

***Maninka* Music in Guinea**

In Guinea, music is traditionally performed by members of certain families. Today, the musical families, *jelis*, are still expected to study music, and to act as story-tellers, but they have also started selling music to Westerners. The traditional instruments—drums, *kora*, *bala*, and *koni*—are still played mainly by *jelis*, but the instruments themselves have adapted a little with modern inventions. Not only have traditional instruments changed, the guitar has been added to the instrumentation, and yet fits naturally into the traditional style of the *Mande* people, the Guineans' ancestors. No matter where in Guinea one finds oneself, he or she will find music and dancing by all members of the population.

The musical culture described as Guinean actually refers to the culture of the *Maninka*. Because Europeans declared the boundaries of African nations, many tribes are found in more than one country. Therefore, to tell about the musical culture in Guinea would be rather misleading. In fact, the music of Guinea would be better referred to as the music of the *Maninka* people, descendants of the *Mande*, who once had a “large and wealthy empire in West Africa” (Charry: 1). Today, the descendants of the *Mandes* live in Mali, Guinea, Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau (Charry: 1). Because of the ancestral commonality, the cultures of these countries are very similar.

Charry breaks professional *Mande* music into four categories: music related to hunters' societies, music of the *jelis*, drumming related to various events, and modern electric groups (Charry: 2-3). The *jelis*, also known as *griots*, have an important position in *Mande* culture. They come from a family of *jelis*, where each member of the family specializes in a different instrument, but everyone is involved in music. In a society where social class can affect

everything people do, *jelis* learn to play music, and to play it well. As a child, a *jeli* starts learning from his elders how to play an instrument. Growing up, he learns more and practices interminably. By the time he reaches young adulthood, he is able to fulfill his duties to the community. These include telling stories about a town or a family, entertaining at public events, and providing music or tales whenever someone wants a *jeli* (Tang).

Although the original inhabitants of Guinea are the *Maninka*, changing professions and immigrants from other cultures, such as Arabs and Europeans, have also influenced Guinea's music. Charry believes the evolution of instruments in Guinea may reflect the changing artisanal communities. For example, he observes that hunters' music carries similarities to blacksmithing which became important when iron production increased 2,500 years ago (Charry: 29). In the first millennium C.E., political power shifted to warrior-kings who had stories to remember and pass on. Thus, the *jeli* became an important person as he told the tales of the warriors. By the eighth century, Arabs had invaded West Africa, bringing Islam with them. Islam and religion became very important in *Mande* music, and continue to be so today. In the 1500s Europeans began traveling to Africa and forming colonies. The influx of Europeans in later years brought modern musical culture with them. Some musicians growing up in the early 1900s merged Western instrumentation into the African culture, creating a new kind of music that includes guitars, saxophones, and trumpets.

The Muslim influence that Arabs brought to Africa significantly affects the music even today. Many songs contain lyrics referring to God or honoring Him. In contrast to Western songs, where love and indulgence are common themes, most African songs discuss moral or ethical issues. Even in bars or popular entertainment, the words usually have much more positive connotations than those played in the Western world. Furthermore, the musical style may have

been influenced by Islam. For example, monophony and melodic ornamentation are common both in Islamic music and in *Mande* music (Charry: 23).

The idea of ‘music’ is much different in Guinea than in the Western part of the world. The *Mande* people don’t even have a word for ‘music’ in the sense that English does. To them, all musical arts are connected—“dance, instrument playing, and even speech” (Stone: 96). Because music covers such a broad range of activities, not only *jelis*, but everybody in Guinea learns some aspect of it. As part of growing up, the children learn to dance, and as they get older, they become the choruses in epics and songs (Stone: 96). However, if someone displays exceptional talent, they may receive further teaching in an area in order to get better. A student must always play non-*jeli* music, however, as he can never change classes, even if he is exceptional at playing an instrument (Stone: 96).

If asked what African music sounds like, most foreigners would mention drums of some sort. While it is true drums are often played, drums are not the only instrument used in *Maninkan* music, and sometimes they are not played at all. Drums have a long history in African music, and the culture perceives the playing of drums as talking to each other or interacting with spirits and gods (Tang). To this end, there are many different kinds of drums that can be played for all different kinds of occasions. The *djembe*, one of the most well-known African drums, originated in Guinea and the surrounding areas. The foundation of African music is rhythm, and what better way to emphasize rhythm than through the playing of drums?

Rhythm forms the basis for African music of all types. Drums are so often thought of as African because they clearly display the rhythms that make African music differ from Western music. In African music, “there are always at least two rhythms” being played (Chernoff: 42). These rhythms can differ considerably, but when played together, they interlock to form a

complex pattern. In addition, African music emphasizes what Americans consider the “off-beat.” In a quadratic meter, such as the meters of most Western songs, the first and third beats are where someone would clap or step in a dance. Although African music is not typically in the same type of meter, when they hear Western music, Africans emphasize the second and fourth beats. Most Westerners find it very difficult to find the “down-beat” in African rhythms because there isn’t one. In many African rhythms, each drummer starts in a different place in a simple pattern, but when played together, the rhythm sounds very complex.

In addition to drums, there are many stringed instruments played in Guinea. For example, the *kora* is a twenty-one stringed harp made from a *calabash* body. Traditionally, only *jelis* play the *kora* (Charry: 117). Although in recent years some other people have learned to play the *kora*, it remains mainly a *jeli* instrument. The evolution of the *kora* is not completely known, but someone in the *Mande* area discovered it, and it gradually became popular (Charry: 116). Over the years, it has changed a little as improvements are made. For example, today it usually has steel or nylon fishing-line as strings because they are light and strong. Before the discovery of nylon, they had to use animal hide and gut to make strings.

Another stringed instrument played only by *jelis* is the *koni*. The *koni* is a plucked lute with up to seven strings that may have originated from Egyptian designs. A common addition to *Maninkan* music, skill at playing the *koni* may have helped the *griots* adapt to the guitar in recent years. When Europeans brought Western influences to Guinea, the most readily accepted one seems to be the use of the guitar. The guitar, both electric and acoustic, has become a standard in many *Mande* bands.

The xylophone, a very well-known instrument, probably originated from the *Mande* region of Africa. According to oral traditions, it was originally played by a blacksmith warrior-

king which explains the beating motion required to generate sound (Charry: 133). In Guinea, the xylophone is called *bala* or *balafon*, and it is also a *jeli* instrument. It is one of the only melodic instruments that can be played in a drum ensemble, perhaps because they are both hit with the hand or a stick, rather than being plucked or bowed. However, a drum is actually a membranophone while a *bala* is an idiophone.

Music in Guinea is played everywhere almost all the time. *Jelis* can be asked to tell a family's history at a wedding, a "growing-up" ceremony, or a birthday. There are also musicians playing in the streets in various places seeking to entertain the general population. Since everyone knows how to dance, music provides a great link among the people. Music and drumming are used to celebrate Muslim holidays, such as the end of Ramadan. As the Western culture invades Africa, music is performed more and more often as simply a performance. Recordings have been made, and some musicians sell CDs of their music. This has led some *jelis* to become rich, weakening their standing in society. Many of the Guinean people do not like seeing their equivalents, or even people in a lower social class, getting rich from their talents. Furthermore, members of higher social classes, who may be poorer than the *jelis*, are still expected to contribute money or gifts at performances (Charry: 103). Just as in many other Eastern cultures, several *Mande* artists tour in the United States in order to make money.

The musical culture in Guinea, originating with the *Mande* people long ago, has been transformed as Arabs and Europeans moved into the region and brought their cultures along. One of the main traditions, the importance of *jelis* in musical performance, continues to dominate the culture to this day. Although the *jelis* still play traditional instruments, such as drums, *kora*, *bala*, and *koni*, these instruments have become more durable and easier to play as modern inventions are incorporated into their making. As Europeans moved into Africa, they brought new

instruments, like the guitar, which the Guineans accepted into their music. Because music is such an integral part of Guinea's culture, every member of the population is adept at dancing and singing.

Works Cited

Charry, Eric.

2000 *Mande Music*, Chicago:
The University of Chicago Press

Chernoff, John Miller.

1979 *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, Chicago:
The University of Chicago Press

Stone, Ruth M.

2005 *Music in West Africa*, New York:
Oxford University Press.

Tang, Patty.

Teachings on October 5, 12, and 19.