



Malian Traditional Music: Sounds Full of Meaning

SALIA MALÉ

Traditional music is a vibrant expression of Mali's cultural diversity and wealth. Each ethnic group and region is characterized by certain musical rhythms, instruments, and compositions. Music is involved in all aspects of life, marking birth, work, marriage, religious ceremonies, and death.

For the Malian people, music is fundamental and essential to life: it has a precise function and meaning, and it is inextricably linked to a set of doctrines, ideals, beliefs, and practices whose coherence constitutes the identity of each group. Since beliefs about music are often associated with beliefs about the origin of both music and the ethnic group that performs it, the perpetuation of music is a matter of considerable importance.

In order to fulfill its functions as revelation, meaning, and source of pleasure, Malian traditional music teaches about real society and its problems. Songs describe customs and morals, represent people of different social strata, and use either indigenous or imported linguistic and artistic forms. In this way, songs reflect the social and cultural conditions of a moment in history.

It is this reflection of society that typifies traditional Malian music, to such an extent that its performance is never gratuitous. Whether it aims to capture the relation between humans and the divine, to recount the course of natural or social events, or simply to convey the mood of its producers and its recipients, it always has consequences, for "nothing can be sung or played that does not contain something."

Hunters' music (*donso n'goni*) is a popular musical form found in the south of Mali and also in Guinea, Senegal, Niger, Ivory Coast, and

Young men playing the *balafon* (a xylophone). Photo © National Museum of Mali



Salif Keita in concert. One of Mali's leading contemporary musicians, Keita draws his inspiration from traditional music. All rights reserved.

Salia Malé is an anthropologist and former Deputy Director of the National Museum of Mali.



(Top) Drummers perform at a puppet masquerade in Kirango. Photo © Mary Jo Arnoldi

(Middle) Siramori, a celebrated woman *griot*, sings a patron's praises. Photo © Barbara Hoffman

(Bottom) Musicians in northern Mali perform on the bowed lute and drums. Photo © National Museum of Mali

Burkina Faso. It is played on different occasions connected to the hunters' lives, at home or in the bush: the burial and funerals of great hunters, entry into the village of large game trophies, festivals of the hunters' brotherhood, baptism of the child of a member of the brotherhood, welcome of officials, and every other form of hunters' gatherings. These occasions bring into the open relations with occult forces, the magical powers between hunters and between musicians and hunters; they are high-stakes musical events whose outcome is not known in advance. The most dangerous tests of magic and miracle-working are performed to the sounds of specific music. The *donso n'goni* singer evokes a summoned hunter's exploits while exhorting him to further feats; the hunter is tempted to accomplish them on the spot, by making wild animals appear and killing them. If he does not succeed in this, the hunter promises the singer the thigh, shoulder, or tail of an animal that he will go out and kill the next day, week, or month. These public exchanges between the musician and the hunter are touching: the musician recalls to the hunter his past exploits, the hunter alternately recognizes his accomplishments and the challenge to honor the new promise that the situation has incited him to make.

Xylophone (*balafon*) music is another very popular genre throughout southern Mali. Accompanied by the *kora* (21-string chordophone), *jembe* (large drum), or other drum, it is played for baptisms, marriages, and popular musical evenings whose sole purpose is entertainment. It is played as well at annual festivals for village agricultural associations. These are grand moments of gathering and celebration for young boys and girls from a village or group of villages. Xylophone playing also lends itself well to dance contests.

Takamba music is a popular musical genre from the north of Mali. Men and women, seated or standing, dance to it at baptisms, marriages, and popular celebrations. The dance is characterized by graceful movements performed with the hands, eyes, and body, and augmented by richly embroidered *grands boubous*.

The primary value of music lies not only in its harmony in musical terms, as pleasing sound, but also and especially in its relation to life. For Malians, this latter function of music often takes precedence. The saying "It is not the song that is good, it is its meaning that is good" eloquently encapsulates this thought. ■