany jeli vocalists. In its close links with traditional ensembles and instruments like the kora and ngoni, bajourou presents a contrast to the orchestral styles of guitar played in both Mali and Guinea.

35 See Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba Sacko accompanying vocalist Lanfia Diabaté (Bajourou 1993-disc) or Fousseinou Diabaté and Mamadou Tounkara accompanying vocalist Fanta Sacko (1972-disc) for examples of guitar duos accompanying vocalists.
Figure 10: Mafa Diabaté guitar variations on Souressi. F-A-D-G-C-E tuning. Originally in A-flat major. Transposed to F major.
Orchestral Guitar Case Study: Djelimady Tounkara

The orchestral style of guitar playing is a product of the post-colonial era, when numerous state-sponsored groups (known as orchestres) were formed in Mali, Guinea, and Senegal to help forge national identities, as well as explore the diverse folklore of various regions. In Mali, the most prominent group was the Rail Band, which to this day maintains a residency at the restaurant of the railway station hotel in the capital city of Bamako. Since the early 1970s, Djelimady Tounkara has been the group’s guitar soloist and often its musical director as well. Tounkara’s playing incorporates elements of the bajourou style and the ngoni and kora flourishes associated with it. Indeed, his acoustic projects and collaboration with Bouba Sacko show the ease with which Tounkara can integrate his playing into the setting of a bajourou ensemble.\(^{36}\)

However, what has set Tounkara apart and helped define the orchestral style of guitar is the incorporation of melodic material from the bala, as well as the influence of western guitar styles. Bala music, which is extremely prevalent just across the border in upper Guinea, tends to be faster-paced and better suited to dancing than the slower, reflective tempos traditionally associated with the ngoni and kora. Most likely due to the urban, dance-oriented setting in which these groups performed, the influence of the bala and western styles has become an important

---

\(^{36}\) The documentary *Bajourou: Music of Mali* (Marre 1995-vid) provides a great look at the collaboration between Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba Sacko. Both players are also shown in more typical musical contexts, with Sacko playing a bajourou party with his wife Djesira Koné and Tounkara fronting the Rail Band. The musical adjustments the two make during their collaboration are highlighted in a rehearsal sequence.
influence in Malian orchestral guitar playing alongside that of the ngoni and kora, giving the Malian orchestral style a noticeable link to Guinean guitar styles. These diverse influences on the guitar playing, the updated arrangements of traditional repertoire, and the extensive use of western instruments all helped define the modern, cosmopolitan ethos of the Rail Band and other groups of the time. With his assimilation of diverse influences and ability to move between different performance contexts, Tounkara’s playing provides an ideal case study for the orchestral style of playing, as well as its relationship to and contrasts with the bajourou style.

All of these elements can be heard on the Rail Band’s classic version of the traditional song *Soundiata.* Tounkara’s lead guitar playing displays much of the melodic ornamentation associated with the ngoni and kora, but the steady pulse of the accompaniment (Figure 11) is taken directly from bala music.

**Figure 11:** Guitar accompaniment on *Soundiata.* From Rail Band (1975-disc).

```
\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Soundiata_accompaniment.png}
\end{center}
```

Soloing Styles: Two solos by Djelimady Tounkara on *Mansa*

The unique position Djelimady Tounkara occupies in between the contexts of orchestras and bajourou music, as well as the nature of the relationship of these two genres, is illustrated beautifully in the multiple recordings Tounkara has made of the

---

37 Rail Band (1975-disc).
38 The liner notes from the Stern’s Africa re-issue of *Soundiata* (Rail Band 2007-disc) name Cheik Traoré, Mamoutou Diakité, and Ousmane Sogodogo as the Rail Band’s accompanying guitarists during the mid-1970s. It is not clear which of these guitarists accompanies Djelimady Tounkara on *Soundiata.*
piece *Mansa*. The piece has long been a staple of the Rail Band’s repertoire, and has become a signature piece for Tounkara himself. A comparison of Tounkara’s extended solos on two versions of *Mansa*, one by the Rail Band and the other as part of his collaboration with Bouba Sacko, highlights the differences in guitar style between these two genres.

Tounkara’s electric guitar solo on the Rail Band’s 1996 version of *Mansa* is shown in Figure 12, along with the accompaniment played by Ali Dembelé. The solo is an excellent example of Tounkara’s synthesis of diverse influences into a personal style. He starts off with three varied repetitions of a blues-influenced phrase, with an extremely loose rhythmic feel (bracket a). After a brief “response” phrase to these repetitions, Tounkara moves into two phrases played in octaves (bracket b). These stretch the time much like the opening blues scale phrase, and are also heavily chromatic. The octave runs are also punctuated by similar “response” phrases. Tounkara then digs in rhythmically, repeating a phrase that centers on the blues scale, although it also includes F-sharp, the sixth scale degree (bracket c). After a quick run up the pentatonic scale, Tounkara finishes with a long downward melodic sequence outlining a minor scale.

The solos use of the blues and pentatonic scales, loose phrasing, and chromaticism is unusual in Maninka guitar playing, reflecting Tounkara’s love of genres like jazz and rock. In Jeremy Marre’s *Bajourou: Music of Mali*, Tounkara speaks of his diverse influences:
Before independence, I played the guitar and also the drum…The whites danced when we played hit songs like *Tombe la Neige* or *Besame Mucho*. We played songs like that. Musettes, boleros…We also played Portuguese songs…I listened to a lot of Chuck Berry. He was in fashion then, playing rock and roll. I really liked his style. When I listened to the radio or to recordings, I picked it up bit by bit. (Marre 1995-vid)

While the influence of western music is clear in this solo, the accompaniment seems to suggest a bala influence, and Tounkara’s sharp articulation of phrases is also somewhat reminiscent of the bala, lacking much of the legato articulation that evokes the ngoni or kora. However, some of Tounkara’s fills throughout the piece do draw on the melodies and articulation of the ngoni and kora. Tounkara’s combination of influences including the bala, kora, ngoni, and western musical styles in this version of the piece is a classic example of the orchestral style.

On his acoustic guitar version of the piece with Bouba Sacko, Tounkara uses an arrangement similar to that of the Rail Band. However, Tounkara takes an extended solo on a section of the piece with a slightly different harmonic scheme. The bala-style accompaniment (Figure 13.1a) played by Tounkara is typical of the Rail Band’s style. He also frequently plays a variation that features an ngoni-like fill (Figure 13.1b). This version of the accompaniment is echoed in Bouba Sacko’s accompaniment (Figure 13.2), which is played with a ringing attack that suggests the kora more than the bala. Tounkara’s extended solo (Figure 13.3) is an indicator of orchestral influence, as extended improvisations are rare in bajourou guitar playing. However, the solo is full of ngoni and kora gestures and relatively devoid of western or bala influences, in keeping with the more acoustic, bajourou-oriented setting.
It is also worth noting the differences in phrasing between these two solos. While Tounkara uses repetition in his solo with the Rail Band, it is rarely exact and he phrases extremely freely, starting repetitions on different beats and playing behind or ahead of the beat to create a floating effect. His phrasing when playing acoustically is more disciplined. Many of Tounkara’s phrases finish with lines that connect with the underlying accompaniment, and his beat placement is more or less dead-center throughout. Furthermore, his repetition of phrases is more exact, sounding in some cases like accompaniment-like patterns. While it is difficult to generalize about choices of phrasing in the bajourou and orchestral styles as there is more variation between guitarists than between these styles as a whole, Tounkara is making a clear stylistic choice with regards to his phrasing in his acoustic solo.
Figure 12:

All from Bajourou (1993:38). III. From Bouba Sacko

Fret 3. Djelimady Tounkara guitar E tuning, capo at 7th

Figure 13: 1a and 1b. Djelimady Tounkara guitar accompaniments on Mansa. 1:43–2:04. 2: Bouba Sacko

Originally in F-sharp minor, transposed to A minor for ease of comparison.

solon Mansa: 3:38. All from Bajourou (1993:disc)
As in the previous solo transcriptions, bracketed sections indicate repeated accompaniment-like patterns. Tounkara begins his solo (Figure 13.3) with a brief ascending melodic phrase, then moves directly into a repeated pattern that reflects Sacko’s underlying accompaniment (bracket a). This is followed up with a cascading melodic line before Tounkara moves into a three-beat pattern that is in cross-rhythm with the accompaniment and emphasizes a stopped F-sharp and ringing G (stave above bracket b). This use of a ringing note and a stopped note a half step below is a common kora device. The virtuosic descending run that follows is one of the most typically played melodic gestures in ngoni music, and is repeated once (bracket b). Tounkara describes these kinds of runs in the low register of the guitar as imitating the sound of the low-pitched ngoni ba (big ngoni).

After a wandering melodic line similar to his opening phrase, Tounkara goes into a rhythmic repetition of a high-pitched octave, which eventually opens up into more melodic use of octaves four staves above bracket c. Unlike his solo with the Rail Band, Tounkara avoids chromaticism in his use of octaves. While the rhythmic repetition of one octave may be more of a device for building intensity than a direct reference to ngoni melodic content, the use of rhythmic repetition, variation, and cross-rhythm is shared with much ngoni music, which sometimes focuses on one note or phrase that is rhythmically manipulated. For an instrument with such a limited range, this percussive kind of playing is a useful way to build tension in lieu of changing registers, and provides a contrast to the flurries of notes that make up the

---

39 Tounkara (personal communication- 2010)
majority of ngoni solo improvisation. This octave passage leads into more cascading lines using hammer-ons and pull-offs to simulate the articulation of the ngoni.

Tounkara then plays a rapid ascending pattern that is repeated three times with an alternating ending (bracket c), and then finishes with one more descending phrase that leads back into the accompaniment.

Looking at these two solos, the differences between the Malian orchestral style and bajourou guitar playing are highlighted. Tounkara’s electric guitar solo features a great deal of western influence and articulation that suggests the bala, while his acoustic guitar solo sticks to typical modes of Maninka phrasing and improvisation, drawing a great deal of melodic language from the kora and ngoni. Generally speaking, these are the tendencies present in Malian guitarists of both styles, and Tounkara’s ability to move fluidly between the two styles speaks to his stature as a guitarist. Because of this versatility, Tounkara has influenced a great deal of guitarists, whether they play in orchestral or acoustic settings.

It is also worthwhile to make a broader comparison between Tounkara’s solos on Mansa, Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté’s solo on Lefą, and Sekou “Docteur” Diabaté’s solo on Soumbouyaya. Bembeya, Docteur, and Tounkara with the Rail Band are all examples of the orchestral styles of Guinea and Mali, and the bala is a primary influence in these solos. Tounkara’s solo also adds western influences into the mix, which some Guinean guitarists (notably Bembeya) have also explored. Comparing Tounkara’s acoustic solo with the other three highlights not only the differences that distinguish bajourou guitar from orchestral guitar or Malian guitar from Guinean
guitar, but also some of the shared characteristics that define Maninka jeli guitar playing. While Tounkara’s acoustic solo is unmistakably Malian in its use of melodic material from the kora and ngoni, all four of the solos juxtapose repetitive musical elements with melodic phrases and runs. This concept of repetition which is interrupted by melodic lines can be found in the music of all Maninka jeli guitarists. This could be seen as an expression of the concepts of kumbengo and birimintingo at both the macro level of an accompanying guitar and a solo guitar, and at the micro level of a soloist combining repetition and variation within an improvisation. In this way, we can see a shared aesthetic and approach to improvisation that is maintained across different national, regional, and contextual boundaries within Maninka guitar playing.
Chapter 4- Comparative Repertoire Studies: Soundiata, Subaromaloya, and Toubaka

When looking at the regional styles that occur within Maninka jeli guitar playing, certain pieces figure prominently in the repertoire of guitarists from both Guinea and Mali. This chapter will use a comparative approach in examining how guitarists from both sides of the border interpret three pieces: Soundiata, Subaromaloya, and Toubaka.

Soundiata is dedicated to Soundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire. While it is particularly identified with Malian jelis, it is widely played in Guinea as well. With such central historical importance in Maninka culture, the piece lends itself easily to comparative study. Figure 14 shows Soundiata as played by three different guitarists: Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté, Djelimady Tounkara, and Fantamady Kouyaté. The character of the piece is clearly audible and discernible in each version, however the individuality and background of each player is evident in their interpretation. Diabaté and Tounkara’s versions provide two different perspectives on bajourou guitar. Diabaté’s version represents a very modern take on bajourou guitar, with frequent fills and variations. Tounkara’s approach is a bit more measured and traditional, reflecting his age and the era in which he learned to play. Kouyaté’s accompaniment is more in the orchestral style of Guinea and Mali, reflecting his experience as an orchestral guitarist in both countries.

Mafa Diabaté plays in the F-A-D-G-C-E bajourou tuning, and employs frequent variations and melodic fills typical of the bajourou style, and also of modern,
younger guitarists in Mali. In the three cycles transcribed here, it should be noted how slow, steady, accompaniment playing is juxtaposed and used interchangeably with soloing while still maintaining the cycle and outlining the harmonic scheme. This is especially evident in comparing Diabaté’s second two cycles. Djelimady Tounkara’s accompaniment is played in standard tuning, but still features ngoni-like flourishes and a leisurely pace. These characteristics reflect his unique position as an orchestral guitarist with bajourou influences, as well as his pioneering role in defining the relationship between these styles.

Finally, Kouyaté’s accompaniment has a particularly interesting story behind it. Originally from Guinea, Kouyaté has been living in Mali for over fifteen years, serving as Tounkara’s accompanist in the Rail Band for a portion of that time. Like Manfila Kanté, another Guinean guitarist who lived and worked in Mali, Kouyaté presents a fascinating look at the fluidity with which the various styles of the two countries can interact. Kouyaté’s playing, particularly his melodic solos, bears the influence of the ngoni and kora, but many of his accompaniments strongly evoke the Guinean bala style, and, as Badian Diabaté has confirmed, he doesn’t play the bajourou style. Diabaté most likely bases this assertion on his knowledge of Kouyaté’s playing, and Kouyaté would likely agree with this characterization of his playing style. His accompaniment on Soundiata is in the orchestral bala-influenced style, and bears a strong resemblance to the version in Figure 11 from the classic Rail Band recording. This makes sense given Kouyaté’s tenure in the Rail Band, and the

---

40 Diabaté (personal communication- 2013)
bala influence that is typical of his Guinean background. This sparse accompaniment is much better suited to faster tempos than the ornate variations of Mafa Diabaté and Djelimady Tounkara, which are all but unplayable when the tempo picks up. While Kouyaté emphasized this accompaniment as an important rendition of the piece, he does have other variations on *Soundiata*. Every variation he taught me was in the bala style and much more suitable to faster tempos than the accompaniments played by Diabaté and Tounkara. Kouyaté’s approach to this piece is an excellent illustration of how guitar styles have grown out of traditional genres and contexts. Guitar playing in the ngoni style generally tends towards the slower tempos associated with ngoni music, while guitarists who draw from the bala have a penchant for the fast-paced dance tempos that are common in bala music.
Figure 14: Soundiata, three versions. 1. Malia


3. Fantamady Kouyaté, standard tuning, capo at 5th fret. (2010 rec). Accompaniments 2 and 3 are originally in C major, but have been transposed to F major for ease of comparison.
*Subaromaloya* is a relatively recent piece that deals with conflict between romantic partners. This fits with the trend of recent pieces such as *Jarabi* that deal with love or romance. It is especially popular with urban dance orchestras in Mali and Guinea. Figure 15 shows three different accompaniments for the piece. The first two are by Ibrahima Soumano and the third is by Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté.

Soumano’s two accompaniments are deeply in the bala style. The first accompaniment juxtaposes a repeated C with notes outlining the harmonic scheme. The first harmonic area centers on the dyads D/A and F/C, and the second on E/A and G/C. The pattern of a repeated C with added notes is interrupted by a descending line from beats twenty-four to twenty-nine. Soumano’s second accompaniment outlines the harmonic scheme in fairly straightforward fashion, alternating between dyads. There is a shorter descending line that connects two harmonic areas on beats twelve to fourteen. This approach of an accompaniment pattern interrupted by a descending line is typical of much Maninka jeli music, and particularly bala music.

Moussa “Mafa” Diabaté’s accompaniment uses a ringing high A throughout. This ringing texture suggests the kora, as does the accompaniments wide range. While setting up the D/A and E/A dyads using the high A, Mafa interpolates the F/C and G/C dyads in lower registers. This particular kind of interplay between a ringing high voice and lower-register dyads is strongly reminiscent of the kora.
Another piece that invites serious study is *Toubaka*. As a love song, the piece is similar to *Subaromaloya* and *Jarabi* in its subject matter. However, it is in a category of its own when it comes to musical form. It has a much longer harmonic cycle than the vast majority of jeli pieces, and is particularly popular with Guinean guitarists.\(^{41}\) The harmonic scheme of the song could be characterized as having four harmonic areas, each with a duration of eight beats, for a thirty-two beat long cycle. The first centers on the dyads B-flat/F and G/D, the second on B-flat/E and G/C, the third on A/E and G/C, and the fourth on F/C and either A/D or A/E-flat. Although *Toubaka*’s form may be unusual, looking at how various guitarists negotiate this structure provides further insight into the nature of Maninka guitar styles.

Figure 16 shows four accompaniments for *Toubaka*, the first two of which are once again by Mafa Diabaté and Djelimady Tounkara, while the latter two are by Guinean guitarists Manfila Kanté and Ibrahima Soumano. Although only one cycle of Diabaté’s accompaniment is shown, he employs frequent variation and fills in performance. The cycle in the transcription consists mostly of a ringing articulation of the dyads, which recalls many kora players’ manner of playing *Toubaka*. This texture is occasionally interrupted by melodic lines, usually as part of the transition from one harmonic area to another. Examples of this can be seen from beats eight to fourteen and again from beats twenty-nine to thirty-two. Djelimady Tounkara’s accompaniment is similarly reminiscent of the kora, although he uses standard tuning as opposed to the bajourou tuning. One important aspect of the piece that can be

\(^{41}\) Charry (2000 : 157)
discerned by comparing his accompaniment with Mafa Diabaté’s is the line starting on beat nine in Tounkara’s accompaniment and on beat eight in Diabaté’s. Diabaté and Tounkara both begin ornamental, descending birimintingo lines on these beats. Their lines differ at first, but they converge on beat thirteen of the cycle. Indeed, although played in different octaves, their lines from beat thirteen to sixteen are identical except for the final note. This line is an essential piece of melodic information that defines Toubaka as more than simply a set of harmonic areas.

Diabaté and Tounkara both emphasize this line in their accompaniments, even though the birimintingo that leads into the line differs. The accompaniments of Manfila Kanté and Ibrahima Soumano are both excellent examples of the Guinean bala style, and present a strong counterpoint to the kora-influenced accompaniments of Mafa Diabaté and Djelimady Tounkara. As mentioned earlier, Manfila Kanté was best-known for his work in Mali with Salif Keita and Les Ambassadeurs. However, his guitar playing remained rooted in the Guinean bala style, as this 1991 version of Toubaka shows. Kanté’s accompaniment clearly outlines each of the dyads that define the harmonic scheme, using the persistent eighth note attack of the bala. This kind of outlining is a typical device of the style, and when applied to such a harmonically detailed piece, the effect is powerful. Ibrahima Soumano’s accompaniment outlines the harmonic scheme differently, juxtaposing a constant higher tone on the strong pulse with a shifting lower-register countermelody on the weak pulse. The higher tone hangs on B-flat through the first fourteen beats of the cycle before shifting down to A for beats sixteen through
twenty-three and then up to C for beats twenty-four through thirty. The countermelody outlines F-A-F-D on the first four beats, F-G-E-C on beats five through eight, E-G-E-C on beats nine through twelve, E-E-C on beats thirteen through sixteen, E-G-E-C on beats seventeen through twenty, E-G-F-C on beats twenty-one through twenty-four, F-A-F-C on beats twenty-five through twenty-eight, and F-F-D on beats twenty-nine through thirty-two. When combined with the upper, more static melodic line, this countermelody clearly outlines the shifting harmonic scheme of the piece. This alternative way of outlining harmony through rhythmic juxtaposition of a high static tone and a lower countermelody is another common bala device, and makes this accompaniment a strong example of Guinean guitar playing heavily influenced by the bala.
Conclusion

Looking at the wide stylistic variation in the guitarists explored in this study, it becomes abundantly clear how the Maninka jeli tradition remains dynamic and relevant even in the modern world. The degree to which Maninka jelis have adopted the guitar and made it their own is truly astounding, especially to westerners who still equate West African music with drumming and dancing. As the guitar styles of Maninka jelis continue to change at a rapid pace with each generation of younger musicians, older repertoire and traditions are constantly renewed and musically reconfigured. Banning Eyre related the dramatic differences in how certain pieces were played when he returned to Bamako after an absence of only five years. This is a clear indicator of exactly how quickly traditions can evolve in the dynamic environment of a modern West African city.

While I have made a great effort to highlight the regional differences in style that exist among Maninka jeli guitarists, any competent attempt at classification or categorization of West African music must acknowledge the fluidity of musical traditions in this region. In the case of Maninka jeli guitarists, it would be reductionist to suggest that the Guinea/Mali border represents a musical dichotomy, with guitarists on one side sticking exclusively to one style and those on the other side playing exclusively in another. Maninka jeli guitarists develop individual styles informed by a complex combination of factors, including where they were born and raised, which family they were born into, which traditional instruments they played before picking

---

42 Eyre (personal communication- 2011)
up the guitar, and where their professional careers have taken them. Nationality is
certainly present in these factors, and should not be ignored, but it is far from the only
factor.

What I have attempted to identify in this study are tendencies and
commonalities that define certain styles of playing. I was made aware of these
stylistic distinctions in my studies when one instructor’s version of a piece was
identified as *orchestrale*, and also when a musician explained to me Badian Diabaté’s
stature as an exponent of the *bajourou* style of guitar playing. Although these
classifications are useful, cases such as Fantamady Kouyaté, who has assimilated a
great deal of Malian-style ngoni and kora ornamentation into his otherwise typically
Guinean bala style playing, should serve as a reminder that they are limited in
describing the full range of musical ingenuity displayed by Maninka jeli guitar
players.

As the popularity of West African music continues to grow, the role of
producers (and researchers) in how music is performed, recorded, and presented is
becoming an increasingly relevant issue. This is particularly true regarding how the
music is presented to western audiences as opposed to local audiences. Within the
realm of Maninka music, British producer and ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán is
unquestionably the most prolific and high-profile producer, with a distinguished
history of producing recordings for artists such as Toumani Diabaté and Bassekou
Kouyaté. Durán takes a particularly hands-on role in producing, and often encourages
musicians to renew traditions by diving deeper into them, rather than following
current local trends. Duràn recounts one example of this in producing Toumani Diabaté’s first album:

At the time, Toumani, then only 21, was interested in experimenting with multi-tracking himself in the studio, and had already made one such recording for possible release by the Real World label. However, after long discussion and hours of critical listening, he came round to the idea that he did not need to use such technology and that the kora was multi-layered enough in its own right. How different might things have been for both Toumani and Malian music had we approached this album with multi-tracking?...There are many influential and brilliant kora players on the world music scene, but most would acknowledge that Toumani sets the benchmark, and I believe that in some ways I encouraged him to take that path. It is about taking risks, believing in your ears, and exposing audiences to representations of ‘world music’ that go beyond the obvious easy-listen fusions that often displease the academic world. (Duràn 2011: 246-249)

While this approach might seem preservationist, Duràn also encourages musicians to find new ways of reinventing their traditions, and has produced international collaborations between Diabaté and western artists.43

Furthermore, Duràn is well aware of the differences in tastes between international audiences and local audiences, especially when it comes to the use of technology. With the tendency for many West African artists to see electronic effects and technology as “modern” and unequivocally beneficial to their music, the popularity of these technologies has soared in local performance and production.44

43 Examples include Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabaté (1999-disc) and Songhai (1988-disc, 1994-disc).
44 Duràn also makes note of this trend: “during the 1990s in Mali, the kora, and Malian music in general, was becoming increasingly electric. It was rare to hear an instrument acoustically; even in musicians’ homes, they would rehearse with full
With the differences in aesthetics between West African and western audiences, as well as the discrepancy in familiarity with acoustic sound of the instruments, the use of these technologies is much less popular in international releases and performances by Maninka artists, which tend towards more acoustic textures or sometimes towards combinations of acoustic and electric instruments rather than electrified versions of traditional instruments. Although western familiarity with and appreciation of music for local audiences is fairly minimal, many of the recordings produced for international audiences are also very popular in West Africa as well. This shows that recordings like those produced by Durán are not dismissive of local aesthetics or traditions, but rather seek to present these elements in a way that can be appreciated both by locals and by westerners who are unfamiliar with the music, instruments, and context.45

With western tastes still so constrained by a lack of familiarity and understanding with African musics and cultures, it remains to be seen whether the rising popularity of West African music will be matched by a growing understanding on the part of westerners of the cultures and traditions that continue to produce it. One of the most crucial misconceptions to be overturned is that of African music as a

---

45 The collaboration between Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba Sacko (Bajourou 1993-disc), which has been covered extensively in this study is a great example of musicians digging deep into their traditions (old repertoire, guitar styles influenced by traditional instruments, etc.) while reinventing them in new ways (updated arrangements and interpretations of songs, occasional use of western harmony, extended solo improvisations, etc.). While it was produced by Ben Mandelsohn, Durán clearly had an important role in its genesis.
monolithic, homogeneous “other.” The continent’s immense amount of musical diversity remains relatively unknown to many westerners, but the recent crossover success of Nigerian Afrobeat has shown the potential for West African styles to break into the western consciousness. Hopefully, as westerners encounter more of these styles and traditions, they will begin to see Africa as the cultural and musical mosaic that it is, rather than an exotic unknown. I hope my work in exploring one of these traditions can contribute to this understanding in some way.
Bibliography


http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/11/04/0021934711426628 : 1-38


Sterns Music: Sterns Classic Guinean Orchestra Series
(http://sternsmusic.blogspot.com/2011/03/syliphone-years.html)
Discography


Interviews and Lessons


Kouyaté, Fantamady- 2010.


Tounkara, Djelimady- 2010.
Videography

