

LEARNING CULTURE THROUGH A MUSICAL PRACTICE WITH  
MANDING JALIS IN NEW YORK

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This study depicts the music and culture of Manding jalis in New York through the perspective of non-African New Yorkers who interact with them. The non-Africans, the author included, move through the cross-cultural learning process as they attend live jali musical performances and learn to play and perform this music themselves. *Jali* refers to a person born into a particular caste and specific family lineage in the Manding region of West Africa. In Western literature, jalis are described as musicians, singers, oral-historians, advisers, diplomats, ceremony participants, teachers, and bards, among other things (Hale 1998; Charry 2000; Hoffman 2000). This dissertation depicts jalis who play the *balafon*, the *kora*, and the guitar in New York. Up to date, there is almost no literature on the topic.

The author applies Gregory Bateson's notion of cultural "ethos," construed as schismogenic balances of tension and resolution, to both musical and non-musical social aspects of culture (Bateson 1972). Meter and rhythm create tensions and resolutions in people's minds and bodies, giving them a common frame of reference. Simultaneously, participation in music exposes our cultural proclivities. This makes it an ideal place to begin the cross-cultural learning process. From the live music scenes, we then explore how music students learn to produce cross-rhythms and looping layered melodies as well as more subtle nuances in "feeling," or groove. Students learn how to learn, think, and play the music according to the Manding jali's perspective. We apply these musical lessons as we become increasingly involved in the culture, at large.

This study uses an alternative methodology of a reflective practice (Schön

1987) in which the author is the primary participant. She moves from a music student, an organizer of balafon workshops to a friend, a patron, an agent, a *marraine*, and ultimately, a *jatigi* in jali society. The analysis is interlaced with antidotes of interpersonal experiences between Manding jalis, the author, and other participants. In conclusion we see how non-Manding and Manding music and culture cross-influence one another as they interrelate in the multi-cultural music scene in New York.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lisa Feder was born in Manhattan and raised northern New Jersey. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Lafayette College where she majored in International Affairs and French. In high school and in college she studied abroad in Strasbourg, France. After receiving her B.A., Feder worked as an English teacher in the public school system in Costa Rica and in the study abroad industry in New York and São Paulo, Brazil, after which she returned to the university to carry out graduate work. In 2000 she completed a Master of Arts at the University of Chicago in Social Sciences where she spent time with and wrote a thesis on the Kayapo indigenous group in Pará, Brazil. At Cornell University her interests spanned both cross-cultural environmental issues in indigenous areas and music of West Africa and the African Diaspora. During her time at Cornell, Lisa carried out preliminary research on music in both Salvador, Brazil and The Gambia, West Africa before deciding to write her dissertation on non-Africans learning West African music and culture. In the United States, Lisa continues to take part in the West African music scene in New York, and continues to work in Brazil and West Africa. Aside from her musical interests, Lisa is a certified yoga instructor. The influence of her yoga practice is subtly inferred through the pages of this dissertation.

*For Gray Parrot,  
N'fama Ousman Jobarteh.*

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## **Prologue: Huit Americain**

*Four people and two Manding balafons cruise at a comfortable 65 mph down the NJ Turnpike in a Honda Civic. In the back seats two Manding jalis, Famoro and Missia, both from Guinea Conakry chat quietly in Malinké. In the front, I chat with Doug, our driver, in English. Djelimady Tonkoura and Super Rail Band serenade us on the cassette player. Doug and I picked up Famoro and Missia from deep in the heart of Brooklyn this morning. We are heading toward Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C. where we will perform tonight in a griot concert headlined by Fodé Kouyate.*

*An hour or so into the journey, I pull a deck of cards out of my knapsack and slap them onto the middle console. Famoro picks them up, shuffles them a few moments, and deals them out without looking up, without saying a word. For the duration of the game, no words will be necessary except one: Carte. Famoro deals five cards to each of us, save Doug, who must follow the road.*

*I do not know for how long Guineans and Americans have been playing Huit Americain. I do not know if one culture taught it to the other, or if it evolved between them over time. All I know is that ever since I started to hang out with the Guinean-American music crowd in the United States, this has been a favorite pastime, when we have tired of the balafon.*

*Huit Americain, (pronounced wheat American) is like Uno and Crazy 8's. The player who finishes by placing an 8 as his last card gets a bonus point. The person who is left with an 8 in hand loses a point. Famoro deals out the cards and we use the middle console as the deck holder. Round and round we go, Lisa, Missia, Famoro, Lisa, Missia, Famoro. Famoro partakes in strange practices. Each time his turn comes around, he picks up card after card when I am sure he must have something to throw down. He loads his hand up pretty well before he begins to discard. My hand is slowly dwindling down. I use my 8 once to demand a new suit. Of little*

*consequence, the suit goes where it wants to after the demand is met. I yell my first “carte!” Missia goes, and Famoro drops a 2, “draw two.” Missia goes again, and Famoro charges me with another 2. Before too long, my hand has grown and Famoro’s has dwindled. He mutters “carte.” I throw my next card with apprehension, and Missia throws down an 8, wild card. She asks for hearts. Famoro throws down an 8, mitigating her demand, and wins.*

*The next round Famoro wins again. This time, it is my turn before his, and I throw down a “draw two”. He neutralizes my card with an Ace, and wins. The third round, Famoro wins again. This time Missia throws down an 8 before him and demands hearts. Famoro throws down an 8...in the suit of hearts. I laugh, in utter amazement.*

*I sit a few rounds out to help Doug navigate, but I can still keep track of the game. There is some tension going on between Missia and Famoro. It's his turn, he says “carte.” Missia charges him with two, then lays down a card he cannot follow. He picks. A few rounds go by, and he has rebuilt a healthy hand. Now he charges Missia with cards to draw. By the time she gets to discard, Famoro has only 2 cards left. She throws down an 8. Hearts. He throws down an 8. Spades. She puts down a 7 of spades that reverses back to her, and lays another 8 on top. Hearts. He drops his last card. An 8.*

*The stakes rise. I watch Famoro win several times over by laying down several 8s at the end. While he gloats, Missia challenges him to deal up again. They play a brutal round where both charge one another with cards at just the opportune time. Famoro comes close to winning. With an 8 he demands a suit and Missia lays down a “draw two” in that suit. Back to her, she plays “skip” cards, causing Famoro to lose his turn, which she follows with an 8. She wins. They play again. Missia announces to us in French, “Encore, je vais gagner.” She follows it up with an*

*afterthought. Insha'allah." Doug and I echo her, "Insha'allah." Just when Famoro thinks he has her beat, Missia responds with an 8, then another, then another, each one countering another of Famoro's moves, and she wins leaving an 8 in Famoro's hand. She topped his trick. Jali magic.*

*It is difficult to describe the caliber of playing that takes place in the backseat. I cannot come close to understanding how these two orchestrate their hands so well. Their moves are like liquid, fast and smooth. They do not delay in their discards. They do not take time to think. The game has rhythm. They pick cards up when I would think they would discard them. They drop aces and twos like bombs on those who approach their last card. They have an answer to any threat. And to boot, they finish their hands off with one, two, and sometimes even three successive 8s. How do they do it?*

*By playing and observing for a long time, I begin to understand some of their tricks at a superficial level. Play your 2s and aces for those who yell "carte." But I do not have the flow. Famoro explains to me that he watches the cards that go by. He remembers what cards people play, and how they play. He says its Jali business. You cannot beat a jali unless you really want to. Then you have to ask for Allah's assistance.*

*I join back in for a round. Famoro deals and says, "This time try to win." I look up in doubt, and he responds, "Try! You have to try!" I ask for Allah's help and give it my best. I concentrate on the patterns I can form in my hand, the different ways I can play them out. I try to notice and remember what the others play but it is not easy with the fast pace of the game. I pick up cards even when I have some to play, fitting them into the web I create in my hand. I save the 8s for as long as possible. I collect "draw two" cards, waiting to use them until someone is close to "carte." I try not to pause to think too long. I try to get into the flow of the game and think at that*

*speed but still, Famoro prods me, “Go!” I exclaim “carte!” with one in my hand; sure that someone will block me somehow. No one blocks me and I win the round. Famoro is proud of me. He says “Yeah. Good!” as I put down my last card. Did he let me win?*

## Chapter 1: Introductions

*Rather than trying to make my work “scientific” and “objective” by minimizing my cultural and personal differences from those whom I study, I have tried instead to bring these differences out consciously—to use them to better understand what is going on...the focus here is on three musicians, their lives, and their music, interlaced with some comments on my reactions to them and my role in their existence (Anthropologist Simon Ottenberg on studying three musicians in Sierra Leone, 1994).*

This study looks at how non-Manding people move through the learning process as we perceive, respond to, and learn to play Manding music across different cultural contexts. I use an integrated epistemology and methodology of reflective practice to explore the relationship between the mind and body as we break down patterns of thinking and acting and then rebuild them according to the Manding aesthetic. As we reach more advanced stages in learning, we are motivated to act according to the Manding “ethos.” Reflecting on this, we realize there is an ineffable quality that we can only know through participation in the experience. I argue that including this quality provides a more complete ethnographic description than relying on more standard anthropological approaches, and I employ suitable methods of writing, supported by audiovisual material, to convey it.

This study is an anthropology of expression<sup>1</sup> through practice that I have constituted myself from the works of several authors. It is concerned with understanding cultural expression by feeling the motivation to act in such a way for oneself. The idea of an expressivist anthropology stemmed from the work of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in the eighteenth century, as described by Hans Joas in his preparation for a theory of creativity of action (1996). Herder begins with the expressivist theory of language, which “consists in viewing language not primarily

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<sup>1</sup>“An expression—so we think—is given when something that was ‘inside’ surfaces on the ‘outside’ and becomes noticeable” (Joas 1996:75).

as a means of labeling objects in the world but rather as an expression of *feelings*.” An anthropology of expression, he explains, addresses the scope of human expression as distinct from that of other animals. The difference lies in a person’s ability to reflect on his own expressions, which gives him the ability to be creative in his expression (Joas 1996). At the same time, the success of the expression is contingent on reference to conventional patterns of behavior (Wagner 1975).

Music creates the conditions of society *par excellence*, which make it an ideal place to begin the cross-cultural learning process. All social conventions rely on regulation and conformity of action according to specified contexts in time. People use the same verbal expression or the same gesture in slightly different ways, depending on their personal style and understanding, and the context at hand. In this way gestures are imbued with nuances in meaning (Wagner 1975). Musical gestures are no exception. Musicians play particular melodic patterns in a meter which, coupled with subtle emphases and diminutions, produce rhythms according to conventions of their society. Each musician performs musical conventions with a personal style, such as swing and attack, particular to the context at hand, to imbue the live performance with meaning. In non-musical society one can never be sure when and where a gesture will be repeated because it happens spontaneously, when the circumstances call for it. Rhythm in music, on the other hand, creates regulated, condensed social constructs that allows people to form expectations and join in shared actions almost immediately. I argue that participation in music, or “musicking”<sup>2</sup> with people cross-culturally provides excellent conditions for gradually deepening immersion into a foreign culture.

Several scholars address the distinction between animal and human levels of consciousness and self-reflective capabilities (Bateson 1979; Wagner 1975; Joas

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<sup>2</sup>“Musicking” is a term I borrow from Christopher Small (1998).



1996). They point to the state of mind in which intuition is privileged over rational thought as a higher level of knowledge (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Shön 1987). These authors see rational and normative thinking as a marked deficiency (Joas 1996) that may be remedied by practicing art (Bateson), or similarly, by achieving levels of expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986).

The focus of my study has been chosen as an appropriate venue through which to explore the cultural relationship between mind, body and emotion, and the alternative methodology of reflective practitioner in the field of anthropology. Select anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have explored and urged future scholars to consider the mind and body as one interrelated unit through which we experience our world, different from the normal Cartesian duality of mind and body that privileges intellectual knowledge (Small 1998; Bateson 1972; Blacking 1977; Joas 2000). They suggest that participation in the cultural practice of our topic of interest increases our field of perception from which to understand the culture. This study serves as one example of how to bring these suggestions into practice.

In his chapter entitled “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art” Gregory Bateson recognizes that the practice of art requires the re-integration of the conscious and unconscious minds. “For the attainment of grace, the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of the reason” (Bateson, 1972:129). In the same chapter, Bateson points out that in art “each culture has its characteristic species of grace” and “the *success* of this expression might well be recognizable across cultural barriers” (Bateson 1972:129).

Bateson makes a distinction between levels in logical types where it is not the encoded message within the art that is understandable cross-culturally; rather it is the code of production itself that we understand cross-culturally. In order to produce art successfully in any cultural medium, the artist must have endured a process of using

her mind to control and refine her skills to execute culturally specific patterns of expression. Such expressions might take the form of bodily movements, such as making precise brush strokes with a paintbrush, or performing a genre of dance movements with flexibility and strength, or the production of musical patterns by striking a balafon. The artist must have practiced his skill until execution can be practiced without conscious effort. Then he is able to vary his skill subtly so as to imbue it with a feeling, thus, creating aesthetic. The successful integration of consciously and unconsciously produced patterns, or art, is a universal quality in humans that often enables us to recognize art cross-culturally (Bateson 1972). However, I illustrate in this thesis that even this integration may be balanced in different ways and that the quality of the balance has culturally specific values constituting part of the “characteristic species of grace.”

Hans Joas writes that “the human being who expresses himself is often surprised by what he expresses, and gains access to his ‘inner being’ only by reflecting on his own expressive acts” (Joas 1996: 79). It is only through our participation that we recognize that we feel similarly or differently from one another as indicated by our bodies in action. It requires control of the mind and body to learn to react in culturally specific ways. For beginners, this control takes mental analysis and conscious mental effort. Eventually with practice, we come to embody the feeling in the movements. One culturally particular way of orienting the mind and sculpting the body to music feels different than another. We gain a new level of understanding about a foreign culture when we learn *how* to feel and express ourselves according to the standards of that society through the body in action. This takes practice but brings us to the first step in understanding the “characteristic species of grace.”

In his chapter on ethos and schismogenesis in Bali, Gregory Bateson describes the notion of an *ethos* of the culture as “the expression of a culturally standardized

system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals” (Bateson 1972:107-127). Ethos is maintained by a continual state of schismogenesis,<sup>3</sup> or the tension and resolution<sup>4</sup> that forms among members of a society and between societies themselves. An action in Group A of a culture causes a symmetrical or complementary reaction in Group B, which causes another action in group A. Tensions that arise have culturally patterned ways of finding resolution that reflect certain themes and motivations. It is similar to music, and by learning to practice Manding music, we learn a new way of feeling tensions and resolutions according to a new cultural aesthetic. I explore the relationship between the “ethos” and the “characteristic species of grace” by illustrating how Manding musical tensions and resolutions have parallels in the greater cultural ethos.

Bateson points out that “le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait point (the heart has its reasons which the reason does not at all perceive). It is this—the complex layering of consciousness and unconsciousness—that creates difficulty when we try to discuss art or ritual or mythology” (Bateson 1972:134). He finds fault in the Anglo-Saxon system that tries to bring that which is unconscious to the conscious level and suggests that “prose is poetry that has been stripped down and pinned to a Procrustean bed of logic,” which may be why scholars such as anthropologists have had such difficulty in devising a theory and adequate representation of art (Bateson 1972:136).

It is the difficult task of the anthropologist to not only recognize that the characteristic species of grace exists, but to experience it through participation and express it effectively to those in her own cultural group: anthropologists who tend rely on the intellect for scholarly communication, first and foremost. But before we can

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<sup>3</sup>Bateson explains that it is from the analysis of Iatmul ethos that certain “recurrent emphases or themes led to the recognition of schismogenesis” (Steps 1972:108).

<sup>4</sup>Or tension followed by increasing tension, which is “run-away schismogenesis” (Bateson 1979).

express it to others, we must be able to feel it, and that requires active participation in the culture. I would like to modify Bateson's critique of prose in that, creatively written, prose can bring about the feeling of the environment to the reader through anecdote within the first-person perspective. I describe the practice of the anthropology of expression in nonfiction prose supported by audiovisual media and live performance. To translate it from practice to paper requires a continual process of reflecting on the lived experience of the Manding feeling, which, if successful, inspires my writing. The Manding jalis with whom I worked taught me how to endure this practice of translation and relaying stories with feeling, as that is the job of a Manding jali. My success in conveying Manding feeling through this thesis is a test of my lessons in Manding jali culture.

### *Background*

*Jali* is a Mandinka/Malinké word that refers to a person born into a particular caste and specific family lineage, of which maintains definition through endogamy, in the Manding<sup>5</sup> region of West Africa, which includes parts of Mali, the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau with smaller enclaves in other neighboring countries. In Western literature, jalis are described as musicians, singers, oral-historians, advisers, diplomats, ceremony participants, teachers, and bards, among other things (Hale 1998; Charry 2000; Hoffman 2000). Jalis musicians of the Mande region play one of several instruments. In this thesis we are primarily concerned with

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<sup>5</sup> In this thesis I primarily use the term "Manding" but sometimes I use to Mande, particularly when referring to an author who uses Mande. There is no clear definition of the boundaries between these words, They both refer to people who have been united culturally under the Manding Empire but Manding refers to a smaller groups of people within the Mande region that are of the Manding ethnicity. Mande includes other ethnic groups, such as Sousou, that have been united under Manding cultural influence. One of the primary jalis in this thesis, Bacar Sylla, is of Sousou ethnicity. The rest are Manding. Manding jalis generally consider Bacar a jali, but they note that he is not of the original family lineages. The jalis in this thesis speak Bambara (from Mali), Malinké (from Guinea) and Mandinka (From the Gambia) and they understand each other relatively well. Of the Guinean Malinké speakers, many also speak and sing in Sousou, Bacar's language.

jalis who play the *balafon* (or *balanyi* or just *bala*) which is a wooden xylophone with gourds, struck with one mallet per hand, a *kora* which is a 21-stringed harp and, more recently, the guitar.

The practice of jaliya dates from the time of the prophet Mohammed (Charry 2000; Hale 1998). When the prophet prepared to travel, his jali would go ahead of him, announcing his intended visit to the people, getting them ready, bringing them together. The jali did not have music at this time. The first musical jali appeared in West Africa in 1235 A.D. during the time of the first ruler of the Manding Empire, Sumanguru Kanté. King Sumanguru was a Sosso king who conquered and killed many Manding people as he expanded his empire. The story has some variation in the oral tradition but the following is a popular version. During the time of Sumanguru's rule, a man named Jimmo Duwa went into the forest and heard the sounds of the balafon being played by a jinn<sup>6</sup>. The man cut keys of wood for himself and the jinn appeared to show him how to play it. Jimmo Duwa gifted the balafon to the king Sumanguru Kanté (Jessup 1983). Sumanguru kept that balafon in his home but let no one touch it. If even an ant or a mouse brushed past it, the king knew and threatened to kill the creature.<sup>7</sup> The man who found the balafon had a son, Nyangumang Duwa, who went to Sumanguru's house while he was not there and found his balafon.<sup>8</sup> He saw the balafon and said, "What is this!" An eagle guarded the balafon in Sumanguru's absence and warned this young man not to play it or risk death. Despite the warnings not to touch it, the man sat and played the balafon until Sumanguru returned. But jali people never get scared. When the king returned he was angry and asked, "Who gave the authorization for you to play my balafon?"

Nyangumang Duwa showed no fear before the king; rather he began to sing the

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<sup>6</sup> Supernatural being in Arabian mythology and in Islam (Wikipedia, 3/18/07).

<sup>7</sup> I have heard and read this story from many sources, but when I remember from whom in particular, I footnote it. This part came from Famoro, private conversations.

<sup>8</sup> Jessup (1983) as confirmed by Famoro.

king's praises. He said, "Hey Sumanguru, you are a big king. You are the king of kings and the lion's king. You are not supposed to play this balafon for yourself. You should have someone play it for you while you relax. You should not do your own chores. You are king. Other people should take care of your needs."<sup>9</sup> The man recited all of the great people in the king's lineage, sang the king's praises, and played the balafon so sweetly that the king forgot his anger and named the man his personal jali. He asked the man his name, and when he told him, the king responded, "That is not a beautiful name. I will give you a name."<sup>10</sup> He bestowed upon him the name Bala Fo Ségé Kouyate. This name translates as *bala*, the name of the instrument, *fo*, to play, *ségé*, eagle, and *kouyante*, nothing bad can happen to you.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the name has morphed into Bala Fasigi Kouyate over the centuries and is regarded as the first jali musical family of the Manding people. It is said that the Kouyates are never scared and they always seek out instruments to play.

A Mandingo man, Sunjata Keita, defeated King Sumanguru. Sunjata killed Sumanguru and took Sumanguru's jali as his own. He became the first Mandingo ruler of the empire. The first jali lineage began under the name of Kouyate. The Kouyate family is the only one pure jali lineage that did not split off from *horon* (nobility) or *nyamakalou* (craftsman of spiritually charged materials).

For centuries, jalis worked for kings and nobility only. They sang the praises, recorded and recounted histories, orally, through music. They recalled the king's ancestors and inspired the king to rule well. The jalis received clothing and food from their kings and were considered to be of the lower ranks in society.<sup>12</sup> At the same time

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<sup>9</sup>As told, according to Famoro Dioubate.

<sup>10</sup>In the words of Famoro Dioubate.

<sup>11</sup>Translation from Malinké to English by Famoro Dioubate. I have also heard that *sege* refers to the achillies tendon which Sumanguru cut on his jali to make sure that he never walked away and left him (Bacar Sylla, personal conversations; Lynne Jessup 1983).

<sup>12</sup>Charry, Hale, Hoffman, among others, describe the dual position of jalis in the caste system of West Africa. Famoro describes jalis as higher caste than kings, because they give the kings power. It depends

they were an essential part of how the *horon*, or noble caste were able to maintain power. The jalis serves as the public voice of the kings—people of noble caste were not supposed to raise their voices or speak on their own behalf—and at the same time the jali’s exclusive knowledge of the kings’ pasts made their advice invaluable. Without a jali, a king would have no means of effectively reaching his public. As the empire declined, jalis continued to serve political leaders and nobility, which they do down to the present day but now they also serve the common people (Ebron 2002).

Jalis who play the balafon and kora are almost always men, though there are some rare exceptions. Foreign female students such as myself are welcome to learn the instruments. I know of one jali’s daughter and a female jali pop singer who are both learning to play balafon. To specify a female jali, one uses the word *jalimuso* (literally woman-jali). The profession is called *jaliya*. Among non-Africans, jalis are often referred to in French as, *griot* (gree-yo) and *griotte* (gree-yut). The term *griot* has also come into more popular use to describe storytellers in the African Diaspora knowledgeable about the past (Hale 1998). This thesis focuses on jalis who are born and raised in West Africa into particular family lineages and are now living in the United States.

The people of Manding ethnicity are a distinct group in the West African region. From 1235 until the fifteenth century, the Manding Empire ruled over many ethnic groups that were loosely united under one cultural influence (Faal n/d). The kings of the Manding Empire converted to Islam, which had been spreading in West Africa through the Empire of Ghana for several hundred years. The people of the empire converted to Islam but continued pagan practices as well. While the Wolof, Djola, Sousou, Fulah, and other groups have their own languages and cultures,

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which side you ask, a noble or a jali. Either way, the dual position is clear. They are considered the highest rank of the nyamakalou.

Manding musical culture permeates all of them to this day, as they have influenced Manding culture.

The Manding balafons we hear in the United States are usually tuned to a diatonic scale so that they may play easily with Western-tuned instruments. In West Africa many balafons are “traditionally tuned.”<sup>13</sup> “Traditionally tuned” balafons still maintain seven note scales but the distance between the notes do not respect any rule except how the owner wants to have it tuned (Jessup: 1983). Tuning styles differ from village to village, region to region. A song played with traditional tuning as opposed to diatonic tuning sounds quite different to the unaccustomed ear. An American might find some of the tonal combinations strange, unfamiliar or dissonant. To our ears, the melodic phrases produced on the diatonically tuned balafon do not produce very unpleasing or dissonant sounds.

The diatonically tuned balafon is like playing only the white keys on a piano. Manding balafon (and the kora) can only be played in one key at a time. The player holds one mallet in each hand, which means that he mostly produces ostinato melodic phrases. He may also strike two notes at the same time, but it is impossible to play a triadic chord at once. A Second or seventh interval may be played in simultaneity or in ostinato with the “root” note, but each melodic phrase tends to resolve, and remount tension within the course of the looping phrases.

One gourd hangs below each of the twenty-three wooden keys and is tuned particularly to resonate with the sound of the wooden key to which it corresponds. The jali cuts little holes in the sides of the gourds and covers each hole, two per gourd, with a small piece of plastic cut out of a thin plastic bag. He attaches the plastic by

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<sup>13</sup> “Traditionally tuned” is the common term used to describe non-Western tuning style. “Traditionally-tuned” balafons are still made in most of Manding West Africa, though in the past few decades, diatonically-tuned balafons are becoming more common as artists want to play with Western instruments in bands in both West African cities and abroad.



rubbing his finger over freshly moistened chewing gum, rubbing the stickiness around the gourd hole and stamping the plastic on. If you turn over a jali's balafon you are likely to find a chewed wad stuck on the underside. Creating the right reverberations, or as balafonists call it, the right "buzz" is of utmost importance to the jali, and they spend a considerable amount of time adjusting the holes to make the sounds just right. Usually, lower notes have more buzz than higher ones. The buzz has several purposes. First, it amplifies the sound that the key makes. But it also creates a certain, voice-like quality that makes a riveting effect that supposedly communicates with the world of spirits. It used to be that jalis used the paper-thin spider egg sacks to cover the holes to create the reverberations. Sometimes a jali will still use them if he can find them, but easily accessible plastic from bags are ubiquitous in this day and age.

The kora is a twenty-one stringed harp. The body is made of a large calabash covered in cowhide from which a tall wood pole stands upright and two smaller wooden poles serve as handholds. The strings, usually fishing line, are fastened to the pole with antelope hide. The instrument originated with the Senegambian Mandinka of the Kabu (Gabu) Empire (Charry 2000: 115) and is about 200 years old. The kora has different tunings depending on the region from which the player comes. Mamadou Diabaté and Yacuba Sissoko, two Mande jalis in New York use a different scale from the one I first learned in the Gambia with Seikou Jobarteh. The player holds the kora upright and plucks the strings with the index fingers and thumbs. This allows the kora player more flexibility in his arrangements than a balafon player who is confined to two hands. Many of the Manding songs from balafon have been translated onto the kora as well.

The balafon, kora and guitar have similar format of playing. Jali musicians "see their style in two forms: *kumbengo*, or a fixed melodic pattern, and *birimintingo*, improvised and ornamented music." (Hale 1998:169). The *kumbengo* is a series of

notes that make a continually repeated pattern. It may be played in 12/8 time, which allows for melodic polyrhythms. From kumbengo, the listener (which includes the player, herself) may hear different melodies depending on how she orients herself to the repeating cycle from the polyphony of notes. Kumbengo promotes the listener's creative interpretation in the music. As a student musician, one practices the variety of looping melodies in a song for a long time, maybe months, until her mind is so accustomed to them that she need no longer think about the actions. Then the student may begin to hear the kumbengo she plays in different ways as she shifts perspectives on her own playing. It is from this state of mind that birimintingo emerges.

The birimintingo is what Westerners tend to refer to as "improvisation" but this is somewhat misleading. The jali does not have complete freedom to be creative, as the word indicates in Western jazz music.<sup>14</sup> When a jali performs the birimintingo, he has the freedom to piece together phrases from various repertoires, but they must have culturally significant meaning based on a history of a thousand years. The player might incorporate proverbs or Koranic verses. He might recall excerpts from a well-respected jali since deceased, or reference particular segments that speak of a family lineage. He will also play the primary melody that the singer would sing if there is no singer. Sometimes the jali will invent a new phrase that becomes repeated until it establishes cultural meaning, and then when someone else plays that segment, people will remember the jali who invented and put the term into practice. A delicate balance guides creative interpretation in birimintingo between personal will of the jali and his delicate position as intermediary between the past and present social worlds.

The first written description of the jali came from the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century (Hale 1998). Since then, jalis have been described in

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<sup>14</sup> See Afropop "The Art of Improvisation" for more detailed discussion comparing and contrasting "improvisation" in different musical mediums such as American jazz, Shona Mbira and Ghanaian drumming music (*Afropop.com*, "Interview with Paul Berliner. January 12, 2006: New York).

Arabic, French, Portuguese, and English sources (Charry 2000: 105). The origin of the Mande musical jali coincides with the original Sosso balafon, believed to be 800 years old. The original *Sosso bala* of King Sumanguru is housed in Niagassola, Guinea. The *ngoni* is also believed to be almost as old as the *bala*. The first descriptions of the *kora* date back to the end of the eighteenth century (Charry 2000: 115-145).

To be a jali, one must be born into a particular family lineage of Mande origin (*fasiya*). The most common lineage names are Kouyate/Koita, Diabaté/Jobarteh, Sissoko/Susso, Kanoute/Konte, Doumbia and Kanté (Charry 2000: 99-100). There are a few other non-Mande family lineages that, under the Manding Empire, were largely influenced by Mande culture and are recognized as jali families, such as the Sylla family of Kindia, Guinea. Jalis undergo a lifetime of training and practice through life experience in music, singing, and/or speech. They learn histories orally from their family members and from other jalis in the society. Sometimes a family will give their child to another jali to learn the profession by serving as his apprentice. During apprenticeship the student will learn to make the balafon, care for it, and carry it for his teacher to performances when he is old enough. He will learn by listening and practicing, and eventually will be allowed to play the cyclical patterns (*kumbengo*) while his teacher plays *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* (noncyclical melodic phrases, runs, and improvisations).<sup>15</sup> Eventually the apprentice will acquire the social and musical graces to perform on his own.

Ethnomusicologist Eric Charry breaks down the jobs of jalis into three primary functions: speech (*kuma*), song (*donkili*), and instrument playing (*kosiri*). Jalis are usually highly skilled in one or two of these three art forms (Charry 2002: 91). In the past few hundred years, jalis have been and continue to preside over baby-naming

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<sup>15</sup> Further description on *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* appears in chapter 2.

ceremonies, funerals, marriages, as well as to announce the coming of important people, births, deaths, and local news. They tie present-day events and people to the events and people of the past through musical reference and oratory. They continually update history in their music as they observe society around them.

Jalis used to travel from village to village and record in their memory the histories and deeds of the people. Now they travel from village to city, between African cities, and from Africa to Europe, America, and elsewhere. They expect to receive financial and other compensation from the people whom they praise, as their livelihood depends on it. People may claim particular affiliations with jalis who, in turn, learn their family and personal stories as they did for the nobles of the past. Now, people who support particular jalis are called patrons, or *horon*, in Malinké, which invokes the rank of nobility.

After European colonization and with the shift of economy from the country to the city, jalis migrated with the rest of the population to find more work and money. Since the 1960s jalis have become part of the international spread of popular music through recording technology. Popular music of Africa is known as Afro-pop, and that of the Mande region is called “Mande Sound” (Knight 1989). Mande Sound is largely produced by modern-day jalis of the named family lineages, some of the most famous being Mory Kanté, Toumani Diabaté, and Seikouba Bambino Kouyate. They also form groups, such as Guinea’s renowned Bembeya Jazz National. The music is based on Mande songs that have been played for centuries and often the bands incorporate jali instruments—balafon, kora, koni, and guitar—backed up by any number of electric instruments such as bass, drum set, keyboards, horns, and other European-style instruments. Songs often contain the lyrics that have been passed down for many generations, and improvisational-style praise singing, though many also have newly composed lyrics with themes similar to those from older repertoires.

European and American travelers and musicians have encountered jali music both in West Africa and abroad, and have promoted the music and the jalis in Europe and America. Some promoters have worked with jalis to produce records and CDs, and tour in concert halls, universities, and museums, both in traditional, acoustic style, and modern-band style. Sometimes jalis create new hybrid sounds across cultures. Mande popular music has gained the greatest popularity in Europe, particularly in France, though it trails behind Nigerian *Highlife* (Knight 1983).<sup>16</sup> There is a large West African population in Paris, and many famous and not so famous jalis take up semi-permanent residency there, such as Seikouba Bambino, Mory Kanté, and Amadou and Miriam. They play concerts in venues from French bistros and clubs to big concert halls and music festivals. Some gain popular recognition, such as Mory Kanté, whose song “Yeke Yeke” reached number one on German radio in 1989 (Knight 1989). Today you may still find traditional village jalis, but even they have some access to the capital cities such as Conakry, Banjul, and Bamako and even Barcelona, Paris, and New York.

Mande musicians have been coming to New York since the 1960s with African-based national and regional music and dance troupes such as *Les Ballets Africains* and *Merveilles d’Afrique*. Though in Africa they are considered to be superior musicians to drummers, jalis did not initially gain the popularity that djembe drummers earned in the United States.<sup>17</sup> For one, Americans, particularly non-musicians, found drums to be a relatively accessible instrument to learn. Drummers who came to the United States with music and dance troupes sometimes defected when it was time to return to Africa, and found jobs playing drums and teaching

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<sup>16</sup>For more on Nigerian Popular Music, see Christopher Waterman’s excellent book called *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of Nigerian Popular Music* (Waterman 1990).

<sup>17</sup>New York resident balafon jali Famoro Dioubate explains the irony in the United States that brought the drummers to a more prominent position than the jali musicians, who are considered to be the keepers of Mande culture and tradition (Personal conversations, 2005).

American students for a livelihood. The profits they made were sent back to support their families in economically challenged West Africa. Today, one can find African drumming and dance classes in just about any major city and many small towns as well. The Mande Sound did not become popular in the United States as it did in Europe, but it is beginning to grow. Today it is not uncommon to find a jali or jali band at an American music festival, and they appear in nightclubs, bars, and cafés in the cities.

Western researchers and musicians helped to promote the particularly culturally rich role of the jalis in West African society in the United States. The first jalis to gain recognition here were Foday Musa Suso, Djimo Kouyate, and Pappa Susso. Foday made Chicago his permanent residence. In 1978 he began the Manding Griots Society, and in 1985 he collaborated with jazz musicians Herbie Hancock on a Fusion Jazz record. Academic researchers promoted other jalis such as Dembo Konte and Alhaji Bai Konte, and they performed and spoke in educational venues such as universities and museums.

Today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a strong network of jalis living, recording, and performing across the United States. Manding jalis from the Gambia, Senegal, Mali, and Guinea live in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Florida, Chapel Hill, Washington D.C., Chicago, Madison, and California, among other places. They play the ngoni (or kuni), tama (talking drum),<sup>18</sup> balafon, guitar or kora, and many of them are singers. Many came to the United States on cultural visas with musical groups and some have managed to gain legal residency.

In this thesis I explain my involvement with jalis who live in the New York area from Mali and Guinea. They speak Bambara and Malinké, French and English,

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<sup>18</sup>The tama is considered a jali instrument in Senegal and Guinea, but few jalis play it. There is one Guinean jali named Bai Kouyate who plays tama (frequently at Zebulon Music Bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn) in New York.

among other languages. They are of Manding and Sousou cultural groups that fall under the scope of Malian Empire. The family names and positions in society are the same throughout these regions, such that Bambara-speaking Mamadou Diabaté and Malinké-speaking Famoro Dioubaté consider one another jalis of the same lineage.

Jalis are part of a much larger network of legal and illegal West African immigrants who make their living in various ways such as street vendors of African and European products, retail sales of African fabrics, music, videos, restaurant owners, and cooks, hair salon owners and stylists, taxi drivers, business men, political men, high school and college students, among other things (Stoller 2002). Most live in fairly tight-knit communities, they prepare and eat their own food, shop in their own markets, have their own mosques, associate with Africans of their ethnic and national orientations, socialize in their own musical venues. They stay in close touch with one another, as well as expatriates in Europe and their family members and friends in Africa through telephones. The largest West African concentrations in the New York City area are in the Bronx, Harlem, and south of Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Some live in Newark and New Haven as well.

Most jalis struggle to make a living in the United States, as they are not well paid for performances, performances are sporadic and often infrequent, and the cost of living and transportation is high. Furthermore, they are continually expected to send money back home to West Africa to help support their families. Only a small handful of jalis, who are well known either in West African circles, American circles, or both, make a sufficient amount from musical performances and CD sales alone. The rest call on their African and American friends to support their expenses.

The role of the jali in New York overlaps to a large degree with the role of jalis in cities throughout West Africa. In West African social circles in New York, they play at marriages, baby-naming ceremonies, end-of-Ramadan parties, birthday parties,

and any time a patron organizes an event. They also play in the privacy of their own homes with and for their friends. Jalis are normally paid for playing events, but they may also receive money in the form of “spraying” in which audience members, or otherwise called patrons, throw money at the performing jalis to honor them.

Jali relationships with the non-African world grow out of musical affiliations in diverse ways. Jalis perform in New York City venues such as bars and cafés such as Zebulon and Café Barbés, both in Brooklyn, in World Music venues such as Satalla, Makor, and Joe’s Pub, restaurants, museums, and concert halls such as Carnegie Hall and Symphony Space, all catering to a diverse array of New York City habitants. They perform at American musical festivals in and outside of the city. They often play music with Americans and other non-African musicians, and sometimes they form bands and record CDs together. The jalis also take on private students, teach classes in public schools and universities, and give music workshops, particularly in balafon. They also play for African drum and dance classes at places such as *Djonibas Drum and Dance School*, the YMCA, and other private dance and music centers. Jalis rely on their American musician friends to find them work in American-oriented venues and on their West African friends to sponsor events that demand jali music.

### *Literature Critique*

As a participant in their social network, I describe the lives of jalis who live in the New York area as they move along a spectrum ranging from entirely West African to entirely American social contexts. I talk about specific themes in the social relations of jaliya, which are described in these sources and recur during the course of my experience. These are, patron-jali relations, *nyamakalou*, *badenya*, and the effects of praise-singing to recreate and reconfirm individual and caste positions in society. My explanations bring a vivid, heartfelt understanding of what some of these themes mean in the life of the Manding through my own experiences that differ from and contribute



to primary sources on jaliya (Charry 2000; Hale 1998; Hoffman 2000; Ebron 2002). I also draw on these sources as a point of reference with which to depict the changing role of jaliya in the international community to suit their current realities through their interactions with foreign students, musicians, and audience members.

Literature scholar Thomas Hale provides a comprehensive work on griots<sup>19</sup> in his book *Griots and Griottes*, describing from an objective standpoint the roles, functions, texts, performances, instruments, and social standing of jalis in Manding society. He gathers his information from first-, second-, and third hand accounts presented from an objective standpoint. He supports his descriptions with excerpts of fables and jali texts as well as drawings and photos. Thomas Hale describes fifteen functions that jalis serve in West African society in chapter one of *Griots and Griottes*. They are: genealogist, historian, adviser, spokesperson, diplomat, mediator, interpreter or translator, musician, composer, teacher, exhorter, warrior, witness, praise-singer, and ceremony participant (Hale: 18). He transcribes jali speeches and retells stories that accompany them in order to provide the reader with concise descriptions based on real events. His descriptions are based on literary accounts, some very old, some more recent, of events that have taken place between jalis and others in society. Most of his sources are African and Arabic authors who have written down oral histories that they have heard or spoken themselves. In my experiences with jalis in New York I have rediscovered some of these descriptions for myself. I draw upon Hale's work as a source of comparison and I deepen our understanding of these functions that still exist in similar and altered forms today through personal experience.

Eric Charry devotes a chapter to jali music in his book on *Mande Music* (2000) in which he provides well-ordered, concise descriptions of the art of jaliya as well as the tuning and playing styles of the instruments. He presents his descriptions in a

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<sup>19</sup> Hale uses "griot" where I uses "jali." They refer to the same thing.

mostly objective-oriented and impersonal style as well. Though he talks about it little, his extensive personal experience as a student musician in Mali shows through in his descriptions of structures and processes in jali culture. Both Charry and Hale's books serve as excellent resources on the profession of jaliya in Manding society. This thesis highlights a different form, in that I form my descriptions and analysis almost entirely on my personal experience. I also expose my fieldwork techniques throughout the thesis, allowing the reader follow my process of learning and understanding. Nevertheless, I draw on aspects of Charry and Hale's descriptions as a point of reference and bring them to life through my experiences.

Barbara Hoffman's *Griots at War* (2000) focuses on a particular event in Kita, Mali, in the 1980s where jalis gather to resolve a long-term dispute over leadership. Her book is centered on direct, firsthand experience, with extensive transcriptions of jali speeches in Bambara, translated into English. Fortified with four years of fieldwork as a jalimuso-in-training, Hoffman's academic descriptions and use of prior works are directly related to her real experiences and serve to clarify and organize her vivid descriptions of jaliya without objectifying them. Her work serves as an example of how to bring a foreign culture to life through personal experience. I draw on her book as a reference for clarifications, for descriptions of terms in the local language, and for some analysis.

Paulla Ebron's *Performing Africa* (2002) has several chapters closely associated with the framework of my topic in that her fieldwork crosses cultural and national boundaries from the Gambia to the United States. Her analyses of jali-patron relations in politics and in performer-audience interaction on both sides of the Atlantic have informed my own understanding of the role of jaliya. Ebron makes her position as researcher evident throughout her text and inserts her subjective viewpoint, which helps to put her experience of jaliya in context. In this way, the reader understands

how she arrived at her conclusions. This is a position I choose to take in my work as well. However, in some components of her work, she relies on formal interviews with jalis, and the information she gathered was rather mundane. Her lack of depth in personal engagement with jalis in everyday life keeps her from explaining more esoteric parts of jaliya to the Western audience.

Ebron's position begins similarly to my own. We both encounter difficulties in becoming a student of jali music as a full-time stance from which to build our research. Ebron relinquishes this position to resume a formal role as the foreign, academic researcher. Her work is sponsored and organized by the Gambian government, and she has predetermined financial compensation for the jalis. She admits that her interviews extract the same kind of response from every jali, which shows how jalis would like to present themselves to the international world, but she does little to illustrate how jalis really work in society. More enlightening is her role as audience member in jali concerts, although she does not welcome her privileged position in the social scene and therefore we lose a deeper insight into jali/patron relationships in her analysis. While her work is more real to life than that of Charry and Hale's, she misses some of the more subtle and interesting aspects of jaliya by reducing her role to a position that does not involve learning the values and systems of jali wisdom.

In my work I concentrate on the subjective effects that the music and singing has on listeners as we move from American to African contexts. Hale quotes Nyulo Jobarteh, one jali's verbal attempt to grasp the emotion of this music. "A talented singer is one who can 'split the air with singing, stand before crowds without flinching, and compose words that roll off her tongue with fluidity and clarity so that her audience understands the content of the text and is moved by it.'" (Nyulo Jobarteh as quoted in Knight and requoted in Hale, 164). Both Hoffman and Ebron discuss the

role of the audience member/patron in relation to the jalis. Ebron rejects her position as the object of praise-singing, and therefore does not describe the feeling as a Manding person might. Hoffman, on the other hand, gives a gripping description of the power jalis have over their patrons.

*I have seen many a horon's hand quake as it thrusts forth a bill, sometimes accompanied by a verbal plea, "ka nyama bo" (Please take the nyama away). It is, perhaps, even understandable that some nobles resent the fact that the jeliw, "their" jeliw, as they say, have such power over them, power not only to stir them deeply and make them tremble, but to inspire them to part with hard-won cash or goods in the bargain (Hoffman 1995: 42-43).*

I describe what it is like to be the object of a jali's praise, to be stirred deeply by their music and praises, and to part with hard-won cash from a personal standpoint. Furthermore, I explore how this relationship takes new form as it manifests in a cross-cultural context.

Hale and Charry explain the caste of *nyamakalou* to which jalis belong, but their descriptions of the aspects of music and praise-singing are incomplete. *Nyamakalou* are a particular caste of Manding society, such as leather workers, blacksmiths, wordsmiths and musicians, who work with "spiritually-charged material"(Charry 2000: 48). I bring an understanding of these facets of jaliya to the readers based on firsthand, personal accounts of how the spiritually-charged material motivates me into action as I take the role of patron and audience member.

Hale and Charry introduce two forces in particular that influence jali formation: *Fadenya* and *Badenya*, in which *fadenya* characterizes the relationship of competition between father (lineage) and son, and *badenya* characterizes the relationship of cooperation between family and community members (Charry 2000: 55). I take part in *badenya* and shed new light on it through personal descriptions.

Hale describes the century-old perspective that European and Arab travelers had of jalis. Attention is given to the perception of jalis as beggars and nuisances to

their patrons. The Hausa, a neighboring ethnic group, have a word for jalis that describes both a beggar and musician in one (Hale 1998: 18). Hoffman tells that jalis are sometimes considered to be beggars by their own people as well, of the noble class. But she qualifies this view by explaining that the negative image may be perpetrated by patrons of jalis themselves as a means of reconfirming social boundaries between two mutually dependent castes (Hoffman 2000: 53). In the course of firsthand experience I explore the tense role between jalis and their patrons in the cross-cultural context by falling into the role of patron in a mixed cultural context myself. This role has changed since the decline of empires, European colonization and post-colonization in West Africa.

### *Personal Background*

My own introduction to Manding music happened in the vicinity of Ellsworth, Maine, from my participation in a small group of Americans, ranging from 20 to 60 years old, who had taken up West African-style drumming as a pastime. As most American students and patrons of jali music that I have since met, my introduction to jali music stemmed from an interest in playing the djembe drum. I was almost immediately introduced to the art of jaliya, as one of those drummers in my group had been studying the kora in the Gambia for five years. That man is Gray Parrot, also known as Jali Ousman Jobarteh<sup>20</sup>. He learned about the kora from Jali Seikou Jobarteh from Farafenni, the Gambia, while Seikou came to the United States on an American-sponsored tour with other West African musicians. Seikou's group came to Ellsworth, Maine, to perform a concert and Gray hosted them at his home. It was then that Seikou handed his kora to Gray. Gray took the gesture seriously and committed himself to learn the instrument and the history behind it. Gray traveled to the Gambia every year

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<sup>20</sup> Jali Seikou Jobarteh gave this name to him as induction into his family lineage.

to study kora with the Jobarteh family, and he plays his kora at every drum circle during breaks and occasionally at educational performances and benefits in Maine. I listened to the kora and learned my first traditional Mande songs from Gray and his personal field recordings of Seikou in Maine in 1998.

Two years after joining the drum group and meeting Gray, I traveled to the Gambia with him and his wife to live with a Manding family and study West African music. Since my first trip, I have been back to West Africa—the Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea—four times for a total of eight months to study West African jali music and live with jali families. I have since met Jali Seikou Jobarteh for myself in the Gambia and have spent days sitting with Seikou and Gray as they performed the traditional jali function from within the walls of our compound.<sup>21</sup> Seikou’s music has become most personal and meaningful to me, perhaps because it is the first kora jali music I have known. Seikou comes from the upriver city of Farafenni and continues to practice jaliya according to the old traditions. He sits in the compound and sings about everyone, praising those who do good work, recalling people’s ancestry to them, creating history through song as it happens. Seikou speaks little English but he has recapitulated the history of Gray and my involvement in his life through song and speech. It is through Ousman (Gray), Seikou, and people’s responses to them that I first learned how and when to appreciate the beauty in jali music. Seikou sings my name and tells me from where I came, and to whom I am connected in Gambian social circles, and I respond, *abaraka, jali* and *a ning bara, jali*.<sup>22</sup> I have not incorporated Seikou or much of my African jali experiences in this thesis. This thesis is framed by the life of jalis in the United States. However, my prior experience warrants honorable

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<sup>21</sup> Gray and his wife Chris Covert have inducted me into the Jobarteh family and call me Aminata. Seikou and my Gambian/Senegalese friends refer to me by this name, but my New York jali friends call me Lisa.

<sup>22</sup>“Thank you” and “good work,” respectively.

mention, as it is through this experience that I have been able to make sense of my past two years of fieldwork (2005-2006) in which I concentrated my studies of this music right in my own home of New York City and its surrounding areas.

It was a few years before I decided to make jali music the focus of my dissertation, from my own perspective as a trained musician. Until then, I had not read any academic literature about jalis and knew little of their presence and lifestyles in the United States. I used this to my advantage in formulating my research topic. What were we learning about the lives of West Africans by practicing their music that differed from an academic approach?

The origins of participants in this study include various cultures but centers around two general groups—on the one hand, Guineans and Malian expatriates who live in the United States and patronize or perform jali music, and on the other, American or otherwise non-African students, audience members, and patrons of jali music. The non-African group is predominantly Americans of European descent but also includes Europeans, Asians, Canadians, Israelis, African-Americans, and Latinos. During the course of this study, I try to constitute a category of “Americans” distinct from Mande Africans. The distinctions remain imperfect, so I also employ the terms “non-Manding” and “non-African” when necessary. I have changed the names of half of the participants in this study. Bacar, Peg, Marilyn and Doug are pseudonyms, the rest of the names are real.

### *Methods used in this Study*

There is little in the way of personal description of the social role and power of the jali from a personal perspective.<sup>23</sup> In my fieldwork I maintain the position of

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<sup>23</sup> For non-academic personal experiences with jalis, see Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* (1954) from the African perspective, and Banning Eyre's *In Griot Time* (2000) for the American perspective.

student and reflective practitioner rather than researcher (Schön 1987). A reflective practitioner is one who goes about her normal life practices, and uses reflection on her actions and reception in the society to learn how that society works. She is an integral part of it, and thus her analysis takes on a subjective perspective. As such I made sense of jali culture based on my own participation and understanding as a student, audience member and friend in jali culture, and made sense of this culture appropriate to my actions in contexts as they arose. There is a wide spectrum of possibilities for which no anthropologist functions entirely one way or the other. On one end of the spectrum, the anthropologist places herself in the position of a student within that society, which, if we are foreigners, we must be. She must use self-reflection and feedback from those born and raised in that culture to judge the appropriateness and effectiveness of her actions. In the opposite extreme, the anthropologist enters the society as a doctor-in-training, an expert on the foreign culture who seeks answers to a particular questions already formulated outside of the cultural context. Taking that stance, she observes people as they perform their daily tasks, ceremonies and events that relate to her preconceived ideas. She asks questions of informants outside of the context within which a member of that society might learn the same information. In doing so, she might gain the information she “wants,” but it will be superficial in that it will lack the true understanding within the context of the cultural framework. I naturally minimized my position as researcher and maximized by interest in participation in jali musical society in my fieldwork.

As a reflective practitioner, I am a primary participant in the study in which I follow an organic path based on a continuing personal interest in the music and culture with jalis in various capacities. In the course of two years of fieldwork (2005-2007), I am a student and organizer of balafon workshops, a private balafon student, a friend, a



patron, an agent, a *marraine*,<sup>24</sup> and ultimately, a *jatigi*<sup>25</sup> in my relations with jalis. Much of my knowledge about jaliya comes from self-reflections on my own actions as I move through the learning process (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986). In the course of the thesis I delineate my progression in a learning process. Dreyfus and Dreyfus write about the stages of learning from novice through expert in which the more advanced stages of know-how use intuition rather than rational thinking in action. My research process and methods of analysis necessarily include my intuitions and uncertainties as I act within extra-jali social units. Through self-reflection and inquiry, I adjust my behavior and create “on-the-spot” experimentation to suit the context at hand. This enables me to construct and deconstruct theories that fit my experiences (Schön 1987).

My own work is different in that I did not go to the field, the field came to me. Mande culture looms large in New York and the tightly woven bonds are not easily broken. Still, jalis necessarily become involved in the culture of New York and the surrounding area in order to make a living and to learn about our culture as much as we who are involved with the music learn about theirs. Standard methods of fieldwork would not be suitable for such a study, thus I am necessarily a reflective practitioner and a natural part of the jalis’ cultural reality in New York.

I do not speak Malinké or any of the West African languages with any fluency yet, though I speak smatterings of Manding, Wolof, Fulah, and Sousou. Nevertheless I was able to speak fluently with all of my participants in French and English for analytical and practical purposes. Most West Africans speak one of these two languages as well as several local languages.

I have had many experiences during the course of the past two years, not all of which can be recounted in the pages of this thesis, though it may seem as if I have

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<sup>24</sup>*Marraine* is a French word meaning godmother. Guineans use this term to describe a particular title of honorary status bestowed on a person by the hosts of a celebration.

<sup>25</sup>*Jatigi* is a Malinké word to describe a person of particular noble status, usually responsible for taking care of a jali.

tried at times. Throughout the fieldwork period, I have kept extensive personal journals and made minidisk and audiovisual recordings on a digital handy cam of concerts and balafon lessons out of personal interest and for the benefit of the jalis who have requested them. I reflect on my own positions and personal reactions as a source of analysis,<sup>26</sup> and the recordings have come to be useful, unintentionally, as they create a wealth of feedback when I view them with jalis, other West Africans, and non-African friends who have relationships with jalis in varying capacities.<sup>27</sup> I have come to use “life as inquiry” as a methodology for anthropological fieldwork (Marshall 2001).

Part of my fieldwork technique is to avoid the direct interview. I am self-conscious about asking questions at inappropriate times, and that has served me well in the long run, though it may, at times limit the information I could collect. I do not want to appear in the position of researcher and my aim is not to extract information out of context.

The West African jalis with whom I work generally request that I videotape their performance because they want to be able to review their work. Then they ask me for tape copies for their own files. This has turned into a mutually beneficial technique. I want to understand more, and they want the people of our society to understand them.

Watching the video together provides the perfect occasion for me to ask questions relevant to the circumstance. Sometimes they do not answer my questions. Maybe they do not understand them, or maybe they are engrossed in the video. Certain questions I had planned to ask seem irrelevant or inappropriate at the time of viewing, so I let them go. New questions come out by intuition. Sometimes they offer me other

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<sup>26</sup>Called “first-person inquiry” (Torbert 2001).

<sup>27</sup>Called “second-person inquiry” (Ibid.)

information based on what they find important. This process, again, allows the jalis to guide the course of my understanding as they deem appropriate.

This methodology technique has increased my sensitivity to the timing details of Manding culture. Once again, I find my sensitivity of timing shifts as I develop friendships with jalis. The normal speed at which I might function within my own society, the moments at which I would decide to act, are not the same as when I communicate with my jali friends. When I am sensitive to this, the right occasions for my questions present themselves, or I realize that they were not the right questions to ask. And sometimes, I find answers to questions I would not have thought to ask. In this way, my thesis grows organically, through the natural course of events as I learn about the Manding way of moving through time in interpersonal relationships.

John Miller Chernoff's *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* was the original inspiration for my work (Chernoff 1979). As a Masters student of anthropology, John moved to Ghana to learn to play the drum and promptly relinquished any hope of writing anything meaningful. "When it no longer made sense to think of writing about what I was doing there, I was moving into a level of involvement with African social life that went beyond the limited participation practiced in most ethnographic research orientations" (Chernoff 1979: 8). He continues, "My nonchalance toward events . . . can be construed as part of a research strategy that allowed me to interpret a situation only when I could judge my participation as effective and appropriate in that context" (19-20.) I used his example to justify my own position in which I posited that music and dance students of West African culture, of which I was one, become a part of the culture and understand it in a different way from academic scholars who enter the field to extract information on particular topics framed in the university settings. I decided to become a student of balafon music in the United States and learn about West African culture as other

nonacademic Americans were doing. In 2005 when my fieldwork commenced, I sought out my first American-based Manding musician, a balafon jali from Kindia, Guinea, named Bacar Sylla. My involvement with the American and Mandingo community evolved into different forms out of this initial contact.

### *Summary of Chapters*

The presentation of my work in this dissertation employs prose, audio and visual media, (which can be obtained by contacting the author at [lisa\\_feder@hotmail.com](mailto:lisa_feder@hotmail.com)), quotes from jali friends, and live performance. In the conclusion I formulate a picture of the current day, cross-cultural reality of jalis living outside of West Africa, commenting on how West African and American society cross-influence one another as we move forward into the twenty-first century.

Each chapter marks a progression in the learning process. We view live music vignettes that explore the inexperienced listener's perception (chapter 2) to her response (chapter 3). In chapter 2, I introduce the reader to the basic composition of Manding jali music in which Famoro Dioubate and Mamadou Diabaté perform solos and duets on balafon and kora at the Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance. I introduce theoretical ideas on how we may find meaning in music through a mind-body approach and present how the inexperienced listener may experience and misinterpret Manding music.

In chapter 3 we visit several live musical performances in which Famoro and his band, Kakande play a Manding repertoire based on jali songs played for many decades, an often centuries, suited for non-Manding audiences. I explore how Famoro uses different techniques to engage inexperienced listeners to pay attention and then participate in the music scene. Participation brings the listener to a new level of engagement in which cultural differences are revealed and learning is initiated through

*prises de conscience*. The music provides a common frame of reference through which differences may be temporarily suspended and new social meaning may be negotiated. Live musical participation sets the stage for more in-depth understanding of meaning in Manding music and/or provides the first evidence of how cultures influence one another to change.

Chapter 4 brings us into the balafon workshops. In this chapter we see, through audiovisual media and my own self-reflective writings, how non-Manding students endure the difficult learning process of confronting and breaking through mental and physical barriers in order to reconstruct new patterns of thinking and acting in the Manding way. This chapter draws parallels between the difficulties in learning the music and the difficulties in learning social relations through interaction with the Manding teacher. The chapter reveals culturally distinct patterns of connecting mind and body.

Chapter 5 brings us into the first all Manding musical context in which Oumou Diabaté and her sister, Missia, interact directly with the audience through praise singing and spraying.<sup>28</sup> In this chapter I show how observation without physical participation is a necessary component of learning cross-culturally. I employ self-reflections on my previous experiences in West Africa to make sense of the current live music situation in New York, which prepares me for participation in chapter 6. This chapter also provides the content from which we can draw comparisons to participation in the American context discussed in chapter 3.

In chapter 6, I use self-reflective writing samples to bring the reader into my personal experience of becoming incorporated into the Manding jali social context as a *jatigi*. I divulge my inhibitions, my self-doubts, and my triumphs in expressing myself

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<sup>28</sup> Spraying is a term I borrow from Christopher Waterman. It describes the act of flinging money at or sticking money on musicians and singers as a form of appreciation (Waterman 1990: 184-85).

through Manding patterns of thought and action, which result in my acceptance into the Manding social circle. From this position I offer a new, personally meaningful explanation of Manding jali music and society based on personal experience that, I hope, deepens our understanding of Manding jaliya from the standard academic literature.

In chapter 7, I summarize the reasons made apparent in this thesis for making music and other artful practices a part of our anthropological methodological techniques. I make conclusive statements about the essential practice of anthropology as a reflective practitioner by reiterating what my reflective practice revealed about Manding jali culture. I explain how cross-cultural influences affect both Manding and American culture in New York in the twenty-first century in New York.

## **Interlude 2: Jalis in New York**

*In locations throughout NYC, one may come across areas where dark-skinned people dress in robes made of damasque and head wraps or hats. They will be interdispersed with other dark-skinned people dressed in Western clothes. You may distinguish a different style to their walk, proud and upright, or not. You may notice a mosque, identifiable by its awning, which depicts the dome at Mecca and some writing in Arabic. Women sit on the streets and sell bottled drinks of chalky white and magenta. Sometimes they sell cups or plates of food. Men sit behind tables selling DVDs or incense and herbs, or pocket books and jewelry. You may be walking down 125<sup>th</sup> Street or 116<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. You may be walking down Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. You may even be in the Bronx. You would also find an occasional jali or jalimuso if one knows where to look, carrying a balafon or a kora down the street, or playing a concert in a local African storefront. You will find them in all sorts of capacities—from the all-West African fête—a baby-naming ceremony, a wedding, a concert—to downtown world music bars and cafés. Jalis are part of the underground life of West Africans in New York City that few of us realize exists. Most cross the cultural divide only for purposes of work.*

*The West Africans who make it to New York are lucky. Everyone in West Africa wants to have a family member, or go him or herself, to America or Europe to make money. It's the American dream. While doing so they make themselves as comfortable as possible. But life here is definitely not easy, and many people wish they could return to Africa. They have converted living rooms in Brooklyn and Harlem apartments into African home-style restaurants and bars where ladies in the back kitchen are busy preparing your typical bura-rhe, cansi-ye, chiu bu djen, et cetera. They go to their own seamstresses and dressmakers, hairdressers, hardware stores. They have their own taxi companies. They can find all of their groceries, even palm*

*oil. They buy their fabrics in the markets. They live and function in enclaves of Sousou, Wolof, Malinké, Fulani, and use French or occasionally English, when they find no common African language. Some speak very good English; many speak smatterings of it. They have children born in America. Some children attend American schools and are bilingual and bicultural. And all of them fulfill their social needs within NY and among American, European and African cities via cell phone and travel. They even import their own home video movies on DVD and local music on cassettes and CDs, all of which you can buy around 116<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem, or at Samassa Records on Broadway and 26<sup>th</sup>. When someone can sponsor it, they occasionally import a jali or jalimuso from Africa, like Oumou Diabaté, or Fode Kouyate, or Seikouba Bambino. A musician may drop in from Paris for a big social event. It allows the ex-pats to stay in touch and remember who is who in their local community here in the United States.*

*I live on 121<sup>st</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue (“Adam Clayton Powell” says the street sign but no one calls it that) and St. Nicholas Avenue. There is a Senegalese taxi service on the southeast side of St. Nick’s, a Senegalese restaurant called La Marmite on the northeast side. There are a multitude of West African shops down 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue within a few blocks of my house. The Fulah people sell CDs, phone cards, men’s underwear and socks. The Ivoirians specialize in imported CDs and DVDs from Africa, some originals, some copies. On 116<sup>th</sup> Street African hair dressers share shop space with family members that sell an array of goods, and everyone has his or her favorite, national restaurants; among a few are Khartoum for the Guineans, Le Baobab for the Senegalese, Mali, for the Malians. If you are so lucky to pass this way on a Friday afternoon, the storefronts turn their speakers out and play the live Muslim prayer. People rush off in their holiday’s best robes, the holiest and the elders in all white. Friday’s 2:00 prayer is the most important of the week.*



*I have been on the other side, in Africa where I have watched people receive phone calls on their cells from their loved ones in Toubabadou<sup>29</sup>. They go to telecenters and wait for hours to call international and request money from family abroad. Sometimes they receive money, presents and visits from them. I have seen what happens to the West African expatriate when they go back home. Many of them live a dual reality- one in Africa and one in the United States. They have different social networks and even different families. But they are all connected across that big ocean through the technology of cell phones.*

*Famoro, Doug, and I walk down the street near Famoro's apartment, deep in the heart of Brooklyn on Flatbush Avenue, past Prospect Park. We go to the "restaurant." A woman in African garb walks alongside us dragging two little children with her. She gives one of the children instruction and Famoro immediately starts to chat with her. The woman is very happy to talk to Famoro. After she passes, Famoro tells us that she spoke to her child in Djakanké, the local and obscure language of Famoro's mother's village. The language is rare, and he was surprised to hear it, as she was surprised that this man understood it! Famoro points us to a doorway and we enter and climb a flight of stairs. Inside is a regular NYC apartment, but the living room has been converted into a makeshift dining area with poofy couches and chairs and a series of low coffee tables made of fake wood formica, pushed together to make a big one. There is a full size color TV in the corner, tuned to a British soccer game. We greet the young African couple sitting at a corner table apart from the others and take a seat on the couches. The tailor opens his dividing window with the living room and greets Famoro and us. We answer his Sousou and he is impressed. A woman brings out two large metal bowls, one with sauce and one*

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<sup>29</sup> Toubabadou is the homplace of the "toubabs" in West African lingo, similar to the Latin American "Gringolandia" the home of the gringos. Toubabadou usually refers to Europe and/or North America and toubab refers to a (usually) white person from Europe or America (but sometimes African-American or African-European too).

*with rice. Famoro asks for bengbe, spicy sauce. The woman returns with bengbe, folded paper towels, a pitcher of ice water, and one metal cup. When we finish our meal we will each take turns drinking a glass of water from that cup. If you had blindfolded me and taken me to this place, I would have sworn that you had flown me to Africa, and that we were in someone's restaurant in Conakry.*

*Earlier that day, when I had arrived at Famoro's for a balafon lesson he was relaxing in the midafternoon sunshine. We chatted a while, and then he said he wanted to show me something. I sat on the edge of a chair and he slung a balafon around his shoulders. He began to tap out the simplest notes of the latest song I was learning. Slowly, he approached me, although I was not aware of it at the time. The balafon came within a foot of my face and gradually, Famoro began to add components to the pattern, though I was not entirely conscious of what he was doing. He continued to play very softly, very smoothly. I do not know how much time passed because his grace and complication increased incrementally until I was completely transfixed with the sounds he was producing. I learned what "adiata!" meant at that moment. "Sweet" was the only way to describe it. When I came to self-awareness again, I was digging in my pockets to find whatever bills I had. I threw them at Famoro, teary-eyed, and asked him to stop playing. He chuckled, took the balafon off from around his shoulders and sat down, contented.*

## Chapter 2: Perceptions of Manding Music—A Live Approach

*It is late Saturday evening at the Grassroots Festival in North Carolina. Famoro appears on the big stage dressed in a long, maroon grand boubou<sup>30</sup> and white Muslim cap. It is after dark and there are a few spectators standing at the stage front, eagerly awaiting his commencement, sipping hot tea. I am one of them. We watch as Famoro sets up the balafon. He arranges wires with the stage crew, adjusts his white cap, sits behind the balafon, and takes a sip of water from a Poland Spring water bottle. He looks out at us and smiles. The two guys in front of me greet him with a nod. I am taking shots of the scene with my Handicam digital video camera. After I click it off, one of the spectators engages me in conversation for a few minutes. Realizing that I know Famoro, he takes the opportunity to ask me a few questions. He has made the connection that Famoro shares Mamadou's last name: Diabaté, or Dioubate. He asks me if they are related. He asks me about the special family name that allows one to play this music. He knows a little something about it because he has watched Mamadou play his kora at this concert the past several years, but he does not understand what a jali is. There are only a few seconds before the show begins, but I tell him that there are about six family lineages in West Africa that are considered jali-families. People born into the families have special rights to play specific musical instruments such as the kora and the balafon. They are not only musicians but also keepers of the oral history. Many jalis have the name Diabaté, but they are only distantly related from many generations ago; Mamadou's from Mali, Famoro's from Guinea. That is all I manage to explain before everything is arranged and the stage manager comes out to introduce Famoro to the audience. "Mr. Famoro Dioubate will*

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<sup>30</sup> A *grand boubou* is the most formal of West African attire. For men, it is a long robe sewn from colorfully dyed damasque cotton that covers long pants, normally accompanied by a hat.

*be making some beautiful balafon sounds for you, and he will be joined by our good friend, Mamadou.”<sup>31</sup> She does not offer much background information. The cheers and applause are small as not many have come out to see the show—yet.*

*Most of the audience members are gathered close to the stage, and they watch Famoro fairly intently as he starts off. After about a minute of playing, Famoro’s music falls into a consistent meter at which point Famoro looks up from the balafon to the crowd and smiles. His chest pulses back and forth with the rhythm, his head bobs slightly. A person from behind me whistles. Though he maintains a consistent meter, the melodic phrases keep shifting shape. Sometimes he drops out a few notes from the pattern and adds a new one or two. Sometimes he repeats a pattern he played on the bass side an octave higher and adds some variation. Sometimes he holds the same pattern for four bars and comes back to the exact pattern after playing a run<sup>32</sup> or several runs back to back, followed by another melodic variation and another run. These runs cause a break in the rhythm and the looping melodies and last varying amounts of time, after which Famoro re-establishes a rhythm and a variation of a looping melodic pattern.*

*There are occasions when Famoro changes the emphasis from the downbeat to another beat in the rhythm. I try to hold my concentration on the downbeat the next time he does this, and the next. Sometimes I lose my place, and sometimes, with conscious effort, I am able to maintain the beat until Famoro’s music comes back around to meet my step again. It is hard to feel ease during these times.*

*The piece comes to an end in what seems like an arbitrary spot, but one that*

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<sup>31</sup> In the Grassroots Festival Program, the biography on Famoro says that Famoro was born in Guinea to jali lineage, and that his music evokes the ancient traditions of West Africa while adding a distinctly Westernized flavor. His bio also mentions that he is the grandson of legendary El Hajj Djeli Sory Kouyate. The biography on Mamadou says that he was born in Mali into a musical lineage that dates back seven centuries. Neither “jali” nor “griot” are mentioned (Brochure for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Fall Shakori Hills Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> The run is a progression of notes in sequence from high to low

*leaves me feeling that the piece was resolved. Famoro ends the piece just after he recalls a segment of well-repeated melodic pattern. He plays it in full once, then again, but just the first half before breaking into a final run and returning to the end of the pattern, playing the last four notes a little slower, for emphasis. The audience erupts into applause and I turn around to see that we have a much larger audience than we did when Famoro began.*

*A few songs later, Mamadou joins Famoro on stage. The audience applauds and whoops, and it is obvious that some people already know Mamadou from past concerts. Audience members unfamiliar with Manding music may not have any idea what a jali is upon first encounter, or even second or third. Famoro's explanation from stage in broken English will not help their situation either. "We wahn you know what is jali." He tells the audience. He spreads his arms wide open and grins proudly, "We ahr jali." I look around at the audience and I am sure that almost no one knows what in the world Famoro is saying. But they cheer him on, because they so much like to hear the music the jalis are playing for them.*

*With Mamadou on stage, each jali has more freedom to improvise while the other maintains a basic pattern. They take turns soloing while the other maintains the rhythm. I think it is similar to jazz in format. I do not find myself losing the meter as often as I did when just Famoro played. The audience seems to enjoy the duo even more than Famoro's solo performance. Is this because they also find the music easier to follow? Or is it because they already know and love Mamadou and the sounds of his kora?*

*By the time Famoro plays an encore the audience and he are both very warmed up. Famoro announces that the song is from his grandfather and proceeds to play his best. Even the first-time listener is impressed by his exhibition of talent.*

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the perception to Manding music from

the inexperienced listener's point of view, and to introduce how to think about the link between the mind and body in a musical context. I experience the music for myself as an active participant in my study, and I reflect upon my past experiences and conversations with listeners to reconstruct an image of how we process and find meaning in Manding music during the early stages of our becoming familiar with it.

There is a history of diverse musicological approaches that address how to analyze meaning in music. Musicologists have explained emotion and meaning in music through consonance and dissonance, through tension and resolution in the relationship between notes in a chord, and/or through note or chord progressions through a song. (Lerdahl 2001; Meyer 1956; Small 1998). These theories tend to employ a syntactical, written approach to musical evaluation and do not map out Manding musical aesthetic easily.

It was once standard to write down musical notes and analyze their harmonic relationships as they progressed over time. The static analysis is useful, but such a static analysis of music posed problems to musicologists who favored a live analysis of music as it is performed and experienced. I join the discussion through Charles Keil's article "Motion and Feeling through Music," (Feld and Keil 1994) in which Keil takes issue with Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956). Meyer attempted to unite the formalist and the behaviorist theories of musical analysis, supporting the view that music has meaning to people both at the intellectual and the emotional level at the same time. Meyer employed written scores of music to analyze and decipher the meanings within. Keil's primary argument is that Meyer's "embodied meaning" fails to be an adequate method for analyzing the emotion and meaning in all music types. He is particularly concerned with African Diasporic music, such as jazz, whose emotion may be attributed to the unwritable ways in which the subtle tensions in rhythm produced through slight variations in strikes behind or

ahead of the pulse creates a “vital force.”<sup>33</sup> These subtle tensions tug on our emotions and stimulate our minds and bodies into action.

The perception of music, as any form of cognition, does not lie merely in the auditory system, but in the somatosensory and motor systems as well. It is important to recognize that mental and imagined physical correspondence happens simultaneously with the music *whether listeners are moving to the music or not*. Recent neuropsychological findings show that even when the body is not physically reacting to stimulation, “stimuli are matched to the dynamics of the motor system, then they may invoke a motion of an internal representation, or motor image, of the corresponding musculoskeletal system, even if the musculoskeletal system itself does not move” (N. P. M. Todd 1999, as quoted in Iyer 2002: 392). This is very important to consider in American venues where people are often reluctant to get up and dance as most West Africans do. The inactive listener can still understand musical composition intellectually and feel a sense of shared emotion with the artist and the rest of the audience.

Keil offers his own “processual approach” to musical analysis that uses live performance as the template from which he explains musical meaning. He borrows an idea from John Blacking to produce a “body-based aesthetic” or dance to explain music that supercedes written explanations, but Keil never fully develops it. In order to clarify the difference between Meyer’s and his own analytical tool, Keil devises a table of contrasts between the two methods, syntactical and processual in which he places “composed, repeated performance, mental and harmonic” among others on the syntactical side, and “improvised, single performance, motor, groove and vital drive” on the processual side. While he argues for the processual approach, Keil encounters a problem with his own method when faced with music that lacks consistent rhythm.

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<sup>33</sup> Chapter 4 reveals that this vital force is called “groove” in some cases.

He states, “In classical Indian music, to use a difficult example, syntactical criteria seem more applicable to the initial phases of a raga’s development, whereas the accelerating rhythmic interplay between sitar and tabla during the concluding portion would require a predominantly processual evaluation” (Feld and Keil 1994: 73). I wish to employ and refine Keil’s processual theory by developing further a mind/body-based processual approach to understanding music and culture that works whether there is perceivable meter to the music or not.

The inexperienced listener informed by a Western musical orientation takes some time to become oriented to Manding musical composition, such as the ways in which melodies lie within polyrhythms. Through my analysis, we see how the mind/body of the listener links up with the music and the musician, and where the mind and body become separated in a *prise de conscience* (Hanks 1996). It is at the point of separation that individual listeners may begin to gather a notion of cultural boundary between cultural orientations, revealing a sense of “Manding-ness” and “non-Manding-ness.” We begin to outline a Manding musical aesthetic that differs from the Western-oriented aesthetic and we introduce how to reconcile the mind/body as an interrelated unit.

Music may be described most basically as “humanly organized sound” (Blacking 1974). It is recognizable as music across cultural boundaries so long as the listeners can detect some sense of pattern to the sound sequences, which they have a tremendous capacity to do.<sup>34</sup> This thesis explores how cultural epistemologies

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<sup>34</sup> “We are pattern-searching animals” describes neuroscientist Jan Fishman on the radio program *Radiolab*. Fishman explains that when a new stimulus is perceived and enters the brain--he is speaking particularly about the cognitive perception of music--- there are special neurons responsible for seeking patterns to that which they do not recognize. When they cannot find a pattern they become agitated. Continual dissonance makes the neurons produce dopamine, which in small quantities makes us feel euphoric. Too much dopamine can make a brain crazy, as the first public hearing of Stravinsky demonstrated. In fact too much dopamine can cause schizophrenia. With repeated exposure, however, brain neurons can begin to find patterns in what previously seemed chaotic. In this sense, foreign music, say from another culture that is difficult to hear and process, can become more pleasing and understandable with repeated exposure. With regard to West African Manding music, inexperienced



influence the ways in which people perceive and give meaning to patterns in culture and music. There are many perceivable patterns in music, the simplest being the consistent beat, to which other notes consistently placed in relation to the beat, form rhythm. There are ways of grouping tones together to form melodies and ways of placing melodies over the rhythms. The unique styles of organizing sound into patterns makes up a cultural group's musical aesthetic. When people listen to foreign music, some of the tendencies for that particular aesthetic become apparent to them while other tendencies are harder to grasp or are missed. What these patterns mean to the people of the culture is more elusive, though we may intuit something about the meaning from the way that the patterns affect our minds and bodies, as we see through chapters 2 and 3.

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The Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance is a four-day tri-annual occurrence in Trumansburg, NY and in Shakori Hills, North Carolina. At this festival, four stages are built on a seventy-five acre farmland in the woods. Festival goers might hear rootsrock, country, zydeco, Latin, African, bluegrass, oldtime, gospel, blues and reggae music throughout the better part of the days and well into the evenings (Official Program, Shakori Hills, 2005). Most musicians are American but about 25% of the bands are of ethnic minorities- Latino, African-American, Native American, and a select few are from other continents such as Africa, Asia, and Europe. Aside from the music, festival goers may purchase local crafts and food from local vendors and there are several music, dance and crafts workshops for people of all ages as well. Every morning there is a free outdoor yoga class for the early risers, and

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listeners may have trouble finding the correct downbeat, which confuses many at first. At the same time it is possible to detect the patterns in the music's strong rhythms. Is it possible that the polyrhythmic music causes listeners to release small doses of dopamine, thus increasing their joy?

every night there is a drum circle. The festival attracts mostly American families and individuals of all ages, especially from the local and regional areas, but also music lovers from across the United States. Tickets are about \$70 for the full four days and about \$20-\$30 per day, depending on the day. Many who attend from near and far sleep in campers or tents on or near the festival site for the long weekend. The event is well organized and unruly behavior is rare.

Famoro Dioubate is virtually unknown at the Grassroots Festival and this is his first official solo appearance. Famoro was born into a Malinké (branch of Manding) jali family in Conakry, Guinea. Both his mother's side (Kouyate) and father's side (Dioubate) are of the highest ranks of the jali families under the old Manding Empire. His maternal grandfather, El Hajj Djeli Sory Kouyate, is one of the most famous living balafon legends of West Africa at 93 years old. Famoro has toured all over the world several times, and has resided in New York City since 1998.

Mamadou Diabaté is also a Manding jali. Born in 1975 in Mali, he was raised in a family of kora players. He has lived in the United States since 1996 and has been playing the Grassroots Festival for many seasons. He has established a strong reputation among many festival goers, and recognition in the World Music scene, particularly since being nominated for a Grammy Award in the World Music category in 2005.

Famoro and Mamadou met in New York City in the late nineties and Famoro was the featured balafonist on Mamadou's first (of three) albums entitled *Tunga* (2000).<sup>35</sup> They did not speak for years until they remet at the Trumansburg Grassroots Festival in July 2005, a few months earlier. Famoro came to the Trumansburg Festival as my guest, and played balafon as a courtesy to the Art barn, a temporary art

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<sup>35</sup> Famoro speaks Malinké and Mamadou speaks Bambara. Apparently these languages are close enough that Famoro says they have absolutely no problem understanding one another.

gallery where I was volunteering at the festival that year. He attracted a spontaneous and riveted audience there. The festival organizers spotted him and offered him a featured spot in the upcoming festival in North Carolina, where we see him in the scene above. In Trumansburg, Mamadou and Famoro rekindled their estranged relationship of five years, and Mamadou invited Famoro to join him on stage during his performance that evening as he did not have his own performance on stage.<sup>36</sup>

Both kora and the balafon music is based on the same Manding repertoire and contain many of the same characteristics—polyrhythms, syncopated melodies, and runs of notes that connect patterns. The major differences are in sound quality and in strikes or fingering of the instruments. The balafon player only has two hands available to play notes while the kora player uses four fingers, the thumbs and index fingers of each hand. Famoro and Mamadou do not require much (if any) prior rehearsal to play brilliantly together, because they have grown up listening to similar music, and they have played together before. Manding music is not entirely foreign to many of the festival goers, many of whom have seen Mamadou Diabaté play in other years, although there are quite a few for whom this is their first Manding music show. Those who have seen Mamadou would have seen him perform solo or with his band, which now includes Malian balafonist jali Balla Kouyate. Both the kora and balafon are played as percussive melodic instruments and the music is characterized by a strong sense of rhythm.<sup>37</sup> In other Mamadou concerts I have attended, the audience reacted similarly to the way in which they act at this Grassroots Festival. They are mellow; they listen and maybe sway a little to the music, but they do not dance a lot. Many audience members have not seen the balafon as the featured instrument. The sounds of the instruments are quite different; the kora player plucks strings and the

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<sup>36</sup> They recognized me as the catalyst that brought them back together, and Mamadou has specifically thanked me for bringing Famoro back to him. I did not understand the repercussions of this at the time. Perhaps they did not either.

<sup>37</sup> The Manding people themselves say that they “beat the kora,” the same term used for a drum.

balafonist strikes wood with mallets. The kora music by itself has a soothing quality about it, like an acoustic finger-plucked guitar. The strikes to balafon keys have a sharper, ringing quality and may be less soothing but they are more obviously percussive.

Some of the festival goers know the basics of West African rhythms on djembes (West African drums). Others know little to nothing at all. Although the kora and balafon songs contain the same polyrhythms as West African djembe songs, melodic jali music without drums does not stimulate people in any cultural group to dance wildly. Generally, American audience members sway to the music if they dance at all. Some more daring and uninhibited youth prance and skip to it. I notice no Africans in this audience today, though in past Grassroots Festivals I have seen other West African musicians in the audience. They often identify themselves by calling out encouragement to their compatriots in a foreign language, or by walking up to or on the stage to give blessings. They also tend to limit their dancing to mild swaying and stepping.

Famoro strikes out notes on his balafon according to a very particular Manding aesthetic that serves as a highly specific form of expression to Manding society. The musical patterns—melodies rhythms, and runs—are deeply embedded in a rich cultural format, of which most of the audience members have little or no understanding even if we have heard the music before. Some might expect to hear polyrhythms and we might recognize a melodic line, but I would gauge that the average listener, myself included, is a beginner or at best, advanced beginner in knowing the musical composition or its deeper cultural significance.<sup>38</sup> Yet based on the growing attendance, I can safely say that most people are enjoying it. Famoro is

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<sup>38</sup> Beginner and advanced beginner refer to Dreyfus and Dreyfus' categorization of the stages of the learning process (1986).

reaching out to us through music, trying to convey his feeling with us (private conversations). Although we are not Manding, even the first-time listener can feel his music; we might find it moving, and might move to it. Each listener perceives it musically and emotionally in different ways and to varying degrees according to individual prior experiences. Yet at the same time the music serves as a common thread that weaves all people—musicians and listeners—into one web. We share a common experience in the moment, despite our cultural, linguistic, individual diversity.

I assume that I have more experience with Manding music than most of the audience members present at the concert, although there are undoubtedly much more experienced musicians than me watching the performance. I undergo a continual learning process and can reflect upon my past experiences and self-awareness of my own knowledge to gauge how I and other listeners might understand this music. I assume that most of the audience members who have listened to Manding jali have been limited to American-oriented cultural venues such as these, and perhaps the jali's CDs. I assume, based on repeated experience in scenes such as these that almost none of them have experienced listening to this music in a predominantly West African social context. My assumptions are based upon years of participating in such events and ongoing personal conversations with audience members. As it is impossible to gauge every listener's understanding, I reflect upon my own experience at this concert, as well as conversations with participants and friends, to reconstruct a general notion of how the inexperienced listener<sup>39</sup> at the 2005 Grassroots Festival perceives

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<sup>39</sup> I use the term "inexperienced listener" to describe the average listener who has had limited exposure to this music. Perhaps he may have seen Mamadou play several times before, perhaps he even has a CD. The listener might have proficiency in a musical instrument (not West African-style) and have some knowledge of musical theory and composition. This listener is not oblivious to World Music, and may even be an ethnomusicologist. The listener, however, will follow certain trains of learned patterns (likely common to growing up in a Western or American environment) that when listening to Manding music, it will challenge his most comfortable ways of understanding musical composition.

Famoro's performance of "Lasidan."

*Improvised Rubato Introduction*

*The same piece of music may move different people in the same sort of way, but for different reasons* (Blacking 1974: 52).

The first fifty seconds that I call the introduction is marked from the rest of the song in that it lacks a consistent meter. I use it to demonstrate one way in which diverse people may form social bonds by sharing the same quality of time in a live musical performance. Famoro begins with an emphatic bounce on two notes that marks the beginning, perhaps the "root" notes. He then establishes a series of notes in progression that frame the mode of the song. He continues with a melodic phrase that descends and rises, building expectation until culminating in the same series of notes again. This is followed by a series of little overlapping runs starting very high. He seems to pause over parts of the run, repeating a few notes very quickly, before continuing. Every few seconds Famoro shifts to a new phrase, and the listener gets accustomed to it. Referring back to the previous phrase, the listener draws the relationship between the two in his mind, which may or may not match the understanding that Famoro has of the relationship between the two phrases. The relationship is tenuous at best, imagined perhaps, and its nature shifts with each new melodic phrase. It is impossible to predict what notes or rhythms are coming up as the introduction lacks consistent meter, but sometimes a previous relationship is recreated.<sup>40</sup> The introduction plays with our expectations, heightens our arousal with surprise, before eventually resolving itself at the root notes on which Famoro started with an emphatic bounce. The resolution does not, however, leave the audience time

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<sup>40</sup> To Manding musician and other very experienced listeners the phrase ordering may be "improvised" according to the discretion of the musician, but phrases often have culturally significant meanings. The introduction of one significant phrase might indicate to a Manding person what could follow. These intricacies are lost on the inexperienced listeners. This idea is elaborated upon in chapter 5.

to pause and reflect, as immediately the root notes serve as the jumping off point for the beginning of the cyclical rhythm.

No one sways to this excerpt because there is no consistent meter to sway to. If they are even paying attention to the music, they are intently listening to the musical progression and watching how Famoro moves. Does this mean that the introduction to “Lasidan” is purely intellectual stimulation that one might evaluate by writing the music down and analyzing it syntactically? I argue that it is not, and I use Alfred Schutz’s description of musical “inner time” as a starting place on which to build upon Keil’s theory (Schutz 1951).

In his article “Making Music Together” Alfred Schutz describes the mental action of following a musician’s musical train of thought as a type of musical communication that takes place between the musician and listener on the intellectual and emotional levels. (Schutz 1951). During a musical piece such as “Lasidan,” the listener may pay attention, note for note, phrase to phrase, to the musician such that both listener and musician exist in a musical time in which the “flux of musical events unfolds” and unites player and listener in the same experience. The music exists in a one-way progression from beginning to end of the piece, but the listener, using his reflective capabilities, continually refers back to previous parts of the music and deciphers structure to the composition.

The musician and listener share what Schutz refers to as “inner time” in which the outside social reality fades into the backdrop. The mental attention of both is focused on the sound, where the rest of social reality exists inside of a greater world of complex social interactions (Schutz 1951: 96). What is happening musically, moment to moment, is the mutually shared experience.

*We have therefore the following situation: two series of events in inner time, one belonging to the stream of consciousness of the*

*composer, the other to the stream of consciousness of the beholder, are lived through in simultaneity, which simultaneity is created by the ongoing flux of the musical process. This sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time, this living through a vivid present in common, constitutes what we called the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the 'We,' which is at the foundation of all possible communication. It is within this shared experience that the musician's expression becomes meaningful to the partner tuned in to him (Schutz 1951:92).*

Schutz's description is both processual and intellectual, as he describes how music reveals itself to us through time. According to Schutz, the musician's expression becomes meaningful to the listener because he and the musician are linked to one another by the same experience of shifting patterns. Schutz's description of inner time offers us a way out of Keil's conundrum of processual analysis in the absence of groove by creating a processual approach in the intellect. However, Schutz's explanation is too simplistic. I expand upon his idea and bring the body back into his intellectual processual method of analysis.

Let us assume that we can isolate inner time within a larger social scene. Imagine it as a sort of meditation where the listener shuts out the outside world and focuses only on Famoro's musical progressions. The truth is that we probably drift in and out of this kind of focus throughout the introduction. The "shared experience," nevertheless, causes the listener's intellect to make associations to movements that exist inside of and in between people and their environment in the outside world, whether they are intellectual or physical. Famoro guides the listener's mind to the nature of emotions, which the listener experiences, by playing notes in a particular way. The emotions and images that the music might conjure up in a listener will be individually specific, but there is a connection between what listeners and the musician himself experience from the music if not just the fact that *everyone is experiencing intellectual activity related to the shifts that take place in the music as it is revealed*. This, in and of itself, provides common ground from which to build



further communication.<sup>41</sup>

The emotions and images one might experience do not reside only in the mind but are inextricably linked to past corporeal experiences. Neuropsychologists have found that body motion and the cognitive perception of musical rhythm are intrinsically interrelated. In the sensorimotor loop in the brain, “a perceived rhythm is literally an imagined movement.” Even if the body does not move to a rhythm, the perception of rhythm is understood as if the body were actually moving. (Iyer 2002: 392). “Stimuli are matched to the dynamics of the motor system, then they may invoke a motion of an internal representation, or motor image, of the corresponding musculoskeletal system, *even if the body is not moving.*” (Todd 1999). Iyer describes music as “audible human motion”<sup>42</sup> (Iyer 2002: 393). When Famoro moves to execute music, his body is inextricably and directly linked to the sounds we hear. His hands move at a pace coordinated to the sound of the strike of the key. We watch and hear the music at once. If the balafon, like a keyboard, graduates from lowest to highest note, then when the music that starts high, moves to midrange, hovers, and drops low, Famoro is moving his body from the left to the right of the balafon. We also understand the pauses, hesitations, accelerations, and movements are matched to Famoro’s hand movements, and because we have a body, we have an idea of the feeling of making such movements. Our minds and, therefore, our bodies, make a representation of the movements as we follow the notes.

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<sup>41</sup> Dance anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna conducted studies on the emotional connection between dancers and audience members in live performances (Hanna: 1983). She interviewed dancers and asked them what emotions they intended to convey to audience members through their dance. Then she asked audience members what emotions they perceived from the dance. Some dancers explained that they conveyed feeling relaxed, or happy, or silly, by embodying that emotion as they danced it. Audience members within the same culture perceived these kinds of emotions to a relatively large degree within the same culture. However verbal descriptions of emotions did not match as much when dancers were of different cultural backgrounds from the audience members. For example, American audiences missed the ways in which Indian dancers conveyed anger in their dances (Hanna 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Audible human motion also allows us to imagine dance as visually represented music, which will be relevant in chapter 3.

The emotions that Famoro displays through the music is, in part, connected to a feeling through his body in motion. The speedy runs followed by lulls are akin to our thoughts and movements at given times during the day. Sometimes we think or move quickly, sometimes we exhaust our bodies or our thoughts and we pause for a moment, waiting for our next inspiration or burst of energy. We can relate the motion of Famoro's music to human feeling of motion in body and mind, or any other movement we experience in our world. For example, the fast triple notes that Famoro plays seem to hover over a spot like a hummingbird stopping at a flower before going on its way. We could equate aspects of the introduction to a person kicking a ball down the field, stopping to bounce it on his knee, running down the field and dodging an obstacle. Each person will have his or her own image, but one can describe that experience to another person such that the second person will see the connection to the first person's experience and the musical movement. The point for now is that we recognize music as human motion that we imagine or have experienced before in our world. Although our human experiences are different, all humans match music to our mental/physical/emotional experiences with their world. This is our foundation for deepening our cross-cultural communication. Seen this way, the processual approach can conceive of the mind and body as one unit even in the absence of consistent meter.

Because the introduction of "Lasidan" lacks formal organization, the listener does not develop concrete expectations as to what will follow. The introduction to "Lasidan" allows the listeners to go-with-the-flow, and in doing so, become accustomed to the general sounds of Manding balafon music. We adjust to the timbre of the balafon, we observe Famoro's motions as he moves his mallets, and we watch his physical demeanor, which appears confident and strong. We are led by Famoro's stream of consciousness as he moves swiftly from concept to concept, growing accustomed to the melodic contours of Manding balafon music. Through momentary

reflections on the excerpts that came before, we perceive some organizational categories to his musical notes. We recognize his grace through our own ideas about the efforts of bodily control and movement. It is clear, even in the context that lacks consistent rhythm or melody, that the introduction is laden with meaning, even if we do not understand the cultural significance of that meaning. What Famoro plays is sculpted, controlled, and emotive; it follows a deep aesthetic. We know because we can feel Famoro's certainty through the knowledge and awareness of our own minds and bodies. We are recognizing the "code" or the nature of the relationship between the mind and body; that is, the two are working together closely. The introduction to "Lasidan" is precisely what it purports to be: an introduction that gives us tastes of the styles that are to come.

*The Onset of Meter: What is in the rhythm?*

We might not distinguish the introduction as an introduction until we hear the piece fall into the consistent rhythm, or meter. Then, by reflecting on the shift in feeling, we may conceptualize the first part as a section of the piece, and we might even label it "introduction" because we *feel* the pointed difference between the introduction and the inception of a meter to the music in our minds and bodies. It is as if we were on turbulent seas and we have now hit smooth water. It's as if Chinese speakers surround us and suddenly they start speaking in English. Our minds lock in with the repetition. We feel it in our body and suddenly the rhythm begs us to tap our feet or sway our bodies in time, even if we have never heard a rhythm like this before.

It is human nature to recognize a repeated pattern quickly, as our survival depends on social interaction. In his article on *the neurobiological role of music in social bonding*, Walter Freeman purports that the human capacity for music-making arose from an evolutionary biological necessity to form social bonds among

individuals. Individuals, he explains, go about constructing a web of knowledge from their diverse experiences about which they form their own, unique understandings based on their personalities and emotions. As we grow older and older, individuals who do not share a common everyday existence experience a widening epistemological solipsism—the gradual increasing division between people’s individual knowledge, that is, their ideas about the world and their role in it. Freeman argues that rhythmic behavioral activities, and music *par excellence*, break through epistemological solipsism and serve as a society-forming practice. Intentionally shared activities bring individuals’ neural focus to a common point of reference upon which both may agree and depend. “It is the prior establishment of mutual understanding and trust through shared actions, during which brains create the channels, codes, agreements and protocols that precede the reciprocal mappings of information in dialogues” (Freeman 2000: 4). Thus, in order for solipsistic individuals to develop social bonds, the first step is to agree to certain codes of behavior from which they may derive meaningful expression. Famoro is establishing that code of behavior for us in the consistent rhythm he plays. He is forming expectations in our minds in that we feel ahead of time what should happen next in the way of rhythm.

Freeman explains that it is at these times of release from tensions as in rhythmic repetition that mental blocks come down and people converse more easily (Freeman). Rhythm, like jogging, breathing, or any other rhythmic activity, is meditative. It eases our minds from the tensions of everyday life that bring a constant bombardment of information. Of course the recurring tensions within the rhythm, compounded by additional variations to the rhythm, will offer new pieces of information and create new tensions with which to grapple, but in a regulated manner. The tensions produced by other notes in the music reinforce the rhythmic

“convention” while, at the same time, add another layer of feeling to it. The listener can choose to tune in to the variations or to maintain focus on the constant pulse.

Rhythm also has a certain emotive quality that is able to cross individual and cultural boundaries. The rhythm a musician produces indicates something about the musician. He chooses the song to play according to the mood he wants to convey to the audience. He would not play a loud, fast-paced song if he wanted to calm the audience down. If he did, there would be culturally specific reasons.<sup>43</sup> The musician may be able to transmit a feeling through the music to listeners by virtue of the fact that they are using the human mind/body as a conduit for reception. Therefore tempos and rhythms are likely to coincide with mind and body functions common to all humans, such as a slow tempo from rocking (a baby to sleep), or a fast heartbeat such as in samba. Tempos may correspond to walking or running, and may entice people to move their bodies slowly or quickly. Iyer explains that musical gestures may elicit “sympathetic behavior” in different people if they represent aspects of human motion. “For example, musical phenomena might evoke the dynamic swells associated with breathing, the steady pulse associated with walking, and the rapid rhythmic configurations associated with speech” (Iyer 2002: 392). He continues to say that each example he mentions corresponds to a different timescale where frequencies for breathing and body sway fall between .1 to 1 Hz, walking, heartbeat, sucking, chewing, sexual intercourse occur from 1 to 3 Hz; and speech, hand and digital motions, from 3 to 10 Hz. (Iyer 2002: 393). Although it does not provide a lot of information, the rhythmic feeling gives us one more clue into the meaning of the music, with which we may begin to build more nuanced cultural significance.

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<sup>43</sup> One example, West African Wolof sabar music is played with extremely fast drum rhythms. The inexperienced listener might feel very wound up listening to this music. One friend told me that when she heard it she felt like she would have a heart attack. But the Wolof people show how to be smooth, though animated, when listening to the music, which they exemplify best through their easy-going dance moves.

Controlling and understanding the feeling behind the action is essential to cross-cultural communication.

The onset of meter mimics society's norms in certain perfunctory ways. Social communication of any kind, body language, speech, or styles of dress rely upon a pattern of action that has been repeated in particular contexts through time such that members of the social group attribute significance to it. As Famoro plays a rhythmic pattern on the balafon, we recognize it as a standard form of behavior. We hear it and see it; we catch on to it quickly and it bonds us into a temporary society.

Emile Durkheim describes society as a certain force and a moral obligation to which people refine their movements and actions in order to come together around a collective emotion (Durkheim 1995: 209). Social behavior depends upon repeated exposure and correct timing to effectively convey meaning. Rhythm is the manifestation of such behavior, *par excellence*, in that it reproduces society-in-the-(re)making, in succinct, time-regulated fashion instantly. Like other social norms, rhythm focuses our thoughts and sculpts our body motions. It gives the listeners an immediate common point of reference that is easily recognizable and felt, unlike other social norms which require days or months to notice, and even longer to internalize.

### *Culturally Diverse Perceptions*

Ethnomusicologist Chernoff describes the potentially confusing aspects in West African music for the inexperienced Western-oriented listener.

*Western music tends to rely on a single metric pulse unified on the downbeat: rhythmic movement is generally straightforward and is often articulated as an attribute of melody. African music tends toward multiple rhythmic lines defined with reference to one another: frequently, the rhythms [melodies] have different starting points and different timing. As a result, those who are unfamiliar with a given piece are not clear about which particular rhythm defines the basic pulse of the music. The inability to distinguish a rhythmic foundation*

*results in alienation evidenced as the experience of monotony or its complement, cacophony. Even without variation, a particular rhythm can be potentially disorienting, and African music exploits this ambiguity in perspective* (Chernoff 1991: 22).

I dissect Chernoff's points by explaining how they play out for the listener in live musical performances. Though we can use the musical meter to tune in and form bonds, there are also significant characteristics to Manding music that cause the inexperienced listener to get caught in her culturally informed expectations of how the music will unfold. When this happens, her mind/body move in one direction and the music moves in another. Noticing that the music does not follow her expectations; the listener has a *prise de conscience* (separation of mind from body), which stops the body's regulated movement to the music until the listener can reestablish a connection to a rhythmic pulse (Hanks 1996).

In his book on the communicative practice, linguist William Hanks reviews the history of linguistic anthropology, placing special emphasis on the effect of phenomenology on language studies. He draws upon Merleau-Ponty to describe the process of making bodily habitus from moments of self-consciousness. "The *schema corporel* is constituted in the momentary consciousness of the actor, what he called the *prise de conscience* in which the actor is aware of his or her own current body posture and motion. It is a reflexive process, in which perception and awareness of self interfere with physical motions to produce a phenomenological "posture" (Hanks 1996: 254 on Merleau-Ponty). I describe some of the most common ways this happens to the inexperienced listener by recalling my own experiences as well as referring to observation of and conversations with other audience members. In this thesis, I focus particularly on the *prise de conscience* that happens when the student realizes her postures and motions are different from what the music seems to indicate. The *prise de conscience* is the first step to creating a new habitus in a new cultural frame of reference.

### *Layered melodies*

In Manding balafon and kora music, it is common that two or three different melodies can be heard simultaneously and that they might respect a different but coordinated pulse. In a solo balafon performance such as “Lasidan,” the musician can only play so much of the song at once with two hands. Famoro plays several layers of “Lasidan” melodies at once and also shifts between them. He sets up a foundation pattern or patterns into which he interweaves new patterns, makes variations on patterns, and makes runs down the balafon that serve as a bridge between two patterns.<sup>44</sup>

In “Lasidan” Famoro makes an addition in the music that accentuates different ways of hearing the rhythm(s). In this case, let us say that the downbeat falls on the lowest bass note. The instant Famoro introduces a melodic line over the rhythm, he orients it to the upbeat in such a way that the listener, myself in this case, based on my own cultural sensibilities, might shift her orientation and conceive of the downbeat as oriented to the melody. This means that she will hear the melody as straight, instead of “funky,”<sup>45</sup> and every time the run comes around it will throw her off again, until she learns to orient the melody properly, which will change the feeling of the music to her.<sup>46</sup> Having learned a thing or two about the music, if the listener remains locked on

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<sup>44</sup> Jazz drummers are also known for playing bridges between two rhythmic patterns to connect them or transfer between them. (Steve Pond, personal communication).

<sup>45</sup> This word came out of a conversation Irene, Austrian tap-dancer who now choreographs to Manding music, in speaking about the first time she composed to “Lasidan.” She composed her tap to where she thought the downbeat was when, in fact, as she later discovered, she was composing to the upbeat. Emphasis on the upbeat creates “funk.”

<sup>46</sup> Steve Pond comments: The melody is a descending scalar line. What throws the listener off is that she expects the melody to line up with the strong metric pulses (in 4/4 time, the understood hierarchy is on-beat rather than off-beat, and the beats are stressed in the following declining order: 1-3-2-4 (sometimes 1-3-4-2, as when beat 4 serves as a pick up for the next measure’s beat 1: “and ONE”). It’s a demonstration also that in Western aesthetics, melody trumps rhythm and meter, since the listener is trying hard to reconcile the “errant” rhythm with the “correct” melodic line and logic—and finding herself completely wrong (from an example of beat misalignment in “Tell Me Something Good” by Rufus.)



the downbeat, it gives her body a different feeling, like that of a reggae beat where the melody comes in on the upbeat. However, in music with which I am familiar, melodic orientation to the upbeat, such as reggae, maintains the same orientation to the downbeat throughout the song. In this piece, Famoro plays runs and melodic lines, some of which fall on the downbeat and some of which fall on the upbeat. Remaining focused on the downbeat in this music is a mental exercise for me and changes the feeling the music gives me. Because I am not used to these shifts at first, I find them momentarily disorienting. Even the secure, well-trained musician not familiar with Manding aesthetics might notice that the feeling of the melody shifts from downbeat to upbeat in ways that are not expected. At this point the listener, following the melody, will change her feeling from the downbeat to the upbeat. If she remains constant on the downbeat, then she will feel the melody in terms of a “funky” feel (pulse on the upbeat).<sup>47</sup>

### *Tonality Induction*

There is a field of music perception dedicated to tonality induction. It addresses questions such as how we identify the key of a song, how we locate the tonal center for a tone sequence, and how we group notes into meaningful categories (Gjerdingen 2000). Tonality induction is affected by initial placement of melodies over rhythms, orientation to upbeats, and gaps between notes such that unexpected starts to songs can throw off a listener’s ability to categorize and form structures correctly (Vos 2000: 410).<sup>48</sup> However, humans do possess a certain capacity to

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<sup>47</sup> This may not be too disorienting because of her familiarity with funk or reggae music. However, the 12/8 feeling is not one to which we are accustomed, even in African Diasporic music, with any sort of regularity. When it occurs (as in jazz) it is a temporary texture (Berliner, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Tonality induction develops from early childhood, such that familiarity with musical styles enables people to “encode long sequences of musical information in order to appreciate the musical nuances.” Children exposed to a wider array of musical styles at a young age have increased neural plasticity, which allows for the development of a wider range of short-cuts in their tonality induction memory.

decipher new kinds of organization even in music they have never heard before. Carol Krumhansl conducted one such cross-cultural experiment where excerpts of Finnish folk hymns and North Sami yoiks were played to listeners most familiar, slightly familiar, and not at all familiar with these types of music. The results show that even unfamiliar listeners were able to determine some melodic organization with relatively strong results, although they did not fair as well as those familiar with the music. (Krumhansl 2002; 470). Carol Krumhansl finds that human beings are both culturally sensitive *and* adaptable to learning new systems of organization (461).

In Manding music, the melodies are relatively straightforward to a Western-oriented ear, perhaps to any cultural ear, in that they are short and cyclical and tend to follow a similar course of moving away from and returning to the “root” note to resolve.<sup>49</sup> I can hum a Manding melody quite easily, and often do. However, Western musical sensibility<sup>50</sup> tends to focus on one melody, which is fixed to rhythm. In Manding music several melodies are oriented to rhythm in different ways. *It is because the melodies are relatively simple to grasp*, and our culturally oriented expectation that melody is oriented to rhythm in a fixed way, that Manding musical aesthetic interferes with our abilities to tonally induce the structure of Manding music.

### *Runs*

The Manding musician also produces tension and resolution in the runs he plays, which are a part of birimintingo. The runs that Famoro plays from high to low in

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Adults who were not exposed to a variety of music and hear foreign music later in life have a harder time learning the new kinds of musical grammar. This is quite similar to studies regarding foreign language acquisition.

<sup>49</sup> However, they also tend to create a desire to want the cycle to continue when it comes to resolve because the resolution note is often the same as the start of the phrase (Cohen 2000:454).

<sup>50</sup> I use “sensibility” in the sense that John Miller Chernoff uses it in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, and use the terms, “non-African” or “non-Manding” or “American” sensibility in contradistinction (Chernoff 1979).

between melodic patterns depart from the established groove, and serve to shift the listener from a participative role to a nonparticipative one. This temporary departure from groove produces a form of tension. Runs are usually played with rapid hand motions, and rhythmically, are hard to follow; this augments the tension crucial to the West African musical aesthetic. However, Manding music tends to disorient the inexperienced listener with regard to the rhythm, so that a final resolution to the melodic phrase may produce a bigger sense of release from tension for the listeners. As we saw above, if that resolution falls in the middle of a melodic phrase, it might still be difficult for the inexperienced listener to find her orientation, and she may never feel the release from tension in the same way as an accustomed Manding listener does.

#### *Polyrhythms in 12/8 Time Signature*

“Lasidan” is not as disorienting as it could be for the inexperienced listener compared to other Manding songs because, though the melodies and runs are oriented to both the downbeat and the upbeat, the rhythm remains predominantly in a four-beat cycle. The shift from downbeat to upbeat is not dissimilar from African Diasporic music, particularly reggae and funk, although in reggae and funk the upbeat orientation for vocals remains constant throughout the song.<sup>51</sup> Most of Manding songs are played in 12/8 time. In 12/8 time we can hear the downbeat as a multiple of 3 or of 2. The melodies may be oriented to any down or upbeat of the 4/4 time, or any of the triplets conceived of in the 12/8 time.<sup>52</sup> As such, there is even more variety as to how the various melodic lines can lie within the rhythms.

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<sup>51</sup> African Diasporic music shares many qualities from their ancestor’s music in Africa such as call and response, lyrical emphasis on upbeats, buzzing and rattling, vocal gestures such as grunts (Floyd 1995; Gilroy 1993, Wilson 1983). These qualities to which we are accustomed in American society help us to bridge the cultural barriers to African music.

<sup>52</sup> More detailed descriptions on Manding musical meter occur in chapter 4.

First of all, the song feels quite different, depending on which cross-rhythm the listener perceives, the metric pulse of 4/4 or 12/8. Mamadou Diabaté plays “Behmanka” on kora at the Grassroots Festival. This excerpt illustrates clearly the kumbengo cyclical patterns which Mamadou overlays with birimintingo ornamentation almost every cycle. This song also allows us to experience the potentially confusing characteristics that we heard in “Lasidan” but over a clearly 12/8 polyrhythm. The music will feel differently depending on whether we hear the music in terms of the 2 or the 3 pulse. In this example, I am drawn to hear the melody in six even beats per measure (or the six-count), which confuses me every time Mamadou plays the cross-rhythm, which he does with respect to the 4/4 time. At one point Mamadou highlights a different melody within the piece and it causes my perception to shift from the six-count to the four-count. If I can maintain the feeling of the rhythm on the four count as Mamadou switches to the original cyclical pattern, I will begin to feel the first melody differently than I had before. It also stops me from tripping up on the fill and I conclude that this must be the way the musician intends us to feel the pulse.

#### *Listener’s intellectual participation*

Cycling melodic phrases allows listeners to shift their perception to hear the same piece of music differently. The listener’s mind can pick out different melodies each time the cycles come around. Sometimes the listener hears one melody from a combination of the highest notes from both the musician’s the left and right hand together. Depending on how the listener perceives these melodies, layered melodic lines allow the listener to feel the same piece of music in a multitude of different ways as the melodic contours and their relationship to the foundational notes shift. While this can happen in any kind of music, Manding musical aesthetic *creates* ambiguity

purposely so as to engage the listener's participation.

A skilled balafonist such as Famoro, or a kora player such as Mamadou, while playing a solo performance, will shift between different patterns, play parts of different patterns simultaneously, make variations and improvisations, all without losing his place. For the listener, and not necessarily inexperienced listeners only, it may be difficult to stay oriented to the basic rhythmic structure at all times because it is often not being played; the audience is expected to have internalized the basic rhythm by means of moving their bodies, if only conceptually.

### *Conclusions*

Jackendoff and Lerdahl's *Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (1983) suggests how people organize music in their minds. Although their theory does not adequately describe music outside of the Western European orientation, it helps to highlight the traps into which Western-oriented listeners might fall when listening to Manding music. Listeners recognize tonal and metric structures through which they determine what notes are structural and which are embellishing in the general structure of the piece. Embellishing notes play a role in creating mood whereas structural notes outline and define the harmonic and rhythmic structures of the musical piece. Western musicologists such as Lerdahl did not account for a case such as Manding music, where the structural and embellishing notes shift according to which the rhythm the listener gives her attention.

Lerdahl's theory rests on the false assumption that there is only one downbeat and that it is audible (Lerdahl 2001:14).<sup>53</sup> But his own mistake elucidates a common misperception by many Western-oriented listeners when they hear Manding music.

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<sup>53</sup> In West African music, it is common that the downbeat is purposely *not* played in the music. This entices the listeners to participate in the music-making process.

Listeners from one culture might be inclined to make false assumptions about embellishing and structural notes, which lead them into perceiving and feeling the accent in music in the wrong place.

Manding musicians explicitly exploit the tendencies of the human mind to follow a certain structure, which they do by stringing the listener along a melodic phrase, and then shifting the rhythmic orientation to so that it relates to another aspect of structure to which we may not have been paying attention. It is similar to an optical illusion, like that of an Escher drawing in which the viewer can shift the figure of a three dimensional box to look like it is popping out, or sunken in, to the page. While this feature of Manding music is particularly tricky for the inexperienced listener, the jali's skill also affects the experienced listener's ear, although he may be more accustomed to the shift in feeling. Part of the genius in the Manding jali's music is to artfully play with the polyrhythms. The music is teaching us a lesson on a grand scale that goes beyond the musical realm. It says that we must be careful because there are many ways of experiencing a single phenomenon, whether it is music, or other aspects of one's life.

Roy Wagner explains that the organization of time, like any other cultural practice, is a convention that we construct socially. Every society has rhythms, from the way in which we make music to the way in which we organize our day, month, or year. In the U.S., we generally go to work five days a week, from morning to evening, with two-day weekends on Saturday and Sunday. Schools take Christmas/New Years vacation. In Muslim West Africa, people generally work until 2:00 pm when they pray and then eat lunch. Friday is the holy day. They take a month of celebration of Ramadan where they fast all day. "We create the year, academic and fiscal, and the day, whether holiday or workday, in terms of the events and situations that make them significant and worthwhile, and we do so by predicting them and then seeing how the

events and situations impinge upon our expectations” (Wagner 1975: 73). We objectify time and we mask the objectification, we decline to take responsibility for it. Learning how another culture organizes time in music leads to an understanding of how they might think and act in other cultural aspects of their lives. It also brings us to realize the relative nature of our own cultural creations.

We employ our most common denominators to help us bridge the cultural gaps: the functions of the human mind/body and the innate desire to put order to our world. Western-oriented musical culture is not entirely devoid of polyrhythmic phrases, and our familiarity with this sort of structure helps us to understand Manding music and feeling. We form expectations from the experiential similarities.

Episodes of confusion, a particular kind of *prise de conscience*, interrupt the unity of our mind/body in sync with the music. This *prise* makes us misstep in our action, be it mental or physical, and therefore reflect upon what we just experienced. We will continually fall into the trap until we learn to understand what this new form of organization is, so we may come to expect it. As we gather more experience, we start to build a mental catalogue of marked differences between the ways in which we are used to organizing music and the ways of which Manding music differs. Once we lose the necessity of having a *prise de conscience* based on our lack of experience, we have trained our minds to be used to a new way of musical organization. We have, in fact, moved closer to a Manding mindset. At this point, however, we have just begun the learning process; we are at the stage of a small child in African, familiar with the form but only dimly, if at all, aware of the deeply sophisticated aspects of the musical culture.

As Manding music does not follow the same aesthetics, Americans become disoriented, *even if the pattern is cyclical*. Manding music is “popular” or “folk” in Small’s definition, enticing participation due to greater degrees of predictability

(Small 1998; 125), and “processual” in Keil’s description (Feld and Keil 1998) in that the cyclical and repeating patterns catering to *African* sensibility entice people of the local culture to participate. There is a high level of predictability in the cycling patterns to those who can maintain a steady orientation to the downbeat. The very same music does *not* necessarily cater to the less experienced listeners’ participation because they become confused in the polyrhythms. The music becomes more of an intellectual exercise in finding rhythmic orientation for the non-Manding listener. Confusion mounts when birimintingo ornamentation overlaps the kumbengo. Even advanced students find endless intellectual challenges in understanding the ways in which the jali varies kumbengo and birimintingo within the rhythm.

The inexperienced listener finds herself in an interesting place of being able to perceive a consistent rhythm to the song, yet not being able to follow it consistently throughout the duration of the song. It affects the way in which the body might engage in the song, and it certainly inflates the way in which Americans experience locations of tension in the music before hearing the resolution. This is part of the joy of West African music to many foreign listeners. It is a novel way of expressing musical feeling, and it is intellectually stimulating. If inexperienced listeners do not learn to feel the music in the way in which the musician feels it, their minds and perhaps their bodies, can lose their place of orientation and will literally become confused about how to feel. They also will not be experiencing the music in the way in which the West Africans intend it to be felt. Through repeated exposure and familiarity, this music is capable of teaching inexperienced Westerners a new way to feel through music.



### **Interlude 3: Kakande plays Zebulon**

*The audience crowds into a little, French-American, hipster's bar/cafe called Zebulon, in the heart of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The local 20-40-something crowd is made up of hip New Yorkers, well-dressed, casually. Some travel in from Manhattan, in particular from the lower east side and east village. Others come from upper Manhattan or even outside the city because they know people in the band. Some have a musical background.*

*It is 10:30 on Saturday night. People drink beers, wine, mixed drinks, seltzer. They are engaged in social conversations at each of their tables. In front of them lies a dark stage, a wooden platform painted black at the back of the room. It stands about a foot high. Behind the stage is a four-by-six-foot screen that plays an old West African movie with no sound. In front of the screen lies a mix of Manding and Western instruments: Drum set, congas, electric guitar, electric bass, flute, and balafon, front and center.*

*Famoro comes to the stage alone and takes his position behind his balafon. He is wearing corderoys and a button down shirt. He tells the audience that he will do a balafon demonstration for them. He is warming them up to the balafon before the rest of the band joins him. There is scant reply from anyone in the audience, and people go on talking quite loudly. Famoro plays a long and bold introduction while people continue to have loud conversations; however, we hear one person call out several times throughout the song. It is Famoro's guitarist, an elder Manding jali, Mamadi Kouyate. He first calls out during the introduction. People continue to talk loudly. Then the music falls into a slow groove, and Famoro lowers his volume for a few moments. The shift from the introduction to the clearly patterned part of the music marks a shift in audience attention. In this five-second stretch, the audience quiets a*

*bit. Some people stop talking, others lower the volume of their conversations and continue talking. The music and audience rise and fall in pitch. It seems that people are aware, whether conscious or not, of their volume matching his, even if some are not giving him their undivided attention.*

*Famoro follows a clear pattern, connected by some frilly runs. Mamadi whoops a few more times. After a few moments, Famoro plays a run and speeds up the tempo to a sprightly rhythm. The audience attention to the music increases, though we can still hear some people talking. After a long frilly run, Famoro returns to a pattern he played often, but he plays it now, one octave higher. Mamadi whoops again and some audience members add to the vocal gesture with some cheers and claps. The listeners become increasingly involved in conversing with Famoro instead of verbally with each other. Now most of the audience is paying attention. There is only scant conversation in the background. The next time we hear an audience response to the music, we hear a consistent note emphasized, and Famoro has looked at the audience and smiled while emphasizing the pulse with his body motion. One person begins a deep whoop, followed immediately by another person's vocalization, and then another, which culminates in the audience clapping to accompany Famoro's rhythm. The audience begins to cheer again as Famoro makes a shift to emphasize the offbeat.*

*Participants applaud, and the clapping falls into a pulse. A few people continue to mark the time with claps on that pulse, and then fall off and re-emerge as Famoro continues to improvise off of the rhythm. Famoro's melody highlights the space right after the downbeat.<sup>54</sup> One person is persistent with clapping and maintains a tempo for the better part of the time until the song's end. That listener appears to have musical experience because she maintains the steady pulse despite the melodic shifts that emphasize the pulse in different ways. Other listeners show*

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<sup>54</sup> This emphasis normally confuses the inexperienced listener.

*appreciation with whoops and whistles although they do not (perhaps cannot) maintain the beat themselves over Famoro's improvisations. When Famoro comes to an abrupt end, the crowd cheers wildly. Famoro yells thank you! back at them and smiles widely. He has succeeded in drawing them in, a primary part of jali business.*

### Chapter 3: Participation in Manding Music-Creating Meaning

*It is very important to realize that in taking part in ritual we do not only see and hear, listen and watch, or even taste, smell, or touch, but we also act, and it is in the bodily experience of performing the actions in company with others that the meaning of taking part lies. The more actively we participate, the more each one of us is empowered to act, to create, to display, then the more satisfying we shall find the performance of the ritual. This is not surprising, since in acting, creating, and displaying we are bringing into existence for the duration of the ritual a society in which we ourselves are empowered to act, to create, and to display. Ritual is the mother of all arts (Small 1998: 105).*

In order for music to communicate, there must be a receiver, that is, a listener. Listening can happen at various levels of concentration. One can hear music in the background but not pay much attention to it. One can listen to a rhythm while paying little attention to the individual musical parts, and hold a conversation with a friend simultaneously. One can tune in to the general feeling of the music as a whole, letting it trigger one's emotions. One can listen analytically to different parts of the music. There are different levels of emotional and mental engagement to listening, as observed in chapter 2. In this chapter physical engagement with the music is added.

The emotional, mental and physical components of the human are inseparable and mutually dependent. Ethnomusicologist John Blacking explains, "Feeling is the catalyst that transforms acquired knowledge into understanding, and so adds the dimension of commitment to action. It is the mediator between the body and what is generally called the mind, because it provides the value that selects what shall be shared and conceptualized from what remains private sensation" (Blacking 1977: 5). In this chapter we focus on how physical participation affects the process of cross-cultural learning. We learn that feeling, as a value that selects what to share, can be culturally specific. By changing the way the body moves in action, we also affect the emotional and mental states.

In order for meaning to occur among listeners of diverse backgrounds, participants must share a common frame of reference. Individuals who share experiences together develop conventions of behavior (Wagner 1975), or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) that are creatively reconstructed in practice (Hanks 1996; Joas 1996). In the act of expression, the feeling is channeled through *body schema*, or patterned ways of moving the body that reside in the minds of those who share common cultural frameworks (Bourdieu 1990; Joas 1996; Hanks 1996).

Physical participation in the following music scenes varies among clapping, swaying, stepping, tapping, dancing, head bopping, including singing and other vocalizations. Individuals filter the music through their minds and bodies as they express their interpretation of the music. The ways in which bodies in action follow shifts in musical patterns indicate how the individuals perceive and are moved by the music, which, in turn, indicates individuals' past experiences and cultural proclivities. Participation in the musical ritual, or musicking, allows actors to express and play out their differences. By observing one another, people come to realize the differences between them. They may use their faculties to imitate one another and thus find a new feeling through physical expression.

Music, rhythm in particular, also serves as a common frame of reference in the absence of a common culture. While music allows for individual expression, at the same time it harmonizes differences by causing synchronized or coordinated bodily action to parts of the music and among individuals. It is only through active participation that a coherent social unit may be forged among diverse actors; it is how they share a meaningful experience.

In the first scene I listen to Famoro playing balafon at a music bar in New York in which we can hear the audience's attention shift from their conversations to participation in the music that Famoro plays. In the second series of scenes I observe

audience members who dance and sing along with *Kakande*, Famoro Dioubaté's Manding pop band.

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### *Attracting Attention through Matching*

Different kinds of music serve different social purposes. Manding music, as with many types of African music, is physically engaging (Wilson 1983). This excerpt exemplifies how the jali draws listeners from disparate small groups of people to form a united social group. We observe how the audience's attention moves gradually from their own activity of chatting to focus on the musician and music (quieter, and then no chatting), followed by emotional/bodily reactions to the music (vocalizations), and finally to participation in the making of the music (clapping along).

To grab the audience's attention, Famoro uses different such as adjusting loudness, increasing tempo, simplifying and complicating aspects of rhythms and melodies, and imbuing the music with emotionally evocative content. Sociologists who have studied interpersonal communication have found that there are many factors necessary to forge "good (verbal) communication." In a study on dialogue partners, for example, Stanford Gregory found that interview partners converge nonverbal elements of their speech such as pitch range, pitch register, loudness, tempo, and duration in their dialogue (Gregory 1983, 1994). He purposely mismatched recordings of ten pairs of dialogue partners and fed them into his computer. Then he asked a computer to rematch them according to the sound of their speech. The computer effectively re-matched the partner pairs based on the elements just highlighted.

The unconscious abilities that humans possess to synchronize pitch, tempo, and other qualities of verbal speech are techniques we also see in the musical realm. Jalis are trained since childhood to master these techniques in their musical

performance in order to appeal to their listeners. When I listened to the recording of this night with Famoro, he told me that he watched and listened to the audience while they were not paying attention to him, and he manipulated his style until he effectively reeled them in. He tells me that he adjusted his volume, making it much lower, at times, as part of a technique to lower the volume of the audience's conversations and coax them to listen to him (Famoro, private conversations 2005).

In another conversation, Famoro describes other techniques to me. "I go slow to bring them to me and they can understand where I am going. I give them the step, the time, I play the full accompaniment. I get the melody and time together. Quickly you see they move their hands, they take [pay] attention to me now. If they got me, I change, I can jump now" (Famoro, private conversations, 2007).

Once Famoro grabbed the listeners' attention at Zebulon, he was able to manipulate it in different ways. He challenged the focus of their minds by variously shifting the rhythmic orientation of the melodies. He lured them to participation by accenting the offbeat once he has indicated the downbeat again. This caused them to participate by rhythmic clapping. When Famoro is playing a gig there are times that he will look right at me, or someone else in the audience, and play the beat or the clave rhythm<sup>55</sup> so as to set us straight before flying off again.

When listeners are clapping, many are not able to maintain a consistent, synchronized clap to the music because Famoro highlights another melodic phrase that accentuates a high note just after the downbeat. Most of the clapping tapers off, confusedly. Famoro has altered their rhythmic orientation with embellishing notes. Nevertheless, listeners were able to discern that intelligent transitions in the pattern took place, which they could not follow, and they indicated their approval and respect

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<sup>55</sup> The clave rhythm is common in Latin and Brazilian music as well as West African music. It is a steady pattern that Famoro taps out at clip X with his left hand while looking directly at the camera.

of Famoro's artistic abilities by calling out.<sup>56</sup> Part of the intrigue for Americans is how the musician manipulates the rhythms in ways that they do not understand. By bringing everything back to a common point of familiarity in the end, Famoro succeeded in resolving the piece to the satisfaction of the audience, which was met with loud applause.

Famoro describes how he simplifies the pattern to highlight the downbeat and the melody that goes with it. Once the listeners have grasped that beat, then he is able to weave in and out of other patterns and runs, making improvisations. He still may lose them in his excursions from the beat, but they will understand that he has done something well when he returns to it again even if they did not follow the whole progression. I asked Famoro if the way in which he attracts Americans is different from the way in which he attracts Africans, considering how we get confused with polyrhythms among other things. "Before I came here almost nine years ago, I learned to attract [foreign] people. It gives you intelligence to learn American people. I developed this skill." Famoro had traveled all over the world with his band, Jaliya, during which time he played for Europeans in many countries. He learned how to "give them the time" so that they would appreciate the music more. He tells me that this builds the jali's intelligence to appeal to all kinds of people through the music. He has sharpened his interpersonal musical communication skills by playing for non-Manding people.<sup>57</sup>

Jalis pride themselves on being able to capture an audience's attention and

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<sup>56</sup> Raul Rothblatt, one of Kakande's American band members specifically described that he gained a reverent respect for Manding music by watching Famoro and others play in ways that he knew were logical, but he could not follow, even as an erudite musician.

<sup>57</sup> Mamadou Diabate explained to me in another context, after a Grassroots performance that he never changes the Manding aesthetic for the Americans because it opens their minds to a new way (Private Conversations, Grassroots Festival 2005). Famoro agreed with him. Both jalis feel that they maintain Manding musical aesthetics and traditions in full, while at the same time they appeal to foreign audiences.



dazzle them with their ability to play with their expectations. They are skilled at manipulating the rhythmic patterns separately while also maintaining an image of how they sound together. This is part of Manding notion of how music is organized. When playing for American audiences, Famoro can highlight the melody he wants the audience to perceive, which consequently brings their attention to the corresponding rhythm (Informal conversations, 2005-2006) In doing so, he can shift the audience's concentration from the rhythm played on the left side to the rhythm played on the right side of the balafon by shifting the emphasis of the strikes. This results in shifting our attention from the downbeat to the offbeat in this song, or from the four-count to the six-count in songs with 12/8 meter.

Paul Berliner describes the same skill among Shona Mbira players.<sup>58</sup> The player, by accenting certain notes, can cause those notes from the “high-tone melody to be regrouped with the melody in the middle register, creating a phrase with an altered melodic/rhythmic shape. Through such means as accentuation it is possible for performers to enhance the phenomenon of inherent rhythms in their music, creating the effect of variation in their performance without actually changing any of the pitches they are playing in a particular pattern. This effect of subtle variation can also result from ways in which the listener shifts his or her way of listening to the relationship among interwoven lines of mbira music” (Berliner: 90).

Sometimes Famoro watches the people in the audience as he plays. He tells me that he tries to represent their “feeling” on the balafon. When he is successful, it makes them stop and pay attention to him. “Feeling” is a term that Famoro uses frequently to refer to people, music, and himself and I have come to learn what it means in context. Feeling might correspond to a person's mood, or personality, or the

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<sup>58</sup> The Shona are an ethnic group in Zimbabwe. Their geographical location and culture have no direct affiliation with the Mande people, but their musical styles on the mbira (thumb piano) are similar in polyrhythms and improvisational styles.

energy he emits through his actions or speech, which may be excited and quick, lethargic and slow, calm and alert, et cetera. How different a feeling is expressed by someone who moves slowly with graceful moves and upright posture than someone who moves with fast with stilted movements. Famoro speaks about matching these actions with parts of his music.

A musical pattern, a song, a genre can be described as containing a consistent feeling that the player conveys<sup>59</sup>. Famoro says, for example, “When you listen to my music, I give you my feeling,” and he hits his heart for emphasis as he says this. Or, “When Doug plays balafon, he’s got my feeling.” When Famoro looks at individuals in the audience, he sometimes tries to match someone’s feeling, or energy level. I have seen this work particularly well with children to whom he might direct a high-pitched, bright melody. Children stop in their tracks as Famoro plays to them and become transfixed by the balafon. Sometimes they start to bounce up and down or dance to the music, other times they remain motionless and stare.

Famoro also describes ways of attracting the audience’s attention through his own relationship to his balafon and to other jalis in his past and present. He describes that he has a personal relationship with his balafon that interests people when they hear them (the balafon and Famoro) conversing. He tells me that it is a “Fire. It is spiritual. A feeling, a tension [attention?] between me and my balafon. We converse. We share something. Some people [in the audience] they ‘blah blah’<sup>60</sup> but I have the notes to bring them to me. That is my spirituality between me and my balafon. We get together to bring people to us, our conversation with God.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> He also adds his own feeling to the general feeling in the song. The composition of the song guides feeling by establishing the structures, but the musician adds his personal feeling in the way he pushes on these structures in his expression of them.

<sup>60</sup> Together, the Americans and Manding griots have developed the term together, *blah blah* for talking, chatting, or *blah blahing* with friends. It implies casual conversation, and sometimes meaningless chatter.

<sup>61</sup> When Famoro bows at the end of a performance, sometimes he holds his balafon and bows with it, as if it were bowing as well.

Paul Berliner describes something similar in the relationship between the mbira players and their instruments where there is “an intimate nature of the relationship between the mbira player and his mbira during a performance” (Berliner 1981: 128). These musicians talk about how the mbira has a voice that not only reflects the player’s movements back to himself but also inspires him with new ideas. The mbira literally sings back to the player. Berliner describes that the resonance of the notes in the gourd in which the mbira is embedded, which produces a buzzing sound, amplifies and highlights the overtones, of each note. This is similar to the effect of the gourds that hang below each of the balafon keys. As the sound wave ricochets in the gourd, the note quality changes. He claims that this assists the voice of the mbira. Famoro and other balafon jalis also place a lot of value in the buzzing gourds that lie underneath the keys. Jalis spend much time carefully adjusting the buzz on the gourds of their balafons to gain the desired buzzing effect. The buzz of the gourds serves to produce sounds greater than the sum of the notes the musician actually strikes.<sup>62</sup>

### *Inspiration*

Before an important show, Famoro gets very quiet while waiting backstage. I know not to bother him at this time and to keep other people from talking to him. He is connecting himself to a quiet state of mind for “inspiration.” Sometimes he derives that from people in the audience. But sometimes inspiration comes from people in his ancestry, from the spiritual world, his jali friends, or from his living grandfather, the legendary El Hajj Djeli Sory Kouyate. Sometimes when Famoro plays balafon, his face and body language makes him look as though he is conversing with someone

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<sup>62</sup> Gray Parrot says that it often produces a separate melody that resembles a human voice. (Private communication, 2007).

else. He does not watch the audience; rather he is intently focused elsewhere and his conscious mind seems absent. Once I saw him lean to his left side, open his mouth and laugh at the balafon while he played as if it told him something funny. When I ask him about it he says, “I was with my grandfather. I was thinking about him and he make me to play strong.”

Famoro’s duet with Mamadou Diabaté at Grassroots Festival 2005 was a particularly inspirational show. Before the jalis went on stage, they sat in a performer’s tent just behind the stage and played quietly with one another, tuning the kora to the balafon and getting one another’s feeling. During their performance, Mamadou and Famoro effectively inspired one another as they played, and the audience conveyed their appreciation, myself included. We seemed to share in the inspiration between Famoro and Mamadou although we did not know the history and specific details behind their exchanges. One could hear that their solos referred to one another, and sometimes they seemed to play phrases back and forth as if in conversation. Due to their common ancestry they are able to refer to particular emotions and memories, musically which also serve as a source of their inspiration. Audience members perceive inspired moments through the music. They exhibit this by paying close attention, sometimes calling out in support, and exploding with applause afterwards. At the same time, improvising over the kumbengo patterns by turns is similar to jazz aesthetics of improvisation. This is a more recent development in jali performances probably stemming from a combination of non-African audience responses to jali music as well as jali interests in jazz music both in the United States and in Africa.<sup>63</sup>

Inspiration is defined as “the act of breathing in,” and “the act or power of

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<sup>63</sup> There are several Manding Jazz bands in New York City right now such as *Source* and *The Manding Ambassadors*. The Manding musicians found inspiration from jazz music in Africa since the 1970s, maybe earlier, and some have continued an active practice of learning and playing jazz in New York with non-African jazz musicians.

exercising an elevating or stimulating influence upon the intellect or emotions, the result of such influence, which quickens or stimulates” (Wiktionary, entry 3/07). Inspiration may be rendered mentally, as a memory or idea comes to mind, and emotionally, as a feeling. Inspiration motivates us to express that feeling through action. Famoro’s inspiration comes out as a steady flow of emotion in music, usually intuited by the audience because it is particularly riveting. Inspiration is therefore, transmitted through the music. Similarly, we remember from the Zebulon scene that Mamadi’s whoops also served as a source of inspiration, prompting the audience to respond to the music in a similar fashion. Mamadi, as I learned afterward, was urging Famoro on because he was playing his grandfather’s version of Lasidan, which is respectable and valuable knowledge for a jali to display. The cultural significance was lost on the audience but they were able to perceive the emotion between Famoro’s playing and Mamadi’s whoops. Inspiration may be culturally specific and universally motivating at the same time.

In their book on the power of human intuition, Dreyfus and Dreyfus discuss the progressive stages of know-how in which proficiency and expertise are the second highest and highest levels. Both proficient and expert practitioners rely on intuition to carry out tasks. “The proficient performer, while intuitively organizing and understanding his task, will still find himself thinking analytically about what to do...the spell of involvement in the world of the skill will thus be temporarily broken.” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986: 29) The expert acts ‘arationally’ as he performs his task. “An expert’s skill has become so much a part of him that he need be no more aware of it than he is of his own body” (30). The authors continue, “Arational behavior, then, refers to action without conscious analytic decomposition and recombination” (36). The analytical mind is not leading the intelligence anymore. Dreyfus and Dreyfus “call the intuitive ability to use patterns without decomposing

them into component features, ‘holistic similarity recognition’” (28).<sup>64</sup> This ability comes from lifetime experiences such that in any situation the necessary skills are recalled without conscious effort. Dreyfus and Dreyfus are cautious to warn the reader that intuition is not “*wild guessing nor supernatural inspiration, but the sort of ability we all use all the time as we go about our everyday tasks*” (29).

From the point of view of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, Famoro is an expert balafon player who does not need to use his analytical mind as he performs. Rather, he plays by intuition, which indicates, as Gregory Bateson similarly described, an integration of the conscious and unconscious minds. His expertise relies on a lifetime of culturally specific experience, to be sure. According to Joas, the analytical mind is never entirely sublimated. The actor continually reflects on his actions while performing them. Creativity originates from human ability to use self-reflection to adjust actions on the fly. “We must conceive of perception and cognition not as preceding action but rather as a phase of action by which action is directed and redirected in its situational contexts” (Joas, 158). When we create, we are in a continuous process of acting and reflecting simultaneously.

Famoro indicates that there is sometimes a spiritual component in his inspiration. When Famoro remembers the feeling with which his grandfather or a deceased ancestor played a piece, he is conjuring up that person’s feeling and portraying it through his music. When doing so, his playing is particularly inspired such that even our American audience recognizes it, as exemplified in the last solo pieces of the Grassroots Festival. Hans Joas, who also recognizes the nonrational and non-normative aspect to human creativity, suggests that intuition plays a part in our ability to recognize successful expression. “We know intuitively whether a sentence

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<sup>64</sup> Hans Joas also asserts that all humans, not just artists, act creatively all the time in their expressions. “The main accent lies no longer on whether the result of an action has newness to it, or the quality of the oeuvre, but rather on the vitality of the ‘whole,’ the holistic character of an action, the way it is imbued with meaning” (Joas, on Herder, 84).

or a gesture has expressed something well or less well” (Joas: 75.) That ability is somewhat transferable, cross-culturally, as Bateson pointed out and we see in these examples. It is important to note that this intuition indicates the right feeling, and the action has rhythm to it. We can sense the feeling and rhythm as we watch an expert, even if we do not know what the feeling means. I suggest in this thesis that this is an important component to describing a culture.

In our society we tend to privilege the intellect over the heart. At the same time we value innovative and inspired thinking. The irony is that the most brilliant innovation comes not come primarily from the analytical mind, but from the mind in a state of rhythm, meaning that thoughts are mostly linked to bodily action and analytical thought, separated from motion is limited. In this state, inspiration can flow through the body more fluidly. I suggest that in moments of inspiration, the mind is used to direct feeling through the most appropriate cultural actions. I distinguish this from the state of being when the mind leads and feeling is diminished.

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We may be inspired by the music that Famoro plays, but unless we can locate a consistent rhythm, we are not inclined to dance, and correct movement, whether mental or physical, is fundamental to the appreciation of the ‘art’ of West African music. It is through physical participation that inexperienced listeners may work out their cultural differences to find correct, or Manding-oriented movement.

In the next scenes Famoro plays balafon with his Manding pop band, *Kakande*. The rhythm section helps to orient listeners to the downbeat so that they may dance more easily. Kakande’s members are a mix of nationalities, three of whom are Malinké Guineans, one is French Canadian, and four are Americans of European origin. Famoro directs this band in playing Manding songs on a mix of modern instruments. Electric music is not uncommon among Manding bands from Conakry

(Guinea) to Paris to New York. Some Manding jali musicians have even embraced drum and bass machines over which they play their balafons, koras, guitars and vocals in recording studios.

Kakande plays all over New York City in a variety of venues. The group plays in bars in Manhattan and Brooklyn that hold anywhere from 35 to 100 people. They play at world music clubs in Manhattan that seat 70 to 150 people. They play outdoor music festivals in the city parks, such as Prospect Park where a few thousand people might be present. Most of the venues cater to an artsy and intellectual middle to upper middle class audience of European and American background of all ages, from their twenties to their sixties. There are always some exceptions, and it is not uncommon that a few West African musician friends are present in the audience as well. Celebrate Brooklyn Festival attracts a more diverse group of Brooklyn dwellers, many of whom are African-American, Jamaican, and African. Kakande's basic repertoire remains fairly the same no matter who is present and where it is.<sup>65</sup> However, the balafon and singing improvisations may vary according to the audience present.

Famoro is the headliner for this show at Makor Music Café in midtown Manhattan. His balafon sits front and center on the stage. Jalimuso Missia Saran Diabaté sings lead and backup vocals. Famous elder jali, Mamadi Kouyate, formerly of Bembeya Jazz Ensemble, plays the electric guitar in the classical Manding style of his generation.<sup>66</sup> Three American musicians play rhythms translated from Manding onto congas, drum set<sup>67</sup>, and bass guitar. The (American) cellist, Raul Rothblatt<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In chapter five Kakande plays for a predominantly West African audience which serves as a good point of comparison between West African and American oriented social scenes.

<sup>66</sup> The acoustic guitar is now firmly established as legitimate griot instrument in West Africa. Although it is used by jalis it is still less common than the older jali instruments. Many jalis also play electric guitar, such as Mamadi Kouyate. See Banning Eyre's book *In Griot Time*, for more on a jali guitarist. The story conveys Eyre's experiences living and studying with Malian griot Djelimady Tonkoura in Bamako, Mali (Eyre 2000).

<sup>67</sup> In this concert, Doug, who we meet in full in Chapter 4, plays the drum set.

<sup>68</sup> Raul Rothblatt is one of three co-founders of Jumbie Records.



supplies supporting melody. The flutist, Sylvain Leroux, is from Montreal but lives in New York, and has been trained in jazz. He has studied and performed on the flute and the tambim for ten years in N.Y. and has traveled and studied in Guinea.<sup>69</sup> All of the North Americans have studied other music before focusing on West African music through various forums. Each of them has spent months, if not years, in West Africa and has dedicated his life to studying and performing this music with Manding jalis. Each one also plays a part in supporting jalis such as Famoro by arranging gigs, supplying recording studios, producing CDs, and contributing to the maintenance and success of the jali's life in America.

In the audience are adults of all ages and nationalities. There are also four West African jalis in the audience as well as many New Yorkers and people from Michigan, Connecticut, New Jersey and other states. A fair number of the audience members have come to this show through Jumbie Records connections.<sup>70</sup> The record company has a webpage and a mailing list that sends notices of upcoming concerts and events that they sponsor. Columbia University's ethnomusicology department has also sponsored this event and some of the audience members have come through that path. Others know Famoro and other people playing in the band. Some like to listen to foreign music, particularly of African origin. Some are learning to play this kind of music on djembe drums, balafons and koras. Others are learning to dance to this music in African dance classes. Some are new to, or have little experience with this music, and a few people may have never heard live Manding music.

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<sup>69</sup> The tambim is a long, wooden flute played by the Fulani people who live along side the Manding and are considered part of the greater Manding Empire. Manding and Fulani people often combine their music together. The Fulani also have a nyamakalou musical profession.

<sup>70</sup> Jumbie Records is a small, record production company that produces a mix of West African, Jazz, Romanian and Hungarian music under one label. They have produced about seven albums over the past five years, one of which combines Hungarian-Romanian folk and West African Manding music. Jumbie Records is in the process of producing Kakande's first CD in bass player, Peter Fand's Blue Monster Studio in Brooklyn.

No matter what the venue is, Kakande causes people to dance and sing along before the end of the show. Still, the Manding nature of polyrhythms and syncopated melodies lead the listeners to react in different ways. Sometimes the listeners are confused as to how to step to the music. Bodily participation in the music scene provides a means for them to reveal and work out their different expressions, the results of which may be different but coordinated or synchronized movements.

In the first song, audience members dance to the same rhythm and downbeat because the polyrhythmic quality of the music is not emphasized. There is synchrony between people in that whichever parts they move, they stop and shift directions at the same time, all of them coordinated to the consistent rhythm emphasized on the drum, bass and balafon. Everyone is dancing to a four-beat pulse. The audience movements are synchronized with Missia's, and with consistently played notes on the balafon. The energy level is mellow. People sway and step, but no one is very expressive. Although each person exhibits a different personality and dance style, the music serves as a common point of reference that sculpts their movements, acting as a coalescing social force.

In the song, "Paya Paya," the song is polyrhythmic in 12/8 meter. Famoro produces a counter-rhythm to the dominant rhythm that the drums and bass sustain after singing the chorus and as part of his solo. He plays a bright melody in a high register and the Americans in the audience are attracted to the high balafon part; thus they follow the three-beat pulse. A young American man bops lightly to the fast paced balafon. A man sitting at a table taps his hands on the table to this faster pace, and his neighbor bobs his head lightly to the fast pace, too.

At the end of this scene I notice the leg of an audience member who taps his foot in a different place from the rest of the non-African audience. The conga player

also taps out a 4/4 time with his right hand, which may also help us orient to the beat. The man tapping his foot is a Manding balafon jali, Lansana Kouyate. He is tapping out the pulse that a Manding person hears and dances to the rhythm, the four-count, even after Famoro switches the emphasis.<sup>71</sup> The inexperienced listeners are pulled by the shift in balafon rhythm to which the experienced listener remains steady.

### *Bacar's Clap*

In another example, three people in the audience clap to a balafon duet. One man, Bacar, is a balafon jali of Mande/Sousou culture, and close friend of Famoro's. The two others are Americans who play in Famoro's band on a regular basis, Sean and Peter. Sean is the band's drummer who has lots of experience playing jazz and a few years of experience playing West African music. Peter has over ten years of experience playing and recording Manding music in New York City and Africa. All three men are clapping consistently to a steady time, but the Americans clap in a different consistent spot from Bacar. Neither Sean nor Peter can be considered inexperienced listeners, yet by watching their clap, we can see that they perceive the pulse to the music differently from Bacar. Sean watches Bacar and notices their difference.

While it is exceedingly difficult to point out a cultural sensibility in this day and age, and with such diverse human experiences, I still believe we can make loose general remarks about cultural sensibilities in how we perceive and react to music. Can we consider Bacar's clap to be a "Manding" sensibility? (Chernoff 1998). We can certainly distinguish it from Sean and Peter's clap, and we may assume that Bacar knows where to place the beat in this music because he has grown up in a jali family

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<sup>71</sup> His 4/4 time comes a split before the conga player's 4/4 time. This is another difficulty of West African music, in general. Not only are there polyrhythms, but there is syncopation as well, such that one may feel the 4/4 time in different places, one of which may be a third of a triplet before or after the other.

in Guinea. The people of Mandingo ethnicity are of a particular group in the West African region. Bacar is actually considered Sousou, not Manding, and his jali lineage may be suspect at times. However, in the course of the Manding Empire from 1235 until the fifteenth century many ethnic groups were united under one cultural influence (Faal n/d). Therefore, while the Sousou, and sometimes other cultural groups may have particular styles to their music, they all fall under the genre of the greater Mande music and their sense of rhythmic orientation when referring to Manding music is the same. We see then, that Bacar's clap, if representing "Manding" sensibility, is particular to all those cultural groups to which Manding music is a dominant feature, and we may consider Bacar's clap to be a qualified "Manding sensibility."

Can we consider Sean, Peter and my own response to be an "American" sensibility? In considering that we all grew up in the United States to American parents, we would be considered American. An Afro-American would be likely to clap in the way that I would, according to Famoro's experience in teaching balafon. I have noticed that Latinos and Brazilians who listen to or play Afro-Latin beats are inclined to hear the 4/4 pulse in a 12/8 polyrhythm. If we were to make the same observations in France, England or Germany, we might say that European and American cultures share a similar musical sensibility with North Americans (of non-Latino origin) distinct from Manding music. Brazilian and other Latin jazz sensibilities might have overlapping sensibilities, some of which are closer to Manding music than French or American music. But for this particular example of time in Manding music, as an American I would most certainly not clap where Bacar claps to the music. So we may say that Sean and Peter have an "American" sensibility in this particular context, with qualifications.

In polyrhythmic music, what we choose to recognize as the point of reference for the meter is a matter of our past individual and *cultural* experiences. Our

conditioned proclivity is so strong that even the experienced listener may be likely to fall into old patterns of habit, as we see more clearly in chapter 4. I can draw a parallel to foreign language in that I speak French very well, but whenever I have wanted to warn someone quickly, I always exclaim, “careful!” in English first.

When I listen to Famoro’s polyrhythm, I can change my frame of reference back and forth, although my first instinct is to follow the high balafon part and feel this song in 6, as well. It takes a moment of conscious reflection for me to remain on the downbeat. A Manding person will also notice the shift in rhythmic accent but will not be inclined to shift orientation to the second downbeat in mind or body. Rather, she will enjoy the newly accented rhythm in terms of the first, and the tension between the two gives her a feeling to which she is accustomed. I learned how, by being guided by a Manding person, to consciously override my own cultural tendency as my experience grows. When I can maintain the rhythm without using visual reinforcement, linking my moves to a Manding person’s, then I have incorporated the Manding feeling of tension into my body as well. The music feels differently depending on where the listener is oriented. A 4/4 rhythm feels different from a 12/8. It matters to which beat we orient ourselves because it alters the ways in which we hear the other notes, in terms of embellishing or structuring. In order to share the Manding feeling with others, we must feel the music in terms of the same downbeat, without which the tensions and resolutions are asymmetric.

When there are Manding people expressing the music through bodily action, they guide us on where to feel the downbeat. The inexperienced listener is able to align her motions to that of the Manding person’s based on visual cues. The feeling, however, does not come automatically. I can watch a Manding person tap or clap to the beat he considers the “time” and match my motions to his, but I remain dependent on this visual linkage until I internalize the sensibility of the particular rhythm. This

illustrates the “Manding” sensibility in terms of a feeling. Physical imitation is thus a useful tool for learning about culture here; it can be applied to dancing as well as learning to play an instrument. Using the body as a memory bank is one of the tools that oral cultures use to transmit and store knowledge.

### *Missia's Dance*

In observing the West African listeners, one notices that they do not tend to move to the particular riff of an instrument the way Americans do, although there is a culturally specific time when a dancer and a solo instrumental part link up. Rhythm is the predominant force that links drummer to dancer. In one case at Makor Music Café, Missia is inspired to dance to Bacar's djembe. She boldly takes front and center, lifts up her long shirt, and exposes her rear end. Missia isolates movements very precisely to the strikes of the drum. West Africans also commonly use stomping legs and swinging arms to accentuate the musical expression of the drum through their bodies. There is a common attitude, no matter which body parts they highlight. The dancer makes her dance successful through animated and bold expression. The dancer has taken the floor, so to speak, and must state her message clearly.

It is mutually inspiring for drummer, dancer, and onlookers when the stomp of the feet and throw of the arms align with the sharp cracks of the drums.<sup>72</sup> They can motivate one another to shift the rhythm in particular ways. They are in conversation. Sometimes the drummer leads the dancer, but usually the dancer leads the drummer. When done well, the dancer and drummer unite into one entity in which the dancer is, quite literally, a physical representation of the music that we hear. To do so, there is no time for the mind to think. The feeling is produced in the heart and the body

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<sup>72</sup> Gray Parrot suggests that there may be a physiological effect on the optic nerves when the audio/optic occurs in synchrony.

corresponds to it automatically. The result is quite riveting for the onlookers as it is for the dancer and drummer, to be sure.

The cultural difference is one of values with respects to mind/body coordination. The young American guy who follows the drum set with head motions is, in effect, doing the same thing as Missia when she dances to the drum on the stage. But the Africans reserve a special time for this kind of expression, when it can be played out boldly, as a talent, for everyone to see. If not, then the Africans value the steady state of mind and body that maintains focus on the rhythm while a flux of musical (or otherwise) events is going on in the surroundings.

This lesson also applies to the polyrhythms in Manding music. The Americans who are inexperienced with the social norms follow Famoro's shift to the fast-paced balafon part in 6/8 time. They are not wrong in their new rhythmic expression. But, as with the improvised style, the Manding person reserves the expression of dance to the 6/8 time for when the dancer takes the center, or is pushed into the middle of the dance circle in the village. Then, the 6/8 pulse inspires the dancer to move her feet quickly and create a commotion. As soon as the dancer or the drummer returns to the 4/4 time, it is the signal to exit the circle and hand the floor over to the next person.

In this sense, the American person who dances to the 6/8 time on the sidelines of the audience could exemplify a lack of self-restraint to the Manding onlooker, for the purpose of polyrhythms is to challenge the listener to maintain a steady state of mind while the musician creates other coordinated feelings. The musician, on the other hand, uses the polyrhythmic foundation of the music as a continual source of inspiration for creating birimintingo, with which he can focus on or weave between the polyrhythms.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> It is worth quoting Paul Berliner's remarks with regard to the polyrhythms and their function between jazz and mbira musicians. The mbira players use polyrhythms similarly to the balafon players and their source of inspiration lies in the polyrhythms as well. "The polyrhythms that jazz musicians employ at times to animate their music are actually built into the forms of many mbira compositions. Mbira

## *Singing*

Famoro and Missia both sing in the band, Kakande. They blend nicely with the music and sometimes with each other. Sometimes they sing choruses and verses, and other times, Missia sings praises and stories, jali-style in Malinké.

People in the audience listen to Missia sing praises and might infer that she is telling something important by her motions and expressions, although they do not know what she says. As with Famoro's balafon solos, Missia sometimes emphatically sings to people who are not present, but the image or memory of them inspires her. Her words are strong and she has a commanding presence. The audience is attentive during these times. They look at her, they watch her emphatic movements, and sometimes they make facial expressions as if they might know what she is saying. Her body language helps to bring about a feeling. She holds one finger up in the air declaratively. She points behind her and brings her hand down to the floor in front of her as if she is bringing something from the past to the present. Sometimes she sings out names and holds up two hands as if to say, wait, listen to me. I can pick some names out, especially when she sings names of people I know: Famoro's daughter and wife who live back in Conakry, Seikou Touré, the former president of Guinea, and even the band members on stage. The band members usually respond by playing a little solo back to her when their name is called. Many people in the audience do not understand the purpose of these emphatic speeches, but the vocal quality and gestures

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dzavadzimu players commonly perform patterns with a triple feeling in the right hand while simultaneously performing patterns with a duple feeling in the left-hand, sustaining the relationship from the beginning to the end of performances.

That discipline is essential for mbira players. Polyhythmic architecture provides the foundation for their world of imagination. It is this world that they operate within, exploring all the possibilities for invention it enables. Ultimately, they use polyhythmic resources to explore ideas that are melodic and harmonic in character, and to create rhythmic ideas that have increasingly-abstract relationships to the beat." (*Afropop.com*, "Interview with Paul Berliner. January 12, 2006: New York).



are engaging to watch nevertheless.

As we have seen in the past two chapters, there are times when the audience can more readily participate in the musical scene physically, and other times when the music cannot be physically represented. While both are inspiring, they produce a different effect on the audience. Full participation is very exciting for audience members, particularly for Americans who are often reluctant to join in at first. Audience participation, especially when it is in synchrony, forges a common bond between everyone and lifts spirits. Famoro is always successful in engaging audience participation. He particularly likes to pull everyone together and forge a united social unit at the end of his shows by playing “Sosisa.”

Sosisa is always the last number that Kakande plays. Famoro chants out “Soooo! So-Si-Sa” to the audience, and has them repeat it. When he feels they have adequately responded, he begins the song. When the chorus comes around and he sings “Sooo! So-Si-Sa!” everyone repeats it on time. Once he has them singing, Famoro invites those who are not dancing to come and dance. Almost the entire audience gets on their feet to dance this last number. Everyone moves in his or her own style, but, as in the first example of dancing, the rhythm designates the boundaries of movement, and body parts shift direction to the predominant downbeat. People’s inhibitions seem to melt away when the whole room is grooving, and a light-hearted ambience fills everyone. “The adoption (or imitation) of common bodily postures (identified as posture matching) by interactants in pairs or groups tends to enhance rapport between/ among the interactants, because it signals that the interactants are open to and with one another. The adoption of noncongruent postures tends to indicate attitudinal and perceptual differences or relationship” (<http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/nonverbal>).

Emile Durkheim explains that “The very act of congregating is an

exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness” (Durkheim 1995: 218). That stimulant, when regulated by a shared sense of emotion through music, is amplified as the expression of one individual resonates with those around him. Durkheim continues, “Because these ways of acting have been worked out in common, the intensity with which they are thought in each individual mind finds resonance in all the others, and vice versa. The representations that translate them within each of us thereby gain an intensity that mere private states of consciousness can in no way match” (Durkheim: 2001: 209-210). Musical rhythm regulates our minds and bodies so that the innumerable ways in which we think and act become focused on a common point of reference. The expectancy we find in meter guides our body movements so that individuals are led to move with synchrony.

Famoro purposely manipulates the music so that our differences are minimized and we may unite in a common feeling. He brings us to a place where our individual expressions find resonance with others in the room. He emphasizes where we should step, sometimes he makes us clap our hands, and he has us blend our voices together, also very gratifying. These finales always result in thunderous applause and cheering at the end. Famoro feels successful when people clap and holler while still standing on their feet.

In this situation, the group finds a cohesive expression. The inspiration for coming together as one social unit comes from the music, and is responsible for eliciting the group emotion. Durkheim describes the spontaneous invention of song and dance this way: “Probably because a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement, these gestures and cries tend to fall into rhythm and regularity, and from there into songs and dances” (Durkheim: 218). Considered from the opposite point of view, music can

help to forge a group emotion where one does not yet exist by bringing people to sing and dance in synchrony. The musician has the ability, in effect, to create a spontaneous temporary society among people from disparate cultural backgrounds.

What is essential to note is that cultural and other barriers may be crossed by a certain sublimation of the mind and unison of bodily action. Durkheim also recognizes that “the two sorts of representations form two kinds of mental state, and they are as separate and distinct as the two forms of life to which they correspond,” the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1995: 214). Durkheim says that the bonds of society come from us, the sum of which is greater than us. He places this greater sum in the realm of the sacred. Music has the same ability to create a social body. However, a musical society is temporal. Culturally diverse participants do not share a history of knowledge on which deeper meaning may be attributed. We can build that kind of a history with Manding musicians if we continue to come together and negotiate new meaning in the live musical setting. At the same time we can use the cross-cultural musical venue as a foundation upon which to delve deeper into Manding cultural history.

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The advantage to participation in the live music scene is that the rhythm frames the possible forms of movements. Manding music, like many genres of African and folk music, is particularly conducive to participation through the cyclical rhythms, and jalis are particularly skilled at inspiring participation of the audience. This is essential to forming a social unit from individuals. As Christopher Small says, “It is in the bodily experience of performing the actions in company with others that the meaning of taking part lies” (Small 1998).

When we participate in a live musical scene, we are expressing ourselves within multiple and overlapping communicative patterns. Each action lies within a

web of inculcated patterns to which the actor is accustomed. The music is filtered through our minds and bodies, which trigger emotions and memories based on our prior experiences. The outward expression of feeling through the body in action depends upon our cultural and individual habitus. New meanings are constructed as listeners and musicians modify their habitus to suit the present situation. A temporary society is formed; one that may last the duration of the night, or one that may carry on, if repeated in other circumstances. Through repeated exposure and effort we may learn to produce a new habitus and consequently, express emotions with a new feeling and build new memories.

At this point we have only glimpsed the possibility of learning a new way. The first step is to notice a difference between what you expect and react to, and what the music and others are doing around you. To make this shift to a new paradigm, the actor must practice and acquire new patterns of movement, and repeat the process that bring about the movement again and again in different contexts until she can execute the moves with certainty and imbue them with personal feeling. She needs a Manding teacher.

#### **Interlude 4: *the Airport Story***

Saturday, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

*The program is a crazy one, like it often is when you fall into Africa-Maybe-Time (AMT). Except that we are still in Connecticut. It's 7:10 am and Doug and I are standing on Bacar's stoop. We knock on the door, ring the doorbell, and call on the phone all at once. Doug assures me it's the only way to wake him up. Bacar's missed his flight to Africa before. Will today be different?*

*Finally, after repeated attempts, Lansana opens the front door to the apartment. He is dressed in a three quarters length terry cloth blue bathrobe. A blast of cold air strikes him in the face and shins, and crawls up his robe. He shivers, blinks, and looks at us with a crinkled brow and a grimace. After stumbling over a few words about why we have disturbed him at this ungodly hour, I remember my African etiquette and greet him with a cheery, "good morning!" He manages a smile as he remembers why we are here. He is obliged to be nice, as we are doing his roommate a favor: We are here to bring Bacar to Kennedy Airport.*

*The indirect-ness of this journey began last night, when we drove Bacar from Sue's farewell balafon party to his home, here in New Haven. He made us stop at Sam Ash and K-Mart on the way. At Sam Ash we looked for a variety of guitar strings and mediators. At K-Mart we helped Bacar contemplate diarrhea medicines, cold medicines for children of varying ages, Anacin, Excedrin, Motrin, you name it, we got it. We spent a few minutes describing the symptoms of hemorrhoids to make sure Preparation H was the right medicine for his elder brother. We looked for infant clothes and wristwatches. We opted against the electric shaver and the suitcase. Suitcase? What time's the flight?*

*I took advantage of Bacar's presence to do some of my own gift shopping for*

*Guinea. I would be leaving for Guinea in a month with Feraba African Music & Tap, staying at Bacar's family's compound. I carted items from kitchenware to the pharmacy aisle where Bacar held a box of flu formula. I laid out pairing knives, steak knives, carrot peelers, and other useful utensils on the floor in front of him and asked him to choose what Haja, his wife would find useful for cooking. Bacar pointed. I found Barbie toothbrushes, bug repellent, condoms, tampons, and other potentially useful items.*

*This morning Doug and I barely readied ourselves at a friend's house down the road before greeting the frosty morning sunrise at 7 am, so we could wake up Bacar and make sure that he was ready. I grabbed a two-minute shower while Doug scraped ice off his car. Hurry up and wait, I thought to myself as I rushed. I knew waiting was in store. I just didn't know how ridiculous it would get.*

*Lansana lets us in and disappears upstairs. I find Bacar wandering about the basement of his home, where we occasionally hold balafon workshops. He sports pajamas and a freshly woken face, and he is muttering to himself. Its clear he has not slept much. Nor is he moving very quickly. We follow Bacar upstairs and sit in his bedroom while he showers. There are a couple of open bags, mostly packed, in the corner. He returns and dresses in stages. Tee and boxers. A smoke. Jeans and belt. A couple of phone calls. Doug gives up, and goes out to fetch coffee and muffins. Now Bacar wanders around his bedroom pleading (to Allah?) if he forgot anything, to please let it present itself to him, in English. Bacar speaks excellent English with a fair West African accent. I daydream about what this day will be like for Bacar. From a frosty Connecticut morning, through Kennedy Airport, on a plane for 8 hours, all the way to his family's compound in steamy hot Conakry where he will be greeted by many family and friends. A very long day indeed.*

*An hour has gone by. Just when I think we are getting close to departure,*

*Lansana presents himself to greet us properly and say his adieux to Bacar. Now he stands in front of me in jeans and a sweatshirt, washed up, with a happy face. He excuses himself from his first appearance at the front door, saying he was “fresh wake.” According to Muslim etiquette, one should not greet another in the morning prior to washing hands and face. But once washed, one must greet the others before doing any other business. Now is Lansana’s occasion to redeem himself with a typical West African morning handshake followed by a how is the morning, how is the family, how is the morning? Asking the same question twice is also polite.*

*Bacar and he exchange a few words before they disappear back into the basement cave. They will share in one, last ritual smoke and gather around the speaker-telephone for one, last phone call. Doug returns, and I wait with him in the living room. We hear them talking and laughing in Sousou into the phone. Some guy answers and we figure its drummer Abdoulaye Sylla who lives near by. In a few minutes Bacar comes up, exchanging his flip-flops for socks and Jamaican-made sneakers. Doug and he throw his luggage into the trunk: Two duffels and a big garbage bag of stuff. Garbage bag? Will they allow a garbage bag as checked luggage?*

*We make it to the end of Bacar’s block, Blake Street, and already comes the first request to stop. Western Union, but of course. Bacar explains that he could not pick up his money last night because he forgot his ID. This is meant to soften the inconvenience of the request. It’s 8:20 A.M. Not open. Two blocks down the road, the next Exxon Tigermart has another Western Union. Try there. They can only give him a check. We drive another half a mile. Third try. We almost went back for the check, with Bacar’s explanation that I, Lisa, would take his check, cash it for myself after he goes to Africa, and advance him the money now. No me gusta la idea. Alas, the Shaw’s Supermarket saves the day. Alhumdililai.*

*We zip onto the highway, and cruise for about five miles. There's a Walmart on the right. Don't look, I think to myself. But there was just no passing it. Bacar decides that yes, he really does need that shaver, after all. Doug and I wait in the car. And wait. And wait. Maybe if he could not cash his check, we would not be waiting for him to buy the shaver. Too late now. Doug lays his head on the top of the steering wheel. I pull out the hat I've been trying to knit. A full forty minutes later, Bacar reappears with a plastic Walmart bag in hand. We are already in Africa, I think to myself, though it sure looks like the tri-state area. We cross the Triboro Bridge at 10:35 am. Bacar instructs us to head toward Famoro's house, deep in the heart of in Brooklyn. Brooklyn? Hey Bacar, what time's your flight? Not till later, he responds. As Doug drives, his fingers tap out the rhythm of the balafon part along with the Oumou Sangare cassette on the tape deck. It's the only thing keeping him sane. Except when it's making him crazy. Hey Bacar, where's the beat in this one? Bacar guides him to it.*

*We make it to Brooklyn, way down Flatbush Avenue, past Prospect Park, through crowds of people, most of whose ancestors came from the dark continent, but have never seen it for themselves. A few blocks from Famoro's house, Bacar tells us to stop. He's going to hunt for cheap suitcases. I am surprised to see a choice of stores boasting cheap, black luggage on the sidewalk. Within ten minutes, Bacar comes back with one. He opens Doug's trunk and empties the contents of the garbage bag into it, and pushes and shoves until he gets it zipped up. Doug and I just wait in the car, looking at each other in disbelief and exasperation at the parade of delays, yet the amazing resourcefulness that Bacar musters in the last desperate minutes.*

*Bacar hops in and taps the rooftop. Lets go! We arrive in front of Famoro's house, four hours after we presented ourselves at Bacar's house that morning. I am desperate to pee after having drunk the tea Doug got me. Famoro is away but Bacar*



*requests the key from Fula Flute player Bailo Bah who lives downstairs. Bacar has some things to drop off, some things to pick up. There are no questions asked. Apparently, the Africans have already arranged this ahead of time. Only Doug and I feel completely clueless, in our very own hometown. What about Kennedy airport? Bacar tells us that his flight does not leave until 7:30 pm, and that he wants to get there by 5:00. Doug and I almost start in on Bacar at once. That's five hours from now! Bacar puts on his softest voice. Oh, no, you guys don't have to wait for me. Djoss is gonna come pick me up. Was this part of the plan all along? Bacar failed to mention, until now, that he arranged for Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté to meet him here and take him to Kennedy. We were only responsible to get him to Brooklyn. Djoss is a Malian jali friend who lives in Queens. I go back down to the street and in a few minutes Djoss really does appear. He dresses in a fine suit and overcoat and drives a minivan. It is our first meeting. He shakes my hand in greeting.*

*Did Bacar plan this from the get-go? Or did he realize he was wearing out his favors after the last Walmart stop, and call Djoss for assistance. He made a few phone calls, all of which were conducted in Sousou with spots of French. I would have no idea what he arranged ahead of time. Maybe he did not even know the plan of action when he got in the car this morning. It will always remain a mystery to me, as it often does, when I am relying on Africans in Africa. How do things work? You pray to Allah, and maybe they will. Never forget to say, insha'allah.*

*Suddenly, our endless journey ends unexpectedly, and we are almost disappointed when Bacar tells us we are free to go. We exchange hugs, wish him safe travels, promise to meet him on the other side in a month. We feel blessed to be among the last to see him off. We get in the car to go home, to Nyack, NY, about an hour's drive north of Brooklyn. We are free of our duties. Never forget to thank Allah, Alhumdililah!*

*Doug and I ride home quietly. We contemplate the journey that Bacar has directed since last night, from the back seat. If it were an American friend, we'd be annoyed, we'd feel used, we'd think it ridiculous beyond excuse. When we explain it to friends and family members, they think it ludicrous. But we can't help feeling glad to be a part of this whole jali rigmarole. We don't know how he manages to make us feel like it was worth it, but somehow, he does...*

*...until he calls us to pick him up from the airport again.*

## Chapter 4: The Balafon Workshops

*A researcher realizes that the process of learning about and adapting to life in foreign cultures is as much a breaking down of the categories and concepts that he has brought with him as it is a recognition and realization of the most meaningful perspectives he can establish. (Chernoff 1979: 20).*

### *Introductions*

We call him “Bacarski,” but he is not Polish. He is the biggest mashugana you will ever meet, but he is not Jewish either. When he is in front of you, he is your best friend, but as soon as he is out of sight, you swear him off because he has weaseled from you more than you were willing to give. But before long, you cannot wait to hear from him again, and he always calls again. You feel lucky that he remembers you, until he asks you for money again. You try to remember that it is an honor, because he *is a jali*, he *is* one of the most interesting people you’ve ever met, and he *does* feel close enough to call you and ask for help—like family. Perhaps Bacar is the perfect solution to suburban boredom. We tell ourselves it is the balafon music we try so desperately to learn, but sometimes I have to wonder. He fills a vacancy in our lives, spices it up a bit, and at the same time makes us feel as if we are somehow tipping the balance of the unfair global economy in a more equitable direction. Bacar *knows* this, you see. He works on our soft spots quite pointedly.

When I envisioned a balafon jali, I imagined a tall Muslim man dressed well in African attire, like a *grand boubou* with a Muslim cap. Bacar Sylla is a jali balafonist from Kindia, Guinea.<sup>74</sup> Born in the sixties, he stands only 5 feet 5, but he is a bundle

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<sup>74</sup> The Sylla family is, in fact, of Sousou origin, and is therefore not part of the original jali lineages. But Bacar’s family has been serving as balafon jalis for many generations, and the family is now generally accepted as a jali family. While Famoro Dioubate identifies Bacar as a jali, his mentor and a good friend, Famoro also tells me that Sylla is not originally a jali family. The Sylla lineage is of marabouts (holy men). It is not uncommon for marabouts and jalis to cross family lines in marriage as they both work with occult and spiritual knowledge and power.

of energy. He normally wears jeans and a sweater, T-shirt, or football jersey, and sneakers. He smokes cigarettes like a fiend, and when he runs out, he will make you buy him a new pack and then convince you that it's OK to smoke them in your car. His charm wins you over. He is renowned for playing the balafon and can entertain a room, even while he is tired and falling into slumber. When he tells an ancient jali story such as the one about *Sunjata*<sup>75</sup>, he makes a grown adult feel like a little kid again. I sit there, wide-eyed and anxious to hear how the poor man who cannot walk avenges his enemies. Bacar has the ability to get just about anything he needs or wants if he puts his mind to it. Jalis seem to have the capacity for making the impossible happen in their favor. Somehow they slide it under your nose and, before you realize what has happened, it is done and too late to do anything about it. Having a relationship with a jali makes you sharpen your interpersonal skills in many ways.

When I first sought out a balafon teacher in the United States, I could not anticipate the social scene I would enter. I had gone to the Gambia twice, by that time, and had studied djembe and kora there. My friends studied the Balante balafon but it was not until a few years later that I attempted to learn a few Balante rhythms<sup>76</sup> from my American friend, in Maine. I had suffered to learn kora because it was hard to see the strings I was plucking. I preferred an instrument that was more visually oriented. On balafon, the human body makes a much larger range of movement with the arms and hands in which the player can more easily see the varieties of patterns that she is playing. It is not dissimilar to drumming in that one moves one's arms to produce the rhythms. I found the balafon easier to play, though I like the softer sound of the kora. I became completely enthralled in the several rhythms I started learning and found myself awake until 2 or 3 A.M. just practicing. I begged my friend to teach

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<sup>75</sup> Sunjata Keita was the consolidator of the Malian Empire in the thirteenth century.

<sup>76</sup> The Balante people are a small ethnic group in southern Senegal and Guinea-Bissau.

me more of what he knew. He taught me a few more patterns, which I quickly grasped but he is really studying kora, and I exhausted his limited knowledge quickly. He suggested I find a real balafon jali in New York. A friend gave me the contact of Marilyn from Peterborough, New Hampshire, and said she could help direct me.

I called Marilyn and asked her some questions. She was responsible for organizing balafon workshops in her area, and told me that I should expect to learn songs such as “Soli,” “Cucu,” “Yankadee,” all songs I knew on djembe, on a c-tuned balafon. Thinking I knew something more, I refused immediately. No, I wanted to learn the rhythms of the balafon, not the djembe rhythms. And I wanted to play a *traditionally* tuned balafon, like the ones I had heard in Gambia, like the one I first played in rural Maine. A C-tuned balafon sounded contrived, Americanized, inauthentic.

Marilyn told me that most balafons were C-tuned in this country, and that it was necessary in order to teach a whole room of people so that they would be in tune with one another. “Traditionally tuned” balafons, as explained in chapter 1, vary from region to region, village to village, though all Manding balafons have a seven-note scale.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, many jalis tuned their balafons to a Western scale in order to play with Western-tuned instruments.<sup>78</sup> She also told me that those rhythms are balafon songs. I remained skeptical but agreed to speak with Bacar on the phone. She gave me his phone number and I called.

Bacar and I hit it off immediately, on the phone. Bacar could hit it off with a stone if he wanted to. I immediately established that I knew something about West Africa and its music and that I was not one who could be slighted. I told him my

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<sup>77</sup> For more information on varieties of balafon tunings, see Lynne Jessup, *The Mandinka Balafon* (1983).

<sup>78</sup> To tune a balafon, one must unstring the keys and shave wood off of the center or the ends of the wooden slat. A jali might have two or three balafons tuned to different keys, and will switch between the balafons when playing non-traditional songs with a band. This is a more recent development as a traditional Manding repertoire may be played in any key, thus requires only one balafon.

demands. He agreed that it was important to learn on a “traditionally tuned” balafon, that we could get one in Guinea, and he promised me I would learn balafon jali songs. Then he coaxed me into driving up to New Hampshire for his next workshop. It did not take much to convince me, as I was ready. He gave me Peg’s phone number, another participant coming from Connecticut, suggesting we could drive up together. I met Peg a few days later in her driveway. We chatted the whole way up to New Hampshire.

Peg met Bacar and began studying balafon with him much by accident. Back in 1995, members of *Les Merveilles d’Afrique*, a Guinean drum and dance show, finished their world tour in New York City and came to do a performance and workshop in Connecticut near Peg’s home. Peg had just acquired a djembe drum and wanted to learn how to play it. This was the perfect occasion. Her husband had recently passed away very young, and her children were growing up already. Peg welcomed the opportunity to bring something new into her life. *Les Merveilles* were brand new to the States. They arrived in April 1995, stayed in New York, and a friend brought them to Connecticut to make some money and appeal to the Connecticut crowd. Abdoulaye Sylla, Bacar Sylla, Serif and Alseyeni, and other West African musicians taught a class of 30 people. They were a big hit. Alseyeni became Peg’s first drum teacher. Alseyeni started teaching once a week in Great Barrington. The rest of *Merveilles* wanted to come up for the class and socialize, so they all met at Peg’s house. It was then that she became friends with Bacar. She invited the lot of them to Thanksgiving dinner. They came but brought their own food and took it into another room to eat it!

Peg was interested in these foreigners. She got a kick out of them, undoubtedly, by the way she tells me the stories today. She brought them to her daughter’s soccer game, but they were too cold and made her turn right back around

and take them back to her warm home. They listened to Bob Marley the whole way and made up the lyrics they could not understand. *We're Jammin'. I like Chinese Food.* (Peg's a big Chinese food eater and undoubtedly they had been introduced to it when hanging out at her place.) *Get up, Stand up! Stand up for your rice!* She was amused by their attitude toward the Afro-Americans views of slavery. "It's time! Get over it," they said. Peg did not know then that these encounters would eventually lead her to Africa.

I met Bacar at my first balafon workshop in September 2004 in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Balafon workshops normally happen on a Saturday and Sunday, from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. and from 2 P.M. to 5 P.M. The workshops meet anywhere from once a month to once every two or three months, depending on Bacar's and others' availability. Participants pay Bacar \$65 for the weekend, or \$35 for the day, and whatever else he can talk you into while you are together. We work on anywhere from two to four songs during the course of the weekend, but we usually concentrate on two. The workshops are not dissimilar from the Suzuki repertoire, or group classes where students of different levels of ability play together and teaching emphasizes oral rather than written transmission of knowledge (*Suzuki Method*, in Wikipedia-10/23/06).

*September 2004: an open garage in New Hampshire*

*It is a Saturday morning and seven of us arrange ourselves around in a circle with balafons splayed in front of us on stands, chairs, or floor. The garage doors open to a beautiful, crisp day. The coniferous trees sway in the light breeze and the sunlight twinkles in the lake in front of the house. Bacar tells us we are learning "Soli" today. We click on our personal recording devices, mostly minidisks, sometimes an old-fashioned tape recorder, and sometimes a video camera. He starts*

*us off by identifying the first few notes to a looping pattern. He builds upon the notes, one by one, until the group of us plays the entire loop once through. Then he has us play it again and again, round and round. I lose notes, remember them, lose other notes, and remember them. I'm a little tense, but I am keeping up. Eventually I put it all together and I feel fairly steady on the pattern. I am concentrating hard to not mess up, but sometimes the intensity of my own concentration distracts me. I notice this to some degree, but not consciously enough to change it.*

*Bacar yells over to me, Hey!" I don't know what he wants. "Look Up!" He is trying to shift my concentration a little. I try to look around at the others a bit, and to hear what they are playing without losing my place. He is trying to create some ease in my concentration. Sometimes he walks around to my balafon and plays opposite me. Impressive! He knows how to play backwards! I mess up. Don't think. Think. Don't think. I drop a note while he is watching. "Don't change the pattern!" Bacar scolds me. "I know, I know," I stammer, as I tried to get the whole thing at once without completely falling apart. My body starts pumping to keep the rhythm going in my hands, and Bacar says "Relax!" Yeah, sure.*

When a balafon teacher introduces a new song to students, he normally plays the song himself so the students can hear it. For many students it is the first time they have heard it. After playing it for a while, the teacher might reduce it down to just one repeating pattern—the baseline, or the main melodic loop—so that the student can hear what she or he will learn to play out of this complex song of interweaving patterns. When the students play the pattern over and over in looping fashion, they are essentially playing the part of an accompanying balafon player who supports the more prominent jali. Once the loop is steady enough, the teacher may leave his balafon and walk around the room from student to student, playing the pattern opposite them so he can correct their mistakes, drop notes for those struggling, add notes for those who



understand. Returning to his balafon, the teacher might increase the tempo slowly. He might play another pattern, or start improvising between patterns and runs while the rest of the room keeps the basic pattern going. This helps the students feel where their part fits in to the bigger picture of the song. This process might go on for ten minutes or so, until eventually, when he is satisfied that they know it, the teacher will stop the room and introduce pattern two.

This is my first time in a balafon workshop. Learning the pattern is not so difficult for me. I am coordinated in following music and dance patterns, generally. Learning a Manding looping pattern in and of itself does not necessarily challenge any cultural patterns in my mind or body. It is not unordinary or uncomfortable to strike a key with a mallet. It is a basic function of any animal with deposable thumbs. A basic pattern may challenge the memory when it is long, especially if the first and second measures are similar but not the same. But the body learns to repeat the moves after practicing it for long enough. Before long, the mind does not have to think about it, it becomes automatic.

Once I have learned the pattern slowly, it is sometimes difficult for me to incorporate new notes as Bacar teaches them on the fly. There is something about Bacar's instruction that makes me tense in these circumstances. I find it hard to receive instruction while playing, and remain relaxed.

*I am concentrating on what I am playing and doing fairly well when suddenly I feel Bacar watching me. From the corner of my eye, I see him approaching. His eyes follow my moves to make sure I play the pattern correctly. Relax and concentrate. Now he is standing over my balafon opposite me, and he starts to hammer away at my part. He shows me a new note to add in. "You go!" He expects me to repeat it immediately. I play what I know and watch his mallets, opposite mine. Then, when I understand what he is doing, I tell him, "OK I got it," and hope he will go away. Now*

*it is just a matter of talking my arms into doing it. “No! You don’t got it,” he retorts and continues banging out what I should be attempting to play with him. He wants to teach it to my muscles by imitation of his moves. He won’t leave until I attempt the new part, so I try to play it with him. He yells No! every time I hit the wrong key. Once he sees I understand, that I attempt to correct myself, he leaves me to work on it and moves on.*

Bacar is known amongst his students for using terror as a method for instilling balafon rhythms in our brains. I experience this from the get-go for myself, but the more experienced students chat about it freely and with much amusement. They have already gotten used to it, even if it still makes them nervous. No one takes it too seriously in this group, as they have been friends with Bacar for several years now. Either standing right over our balafons or from behind his own, the intensity of his expectation is enough to pierce right through my body, and if that is not enough, sometimes he yells. If I am lucky, after a minute or two, he leaves me, maybe in disgust, and moves to his next victim. Oftentimes, it is only after he leaves that I can relax and incorporate the new addition into the pattern.

Bacar’s expectative and authoritative behavior is not uncommon among West African music teachers of other instruments, as well. I hear of many stories where Americans, often women, become too intimidated by the teacher to continue lessons. It has caused some students to give up, or resort to different methods in which limited contact is the goal. One of the best American kora players in the United States, David Gilden told me that kora lessons with the teacher was not his preference.<sup>79</sup> He almost never studies with a jali; rather he gives them money to record a song and figures out the music on his kora himself. He is a musician by education and that system works

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<sup>79</sup> David Gilden is also known as Dowda Jobarteh. He knows many jalis in the U.S. and across West Africa. He runs the most resourceful website in the United States for kora and other West African music: [www.coraconnection.com](http://www.coraconnection.com).

well for him. It is not uncommon for Americans to record lessons on minidisks and work on their skills at home. But the experience of learning directly from the source contributes something to the lesson, as we will see throughout this chapter. The actual method of instruction imparts knowledge to me that exhibits what Manding teachers value in the mind-body practice. Without this person-to-person interaction and feedback, we limit our experience, even if unintentionally, by succumbing to our own culturally engrained ways of behaving and thinking.

### *A New Sense of Time*

“Soli” is one of the hardest songs to learn for those with a non-West African sensibility, and one of the most fun to (try to) play. The basic patterns are long, and the way that the two parts fit together is quite counterintuitive, at least to the inexperienced student. “Soli” epitomizes much of what is different and intriguing about Manding music in that it exhibits polyrhythm, syncopated melodies and a particular Manding swing, or groove that is particular to the Manding aesthetic. The ways in which these characteristics play out set it apart from most Western-oriented music, generally speaking, and therefore makes a good example for cross-cultural learning. The students call this “pattern one” of the song “Soli.” This pattern is two measures long, and would be rendered in Western written form in 12/8 meter.

Figure 1: “Soli” pattern one version one

*October, 2004: New Haven, Connecticut, Bacar's basement*

*There are six of us playing "Soli" in the circle. The sound would probably deafen an outsider. We are so absorbed in playing that the volume bothers no one. I am becoming confident in playing the pattern, more relaxed in it as I have been practicing this past month. But still, sometimes I feel like I have to struggle to keep up, it moves so fast. I figure it's a matter of muscle training. Or maybe it's the smoke that interferes with my playing today. Most of the participants in the workshop, including Bacar, smoke their brains out. Once we start up a song, cigarettes are left, burning in their places- in an ashtray, on the ledge of a table, on the cement floor. There's no open garage this time. There's only a small window. Not wanting to impose my non-habit on them, I say nothing. But a sensitive person asks me if the smoke is getting to me. You could not see the person across the room from you it was so bad! I admit that it does. They make a 'no smoking' rule in the basement during workshop hours. Thank you! Now that I can see him, Bacar tries to set my playing straight.*

*We're too closed in for Bacar to walk around to us easily so he teaches mostly from behind his own bala today. He somehow grabs each individual's attention by playing her part and watching her. Feeling the attention, the pegged student looks up. Then he adds something to the pattern. He doubles the time of one note, he adds another base note, maybe both. For more advanced students, he throws in a little run within the pattern.<sup>80</sup>*

*I am concentrating on my pattern and listening to how it fits in with the other sounds around me. Something in what the others are playing wants to pull me off track. If I concentrate too hard on it, I lose my place. Luckily, there are more people playing my part. It is louder and therefore, easier to follow. I feel Bacar's eyes fixate*

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<sup>80</sup> A run is a quick progression of notes from high to low that may be played as a variation within a pattern, or as a longer, connecting segment in between patterns.

*on me from across the room. “Hey!” He yells out to me. He is behind his balafon, playing pattern one, the same as mine. I look up at him and try to keep playing. He starts emphasizing one note harder than the rest. I watch and listen to him while concentrating on my part as well. The note he emphasizes is even and consistent, and I realize he is showing me the pulse to the music. Then I realize this is not where I feel it. I wonder if I have been hitting this note inconsistently. It is hard for me to tell, now, but I must have if Bacar is correcting me. I watch my mallets and focus in on the key that keeps the regular beat. At first, my attention on that key makes me forget how to play the rest of the rhythm and I falter. I get back into the rhythm. Eventually, I start to feel “Bacar’s pulse” but it is funky, as if it were the drum fill in a rock song that drags the beat, but one that never ends. I find it more comfortable to think of the rhythm my way. I use Bacar’s “consistent note” as a gauge to make sure I am in place.*

At this time, I was inclined to hear this rhythm as driven by a simple triple meter (two measures of 3/4, which I conceived of as a “six-count”). Bacar thought of it as driven by a compound meter (a two-measure pattern of 6/8 or a one-measure pattern in 12/8, which I conceive of as a “four-count”). To feel this rhythm either way would be correct but the two ways of counting, as four or six beats per measure have different uses in Manding society.<sup>81</sup>

In Western culture, musical meter tends to remain constant and unambiguous in one meter or the other throughout a song. When confronted with a polyrhythm, or cross-rhythm, people accustomed to Western-style popular music tend to hear the six-

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<sup>81</sup> Don Randel writes in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*: Meters in Western music are of two principle kinds: duple or triple [depending on whether each main beat (pulse) is subdivided in] groups of two or three.” In a simple meter, each main beat is divided into units of two, so a four-beat measure is counted as “one-and-two-and-three-and-four” to account for the subdivision. “A meter in which this basic pulse is subdivided into groups of three, however, is said to be a compound meter. Thus, 6/8 is a compound duple meter because it consists of two groups of three eighth notes (three groups of two eighth notes would be written as 3/4 and would be a simple triple meter...)” (1986: 489). Throughout this thesis, I will refer to quadruple compound meter as 12/8 and quadruple simple as 4/4.

count above the four-count, according to my observations, mentioned in more detail later in this chapter. Cross-rhythms, on the other hand, are common in West African popular music, as “Soli” exemplifies. The Manding people have a proclivity for thinking of the dominant time as the four-count in their songs of 12/8 meter. For students learning to play this music, hearing the dominant beat as the four-count becomes necessary as we learn how the patterns interact. The four-count is prevalent in the subtle ways that they swing the rhythm, and it is apparent when we observe West African dancers. I use logics to help me understand Bacar’s Manding sensibility, but I still had a hard time “feeling it” naturally on the four-count. This is because for the duration of my life, specific musical patterns have been inculcated in my mind-body in a particular way, and society has taught me how to think of and respond to those patterns.

When I study with Famoro, he tells me, “relax your body. Don’t be tight.” When I am grappling with the feeling of a rhythm, my body tightens up as I play.<sup>82</sup> Famoro encourages me to relax, sit back, and listen to his playing so that I feel the music in my body. I find I have to use mental energy to *not* hear the music in my intuitive, fixed place of concentration. I try to feel and not think and find it difficult. I try to open my mind to all of the sounds and allow the other rhythmic pulses to present themselves. This approach differs from my norm of putting all of my mental energy on that one, consistent note whereby I try to force myself into hearing the rhythm a new way. It is different to sit back and listen to a tune rather than straining to catch Famoro’s hand movements. But as I develop this practice, I realize that when I have

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<sup>82</sup> Chernoff describes the same thing in Ghana and uses it as a way to discuss the problems of language translation and the benefits of participation as a research method. “My drumming teacher listened to my playing and said, “you must be free,” I might have nodded my head in agreement at the time, though it was not very evident what he meant. I would not try to think about what he had said until I was able to demonstrate to his satisfaction what he was talking about...the method of participant-observation is, as we have noted is a device for mediating the translation through the dimensions of social action.” (Chernoff 1979: 21).

the song clearly in my head, my body has an easier time reproducing it on the balafon. When I take up the mallets again, he shows me how to relax my wrists, let the mallets swing out to hit the notes.

One particularly bad day of concentration, I could play the rhythm, but my mind prevented me from letting it flow. My shoulders hunched, I was forcing the notes out of my body. I stopped playing, feeling Famoro's boredom with my inadequacies. I looked up and asked him, "What's wrong with me?" He told me plainly that my head was not clear. He took his hands to his forehead and made sweeping motions as if to clear the clutter in the brain. "Something is in your way." I could tell what he meant by the gesture. He was absolutely right. I was thinking of other responsibilities that day.

As I learned more ways to hear the music, I tried to train my mind-body to hear-feel the rhythm Bacar's way, the four-count, consistently. I kept practicing the rhythm on my own, trying to hear it swing a different way. But I had a lot of difficulty knowing if I was playing it right. I needed to hear it from the outside, without playing it. When I heard the 4/4 time, it still felt like a drum fill, it was not an easy-going swing. It was not until a workshop, back in New Hampshire again, six months later, when I finally felt this rhythm in 4/4 meter, naturally, consistently, not as a fancy drum fill that never ended. And it seemed quite sudden, actually, like I just clicked into the right groove, literally.

*February, 2005, New Hampshire.*

*Back in New Hampshire again. What a change from the crisp, clear, sunny day in September and from Bacar's smoky basement. We sit in Shilo's living room with a roaring fire in the wood-burning stove. The snow has been falling for days. Marilyn's car is still lodged in the snow bank, half way up the long driveway. But we*

*are nestled together in a cozy house with good company, and a good project. Soli again. It's not just me. This song seems to be the bane of our existence! We moan and groan at the idea of working on it again, but we can't wait to get to it. Like a hard jigsaw puzzle we want to complete. I'm still struggling with the same pattern one, trying to "feel it right." Others struggle with pattern two- they are more advanced than me.*

*I get up to use the bathroom. I can hear Doug playing what seems like a new, catchy melody. It has a nice, easy swing to it and when I come back, I dance to it, stepping from side to side. When they stop playing I ask Doug what song it is. "It's Soli" he responds, much to my surprise. I ask him to play the part he was playing again. He tells me it's the part I always play. I am baffled. He plays me the pattern. It sounds different to me, and I show him what I play. He explains that it is the same pattern except one note is switched to a higher octave. I am amazed to realize he is right. I am also amazed that this one, slight shift has meant the difference between hearing the song in three or in four. I was dancing to the four-count without any conscious effort. It takes me but a few seconds to learn to play the pattern this way. My muscles already know how to move for the most part as the rhythm is already in my body, though I have to coordinate switching that one note from the left to the right hand. My mind cannot reconcile how these two variations of the same pattern have the same time(s). As we continue to practice "Soli," I play the second version of pattern one that Doug taught me. The whole feeling of the song shifts for me. It is easy and relaxed. I have no trouble keeping up.*





Figure 2: “Soli” pattern one version two

When I learned to divide pattern one of “Soli” into four beats per measure, it was an instant click, like someone flipped a switch. It was not my conscious effort that ultimately allowed me to switch from my focus on the six-count to a focus on the four-count. Intellectually, I needed to know that an alternative possibility was there, and to know generally where it stood or I would have remained complacent in my own way of hearing the rhythm. Bacar indicated that the consistent pulse of the G was my cue. It was ultimately my responsibility to feel it there. It was not a matter of getting used to the fancy “drum fill-like” pattern as I had thought. When it happened, it was an effortless feeling in the body, and there was no mental struggle. I clicked into another groove. Sheer intellect could not break through this cultural barrier. I tend to want to reason myself into hearing and playing the music with a Manding feel, but the West African jali teachers, like Famoro and Bacar, teach us to feel it through the body, through feeling, and through an easy, relaxed concentration. It was in the midst of *not* thinking about it that it became apparent. Now I feel this pattern in four beats per

measure, so long as I play Doug's version of pattern one. However, if I play the first version of pattern one, I still hear this pattern in six beats per measure.

The slight change in the melody of pattern one may have helped me to release my fixation on the six count in which I first understood this rhythm. It is noted that music has a strong correlation to memory and mood, such that a repeated piece of music can aid in memory recall from when the music was heard the first time (Smith 1985). Is it possible that the shift in melody, a loose mental focus (not playing or concentrating) and my subconscious will to hear this music in 4/4 allowed me to free an engrained association with the six-count?

After passing through this phase of learning, I was curious to see if other American friends would hear the music the same way as I first did. I played both versions to my jazz musician friend and asked him where he felt the downbeat. First, he recognized them as the same rhythm. I ask him where the downbeat was. He clapped out both of the versions on the six-count! When I showed him how to feel it in two sets of four, he could understand it but it did not feel comfortable to him. I began to get the idea that this might be part of a Westerner's sensibility to music.

Over the past two years, I have continually asked friends and family members the same question. I play the music, orienting myself to the four-count by playing version two, and I ask individuals to clap on the pulse. Interestingly, every single American person felt the downbeat the same way I first felt it, with a six-count. People of a similar American cultural orientation as me, those who have grown up hearing Western European music, be it jazz, pop, classical, even reggae, rhythm and blues and hip-hop, are inclined to hear the six-count before the four-count. I have yet to ask whether the Cuban American or the Brazilian would clap to the six-count or the four-count. Cuban and Brazilian culture have strong footholds in African Diaspora such that most of their music contains similar cross-rhythms as the West African music. I

would surmise that they might hear the music beat in the same place that Bacar does. I have seen evidence of this while watching a diverse audience dance to Kakande's polyrhythmic songs. Recall the Latin-jazz musician at Zebulon who, in a crowd of about twenty Europeans and Americans, stepped to the four-count while the rest stepped to the three. Now I, too was feeling it in 4/4 and it was my preference to hear it that way. I felt I was crossing over a cultural barrier, shifting my orientation to the West Africa sensibility.

Like many Manding songs, when "Soli" is rendered in Western notation, it best fits a 12/8-meter. The four-count or the six-count may come into the foreground depending on the player or listener's mental perspective. Part of the beauty of Manding music is that it can actively engage the listener's mind and body by allowing the listener to shift focus and feel the music in a different way. We recall from chapter 3 that clapping or dancing on the six-count is not wrong in Manding culture, but there is a time and place for it. According to West African sensibility, the musicians and dancers alternate between the two timings at particular times. The basic dance step, person at ease, is to sway to the four-count. Normally people will use this when they are just idling to the music, perhaps on the outskirts of a dance circle, or dancing and watching a band perform. The lead singer will tend to sway back and forth to the 4/4 meter. These dancers provide a useful, visible from which to find the 4/4 meter if one cannot locate it oneself. However, emphasis on a meter may shift when a person enters the dance circle, or starts to draw social attention to herself. Then the dancer is likely to shift into the faster six-count for a period of time, then warm down with a shift back to the 4/4 before leaving the circle. The onlookers also use the six-count as dominant when they clap if they want to inspire a dancer who has entered the dance circle, and shift their claps accordingly. Nevertheless, the predominant downbeat to which a musician or dancer will orient himself is four beats per measure, and therefore

it is essential for the music student to be comfortable with that pulse. In the Makor scene in chapter 3, the Americans or otherwise non-Africans that danced to the faster six-count when Famoro played it could be rendered overzealous to follow this pulse, as they were on the outskirts, hearing the band at large (who maintained the four-count) and not, presumably, trying to draw social attention to themselves. This was the only way they knew how to follow the music. A West African would recognize them as not being familiar with their dance aesthetic. Now we learn the same lesson in playing the balafon.

People of non-African and of West African cultural background can hear the music both ways, but we have cultural proclivities toward one way or the other based on patterns we have heard again and again as we grew up. The non-African cultural proclivity, or, people unaccustomed to cross-rhythms, only suggests the likelihood that someone raised in Europe or the United States was exposed to a number of possible genres such as classical, pop, jazz, blues, rock and roll, country, reggae, and variations of them. While these musical genres are vastly different, they all have some tendencies that mark them as distinct from West African music, whether it be songs on kora or balafon, drum rhythms, whole bands, music of the Fulani, Wolof or smaller Manding ethnic groups. Those musical genres that cross the African Diaspora such as reggae and jazz, are likely to have more similar characteristics with West African music, such as call and response, and melodies that start on the upbeat, but still they adhere to only one, steady, pulse for the duration of the song.

By going through the arduous process of learning to play a music such as Manding jali music, one discovers in oneself particular paradigmatic ideas about how music (and dance) is organized by making mistakes. When learning cross-culturally, the individual comes to recognize similar such mistakes in others of the same general cultural background. This self-reflective learning process reveals certain tendencies in

American students in this study.<sup>83</sup> These tendencies become characteristics of what we may come to recognize as American-oriented cultural proclivities that stand in opposition to West African, Manding cultural proclivities. As the teaching and learning process continues, we start to define not only structural differences, but subtle differences in action, in both the musical and social realms between cultures. From these observances, we form generalities in our minds about how Manding culture works in comparison with our tendencies.

*“Talk to the Hand”*

The process of learning Manding balafon from a jali is a little like putting together the piece of a jigsaw puzzle together, while all the piece are upside down. As soon as you get a fit between pieces, you can turn it over and see the colors in the picture it is developing. And when you start to build big chunks, you might start to see the personality in the picture- perhaps the top of a building and the clouds behind it. A little flavor on the whole image. Someone is handing you the pieces that knows how the picture will develop, and their system of portioning out pieces has some sort of logic, unbeknownst to you.

Learning pattern two, in and of itself, is quite easy. It seems straightforward; it is only a matter of teaching your body to execute the skill of hitting the notes in the right order. The timing in and of itself presents no cultural barriers like the polyrhythmic nature of pattern one. Or does it? When we first learn it, we think of pattern two aligned incorrectly to the beat. It is difficult to then learn the pattern correctly-aligned.

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<sup>83</sup> The same mistakes are made by African-Americans and Caucasian Americans that have little to no previous experience with West African music, according to my and Famoro’s general observations.



Figure 3: “Soli” pattern two

“Soli” is confusing not just for the 12/8 meter but because the second pattern is a “layered melody.” It can also be rendered in 4/4 time, but it is half-syncopated to the downbeat of the four-count in pattern one. Inexperienced people with Manding music are not accustomed to hearing cyclical syncopated melodies in this fashion. I showed a musically notated description of “soli” pattern one and pattern two to a learned jazz musician friend of mine. He did not see anything so unusual on the paper notation. Then I showed him a video of Famoro and me playing the two patterns at once and he was duly impressed. He could not believe that Famoro maintained the syncopated melody easily and could even improvise on it without any signs of effort. Putting these two patterns together occupies much of the problem for the inexperienced student, as exemplified in the following sections.

Now that we have learned to play pattern one and pattern two proficiently, separately, Bacar teaches us the timing between the two patterns. He does so by having us repeat a short lead-in which is the first three strikes of pattern one, which continues into pattern two. This is all we know. In the following scene, I observe while Bacar teaches a new student this lesson and reflect upon my own experience in learning the same lesson a few weeks earlier.

Figure 4: “Soli” pattern two with lead-in.

*November, 2004: Peg’s House, Connecticut*

*I watch as Bacar is teaching Ella how to play part two from the lead-in. I am amused because this is the lesson that has confused all of us so much. Doug and Marilyn might be the only ones who really understand the time, so Bacar employs their skills by having them play accompaniment. Peg and I watch from the sidelines. The spotlight is on Ella. Bacar sings the drum call to begin, “Bip, be-dip, be-dip, we-go” and they play the first few notes of pattern one, transposed up, as a lead into the start of pattern two. They repeat this several times and Ella continually makes a mistake in hand execution. He stops her and tells her that her left hand is not cooperating. He asks her “what will make that left hand understand what I mean?” He tells her, “talk to her” referring to her hand. “Just say, ‘common baby!’” He lifts up his wrist and speaks into it. Ella smiles. They continue. She makes the same mistake. So Bacar walks Ella through the motions step by step, in fragments.*

This is undoubtedly a little frustrating for Ella because she knew the two parts well before she tried to put them together. She does not know why she cannot play them now. It is at this point that the rest of us might want to chime in with a verbal explanation for her, but we refrain.

*They come to the source of her problem in which she strikes with her left hand when he strikes with the right. They pause, he looks at her and says, “my right!” holding out his right hand with mallet. She leans back, takes a pause, and sits up to start again. Slowly, she and Bacar re-constitute this seemingly easy task, piece by*

*piece. Bacar starts her again, with tempo. Doug and Marilyn play along. They are to play the lead-in into a looping pattern two. Playing on tempo, now, Ella reverts back to the same habit, which Bacar now ignores. He focuses on a new problem instead. "It's earlier." They start again, and she plays the same thing. He points her to the place between the end of the lead-in and the first strike of pattern two by playing it, and says, "Right here, you come late!" They start again and she improves the timing. Bacar stops them to start again several times, and as they do, Ella manages to work out her hand execution problem on her own.*

When Bacar notices that Ella is making the repeated error in execution again and again, he realizes that she cannot "talk to her hand" because her mind doesn't understand. If her mind understood, it would only be a matter of getting the message to the body. Ella exhibits a common human tendency, not a culturally specific one. She does not realize that she needs to execute a pattern, and then immediately reverse that pattern to play what is necessary. Because we have proficiently learned to play pattern one and pattern two separately, we do not realize that the rhythm are exactly the same, but are executed with *opposite* hand positioning.

So when we try to play the two portions back to back, our brains want to produce the same rhythm with the same hand execution. Bacar shows this to Ella by walking her through the bodily motions. The mechanical difficulty that Ella demonstrates in this example is not a cultural problem, per se. A West African student who is learning the two patterns might have the very same technical difficulty until he realizes that the first execution is the opposite of the second. Our minds, no matter the culture, become habituated to simple patterns quickly. To expand on a pattern that is already engrained will present a mental exercise, to anyone. Different humans, no matter the culture, might have a natural agility, or not, to pick up patterns and rearrange them as necessary. All humans will be affected by state of fatigue or by



mental distractions. People of every culture develop and sharpen skills with a focused mind. In this case, Ella's hand motions lead her mind to the right conceptualization.

The cultural difference in this lesson is in the method of teaching. Ella's body learns first, after which her mind will come to the revelation that she must reverse the hand execution from the lead-in to pattern two. Bacar teaches her to understand the pattern intellectually by learning it from her own body-in-action. Sometimes I think that African teachers think we are slow at learning, but part of that is that we are also slow at learning *the way* they teach it, through the body in action. Upon understanding that my hands need to reverse the action, I might be inclined to say, "Well why didn't you just *say* so!" I believe that, like the inexperienced listener with an American sensibility who hears the six-count before the four-count, part of our cultural norm emphasizes a verbal explanation that predicates a mental understanding over a bodily one, like I have just laid out in this text.

There are times when Bacar is not present that we, the American students pontificate on the rhythms we are trying to learn, *ad nauseum*. I have participated in such activities that sometimes reach ridiculous levels. We will sit around, Doug, Marilyn, Peg, myself, and others, our balafons splayed out in front of us, extrapolating all kinds of musical theories, to explain what it is that we are learning, why we have difficulties, what the timing really is, and how to write it out. When Bacar is in our presence, he will not engage in such conversations for long. His English is excellent and he is fully capable participating in such conversations. But he calls it a lot of "blah blah" and always point us back to the balafon. Bacar does not see the point in talking about it when the proof is in the playing.

Perhaps he has noticed that words create more confusion when speaking about this music cross-culturally than actual practice. For example, if we try to ask Bacar a question about timing, we often run into a contextual barrier. Bacar might try to

answer what you have asked in the way he thinks you mean it, but in his culture there is no such context for this question. Furthermore, it is not easy for us to correct our wrong notes, just by listening, aurally.

Music students in mainstream American society learn to read notes.<sup>84</sup> As we learn this piece, we are not only learning to play the song, but if we are keen to it, we learn to sharpen our aural skills so we can translate what we hear directly into practice. Reading musical notes does not tell us how to feel or put feeling into music. This is something we learn after we have an understanding of the notes. In the oral pedagogy common in West Africa, the feeling is taught at the same time that the student learns the notes. The feeling comes from the rhythm.

Practicing over verbal explanations leaves less room for error. Reading and verbal explanations add a dimension of abstraction from the source and necessarily contain an element of interpretation on how to think about the music. West African musicians and students cut this abstraction out of the learning cycle. One could conjecture that learning by doing allows the student to formulate her own intellectualizations from her bodily actions according to what makes sense to her. The West African learning method emphasizes embodying action.

When I asked Famoro, he verified that even among themselves, West Africans do not explain how to play a rhythm with words. They will give the “time”<sup>85</sup> (the downbeat) and any other reference to another pattern that might be necessary. Then they either sing or play the part. They will not verbalize what the hands are doing or explain the timing according to Western concepts of meter. They have a different context for relaying such messages that is more closely related to the physical practice.

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<sup>84</sup> In this case I have run into an American for whom this is *not* true. One Native American musician friend has the same trouble with polyrhythms as I do, but he has great ability at learning the music by hearing it because in his cultural tradition, music is passed orally as well. The oral aspect to the learning process is to his advantage.

<sup>85</sup> Famoro refers to the downbeat, or the pulse, as the “time.”

This observation I make in music I found has parallels in the non-musical realm as well. There is reason to this method of interacting with the world. As Chernoff describes, “I understood what to do before I learned how to think or talk about it. In many ways, their adeptness at mimetic techniques made their teaching perhaps less ambiguous than it might have been had they used words, and in fact, whenever I found one of my teachers trying to explain what I had to do, I knew he was at the last resort of his teaching capabilities” (Chernoff 1979: 21).

In an entirely different context in Guinea, Bacar and I have a conversation about a cultural difference between Americans and Africans that speaks to this very notion we learn in the musical context. Bacar summed it up perfectly. He tells me that toubabs always ask about the details of a place that they are about to go to, be it the beach, a hotel, a music venue. Every time we ask him, Bacar answers, “You’ll see when you get there!” Africans don’t ask these sort of questions, he tells me. They wait to experience it for themselves.

Surely an African has the same curiosities that I do, and has the same capacity to intellectualize upon actions and experiences. But they are not in the habit of expressing these thoughts as we do in our culture. They privilege the actual experience over the second-hand knowledge. Perhaps they understand that the experience is different for everyone, so why explain it? Or perhaps another person’s verbalization ahead of time would diminish the expectant participator’s experience. With regard to Bacar’s teaching method, we must trust that there is logic to his lesson, even if we cannot see it immediately. I, for one, have had an automatic wall of resistance that I continually struggle to overcome. It behooves us to develop a trust in the teacher’s method of teaching and go along with it, even if we do not understand why he is teaching what he is teaching.

In his chapter on Primitive Art, Gregory Bateson explains that “in the cliché

system of Anglo-Saxons, it is commonly assumed that it would somehow be better if what is unconscious were made conscious” (Bateson 1972: 136). He contests that point using the example of prose and poetry. Prose cannot do what poetry can because prose tries to pin down precise meaning in a bed of logics. In our attempt to use precise words to describe particulars, we lose the spirit of the actual object. In Western culture, we tend to strip down the spirit of things in our desire to make and ask for verbal assessments. I am sure my West African friends wonder about things American the way I wonder about things African. The difference is that they have cultural norms that squelch the human desire to have knowledge without experience.

On the other hand, verbal descriptions may be very useful among those who share a common context and perspective, as the American balafon students do. They may shed light on how to execute a pattern when the bodily action unconsciously wants to repeat previously learned, inculcated pattern. One may be brought to conscious awareness of the inculcated patterns in oneself through an observer’s verbal explanation. With conscious awareness, one can use the mind to guide the body into breaking the old pattern and executing the new one. In order for verbal explanation to be useful, however, the two parties need to share a common context and perspective on the object at hand- in this case the musical piece. When we are speaking cross-culturally, we cannot be sure that our verbalizations, even around the same object, will be understood, as we see in the next section, “Where’s the One?”

### *Where’s the One?*

“Where’s the One?” is an age-old question that people raised in a Euro-American musical sensibility<sup>86</sup> have asked repeatedly to their West African music

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<sup>86</sup> Euro-American musical sensibility includes music of the African Diaspora.

teachers.<sup>87</sup> It epitomizes a major cultural difference in our different conceptions of musical organization. To be sure, this question is different from the question of meter in the section on “A New Time”, although it also relates to the timing in music. Now we unpack this cross-cultural barrier to see what is at the root of it by looking at “Soli.”

In the above scene, Bacar tells Ella that she “comes late” to the start of pattern two. This is because she assumes that the two patterns that have the same rhythm line up on a downbeat, if not the “one” of the downbeat with regard to pattern one. This is a logical and subconscious assumption for one who has heard music that tends to follow this logic through growing up. But it is quite wrong when applied to West African music.

Marilyn, Peg, myself, now Ella, have had an automatic, unconscious tendency to shift pattern two to make it line up with the downbeat in pattern one. It doesn’t. Realizing this, we try to line it up with the offbeat. It doesn’t. This is not a small mistake easily corrected. A lifetime of hearing music organized around a certain principle makes it difficult to understand where else it could fit, even if we come to realize we have made an inaccurate assumption. So what do we do? This scenario shows us that prolonged mind-body experience is stronger than mere mental comprehension.

To be sure, it is not uncommon in our society to hear the beginning rhythm section of a new song and imagine the downbeat in one place. When the singing begins, we have certain restructuring abilities to right our wrong assumptions. West African music defies our corrective abilities as well. This may happen any time we hear a new song or new style of music. For example, new listeners of reggae music

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<sup>87</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to West African music, but also may include Brazilian and other African Diasporic musics.

might encounter this problem when they expect musical emphasis on the downbeat when the rhythm guitar often highlights the upbeat. This also happens in pop and folk songs, among other genres, surely. But in most cases, the melody in Western-oriented music starts on one of the downbeats or on the offbeat (exactly half of the downbeat). The ways in which we assume that melodies line up together is a deeply engrained pattern that most of us never realize exists until we are faced with learning something that does not fit our system. “Soli” does not fit our logical system.

In the above scene, Ella picks up the space in time between the lead-in and pattern two after hearing Bacar play it four or five times. But this understanding takes place only on a superficial level. Ella plays pattern two with Bacar and Doug while Marilyn plays pattern one. So long as the pattern she is playing is the dominant sound, she will subconsciously tell herself that her pattern, pattern two, is lined up to the downbeat. She will suppress what she knows about pattern one for now, just to eek by. Hopefully, what Marilyn plays will seep into Ella’s subconscious mind without taking over her concentration on pattern two, preparing her for what is to come.

Later that evening, the workshop comes back together, and Bacar divides the room so that half of the students play pattern one and half play pattern two.<sup>88</sup> Now, Ella hears both pattern two that she is playing, and pattern one, evenly. As she shifts her concentration to pattern one while playing pattern two, she winds up aligning what she thinks of as the “start” of pattern two with the closest downbeat of pattern one where she intuitively and subconsciously thinks it should be according to her American sensibility. It is a subconscious pull to “right the wrong” based on the patterns to which she is accustomed. All novices with an American sensibility err in this capacity, and each individual must endure his or her own process in sorting out

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<sup>88</sup> If a student still hears pattern one with a pulse on the 6-count, she will have more difficulties in hearing pattern one and two together than if she understands the four-count. Still, assuming she hears the four-count in pattern one, her problems will still be significant because the rhythms are syncopated.

the problem. As we misalign ourselves, Bacar stops the room and starts us off again, as we have learned how to get into the pattern correctly.

It is likely that West African students are accustomed to hearing the call and response between these two patterns through a lifetime of exposure. Therefore I would expect them to not encounter the same problem of misaligning the two parts. But now let us take a break from balafon playing to relax our minds.

### *Relaxation Time*

Between Saturday's afternoon session and Sunday's morning session, we loose our balafon-focused minds by relaxing and having fun. During this time students and the teacher blow off tensions built up through the lessons, and get to know one another better. Bacar has a regular group of workshop attendees that are a tight-knit "cult," as they call themselves. I was assimilated quickly. Chips, dips, drinks, Chinese food, violent games of *Huit American* (card game) that inevitably lead to screaming nose-to-nose face-offs, drunken singing, improvised rhythm-making with kitchenware, and more. Sometimes we combine our bi-cultural talents to make a West African dish, such as rice and peanut sauce or rice with fish sauce, with a glorified American salad on the side. Or we make a chicken stew with the garden vegetables and plenty of white rice to suit the African's palate. The cult members look forward to the routine, and Bacar calls on them regularly to arrange the next workshop. These parties are an integral part of the learning process. In West African culture, tension is balanced out with humor, fun, laughter, and time to relax. Bacar has entered the right American social scene, as the members of the balafon cult are a laid-back bunch during these weekends. The social fun we have during these times allows us to maintain a camaraderie with Bacar and with one another, which fosters a positive learning environment despite Bacar's intensity during workshop hours.

It was during such after-hours parties that I got to hear how the others came into the cult. Doug has been Bacar's "apprentice" for five years. Doug comes to all the workshops and often walks around, helping the other students, translating between African and American music. Sometimes, Doug studies with us and Bacar gives him advanced excerpts to work on. Bacar also teaches Doug after workshop hours. Usually he picks things up very fast, leaving no room for Bacar's reproaches. But once in a while, even Doug feels the heat. He lets it roll off his back while Bacar is watching.

Doug studied jazz at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1990s. He heard African music on his college radio and was fascinated with the sound right away. He had been playing jazz and pop gigs on the drum set since high school. But this African music reached him emotionally in a way that American musical genres never had. He finds the West African rhythm far more interesting and described the polyrhythmic cycles as more organic in feeling. He particularly pointed to the tensions and relaxations that rise and fall with every cycle, reminding him of the feeling of breathing.

When he moved to New York in 2000, the xylophone-style African instruments pulled Doug's attention the most. He followed people's leads through Djonibas Drum and Dance school to Bacar Sylla, who was scheduled to give a balafon demonstration. Bacar never showed up to the demonstration, but people there led Doug to Bacar. Doug bought a balafon from him and began studying with Bacar immediately. Doug was a quick learner and Bacar was excited. Five years later, Doug is Bacar's number one student. They spend a lot of time together, usually in situations such as the one we see in the interlude. It is to Doug's enormous benefit that he has an almost limitless amount of patience and loyalty. He also has a flexible schedule in that he does freelance carpentry when not studying or performing music.



Doug has the right kind of disposition, dedication, and time that just happens to translate well into a more customary relationship between a teacher and apprentice in West Africa. While they have an amicable relationship, Doug shows Bacar the utmost respect. An American might find the relationship unusual, exploitative even, but Doug will tell you the benefits are well worth it. As time went on and I spent more time with Doug and Bacar, organizing and traveling to workshops together, I began to understand myself how some of the seemingly ridiculous endeavors that Bacar led us in, had a different significance according to the West African mindset.

Today, Doug is so proficient in the balafon that both Bacar and Famoro call upon him to assist in balafon workshops, and sometimes Doug teaches a workshop himself in their absence. Doug also plays with Famoro, Bacar, and other *jali* musicians, either balafon, drum set, or dun duns in pop Manding bands, in demonstrations, in dance classes, and in hybrid music and dance projects, such as *Feraba African Rhythm and Tap* (we learn about this group in more detail in chapter 5). Doug is becoming known in West African musician's ex-patriot circles. It is to Doug's great advantage that he can write and read music as well as learn it orally. He can quickly translate a rhythm he hears into Western musical notation to which he refers when playing gigs with West African bands. It affords him the ability to play full concerts upon having heard the music only a few times. A university education in jazz music served as a strong stepping-stone for Doug's entrance into West African music, but Doug will be the first to say, they are still different.

Doug has mastered the Manding feeling in his balafon playing by learning with Bacar and Famoro. He can reproduce the Manding swing to the satisfaction of his *jali* teachers. One day Famoro confided in me, "Doug, wow! Doug play goood. Doug, he gets my feeling." Doug is undoubtedly one of the best non-Manding balafonists in

the States, perhaps in Europe too. <sup>89</sup>

Marilyn was playing and teaching djembe in New Hampshire when she met Bacar. She quickly caught on to the balafon, and became quite adept. Since their first meeting, almost ten years ago, Marilyn has been helping Bacar by attracting students and setting up balafon workshops and performances in her area. Marilyn has an extremely amicable relationship with Bacar. She loves to smoke, like Bacar, and they share a certain cynicism toward life. They fight like brother and sister, yelling and pulling at each other more like teenagers than middle-aged adults. Sometimes things get temporarily tense between them; like the time when Bacar asked Marilyn for \$1000 and instead, she offered him her old, used car, which she considered extremely generous. Bacar immediately sold the car, pocketed the money, and called her the next week to ask again if he could have the \$1000. But it washes over quickly. Perhaps it washes over through the play fighting that transpires when they are together. Their relationship works for them, and provides great amusement for the rest of us. Sometimes we imagine what Bacar's two wives in Conakry would think of this friendship. Everyone agrees that they would never understand. Men and women do

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<sup>89</sup> Doug's playing has aroused some amusing responses from West Africans that hear him. One day, Doug and I took our balafons at a local djembe group lesson in Nyack, New York. Fode Sissoko, a jali, was the teacher. Toward the end of class, Fode had Doug and I play bala with the drums. We played *Soli* which we know is one of the more difficult songs and Doug really spiced it up for the class. I held the kumbengo. Fode started walking around us and singing with big expressive movements. When the song ended, Fode expressed his excitement.

“Waaaw! Dis bala make me to sing! I hear dis, its like fahr (fire) in my butt—make me to open mah mout wahd (wide)!” He proceeded to make Doug play a whole repertoire of songs starting with “Ala la k'é” the Jali's song. Fode sung his heart out, like a true griot. The rest of the students just watched the unexpected scene. Another time Doug snuck into a drum class to play bala with another jali. When the drum teacher turned around, he was surprised to see this white guy playing bala. “Whaa? I don't see you. I think you are Manding griot behind me. I say, ‘Who is this jali?’” In Bacar's compound in Guinea, one family member commented on hearing Doug play, “I see that you love our culture and that makes me happy.” The balafon music that Doug plays is powerful, and is the structure through which jalis wield nyama. But Doug does not know how to manipulate these structures in order to be considered a jali. For that, he would need to master a whole range of skills that work toward the manipulation of human energy in certain directions. Still, Doug's talent serves him well for crossing cultural boundaries because it exposes his dedication to learn, and therefore, his love and respect for balafon music and jalis. His playing is a means of opening Manding people's hearts to him.

not have relationships like this in Africa unless they are related as cousins, perhaps.

Soon after they met, Bacar asked to live in Peg's refinished basement for a few months. A few months led to a year, during which time Doug, who was doing construction on Peg's house, came to live with them as well. The house became a locale for some West African recording sessions with Bacar, Djoss<sup>90</sup>, and other friends as well as a main location for many a weekend balafon workshop and after-hours party. Bacar has since found his own place in New Haven with some African friends, but the weekend workshops at Peg's continue. Peg explains how she lights up when Bacar calls her on the phone. It dampens the excitement a little when he asks her for money, or assistance of some kind, every time. But then she reminds me that they have *nothing* in Africa compared to us, and remembering that, she would leave all of her possessions to them when she is gone. Peg and Marilyn are close friends. They went to Africa together to study balafon a few years back, and their impressions have influenced their decisions back home. They often confer about how to handle Bacar's most recent requests, how much to give him, and when to organize the next balafon workshop. Peg and Marilyn are both quite generous to Bacar, but they have learned to be firm with him with regard to their limitations as well.

Bacar is an interesting West African jali. He is not reverent in Islam, which many jalis are. He gets drunk and smokes too much and fails to act with a level head at times. Yet he maintains some strict ideas and values of a balafon jali in many ways. He knows which songs should be played to which audiences. He knows how to dress and speak in a proper manner when necessary. He knows how to pull himself together and play with the highest cultural ideals in front of his West African elders. At the same time, he lives life fully, is not scared to take creative risks, nor is he shy about blending into American society. He feels at ease spending prolonged periods of time

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<sup>90</sup> Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabate, a Malian jali singer and guitarist.

with only Americans, and his colloquial English is truly impressive. In my experience, this is not the case for most West African musicians living in the United States unless they are either married to an American or studied at the American university. Bacar has done neither, but he is strong enough in English to be teaching as an artist-in-residence at the University of Florida.

### *Back to Work*

It took me a long time to figure out how the two patterns of “Soli” fit together, and I had to do it my own way. No American explained it to me, and even if he did (Doug would have been the likely candidate) I would still need to get the feeling on my own, as I did with four-count in pattern one. This time, I tried to absorb the feeling as Famoro taught me. I would also sit out from the playing circle just to listen to the others and try to find how these parts were oriented to one another. Listening, I came to hear how the two patterns did line up in one spot where I did not expect it, then misalign again. It threw me off when I listened for that alignment while I was playing. The pieces of the puzzle were fitting together but I still couldn’t visualize the picture they were forming. I just held on during the tension and waited for the resolution to reassure me that I was still on track, during the course of the loop. When the patterns came together in the way I expected, it caused me to hear my pattern from a different perspective than the way in which I learned it. Suddenly, what I heard as the “embellishing notes” before became “structural notes” and vice-versa (Lerdahl 2001). My mind kept flipping between two orientations each cycle, which prevented me from finding a natural groove to the music.

It seemed as if time warped somehow and that no time signature suited the melody I heard. In retrospect what was happening was that I was hearing version two aligned with the downbeat of version one for half of the loop, then I was hearing the

downbeat one third off of pattern one's downbeat for the other half of the loop. Thus, at one point it seemed there was a trip up in time's consistency. I knew the problem was in my own perception but I could not focus the two sides of the loop into one, consistent rhythm. My connection remained tenuous.

Students have different ways of going about learning this lesson. Peg, for example, who has been playing the balafon far longer than me, could play pattern two while listening to pattern one and remain solid. She got used to the trip in time. Perhaps her mind flipped back and forth like mine did. Or perhaps she just concentrated on her own rhythm and checked in to its alignment with pattern one only as the two came around to meet. When I asked her, Peg did not know where the downbeat was while she played pattern two. She cannot tap her foot while playing pattern two. She is content in understanding it through the feeling of space, allowing the tension and resolution to come and go as the space passes and the parts align. She doesn't care to learn the time, she tells me. She misses some of the feeling if she does not know where the downbeat is<sup>91</sup> for, to the West African musician, all patterns stand in relation to the downbeat.<sup>92</sup> Yet Peg's connection is stronger than mine, for the moment and I follow her to remain on course.

Doug, on the other hand, is meticulous in his practice. Because of his formidable background in music theory coupled with five years of continuous balafon practice, Doug can quickly translate African into American, so to speak. He figures out quickly that the song is played with eight beats, where the time between each beat is divided into triplets. He knows that the second melody must start on one of those

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<sup>91</sup>Doug has commented on the same phenomenon when he plays drum set with a Manding band. He might be able to sustain the beat where the Mandingos have told him, but sometimes he does not *feel* it. He says if his playing is intellectual only, he feels as though he is faking the beat, even if the Mandingos tell him it is correct (Fieldnotes 2005).

<sup>92</sup> Steve Pond (personal communication 2006).

beats or triplets. He figures it out logically and lets the logic lead him into the feeling behind it. He learns quickly and thoroughly and is a real asset in helping the other students to learn the music. He can logically explain the timing to us, but still, he cannot impart the feeling to us, we can only get the feeling for ourselves. Logic is not enough to keep us on track.

It takes me months, and different systems of trying before I finally solve the jigsaw puzzle of “Soli.” Still, to understand the full picture, I have to remember to focus on the big picture and not get lost in the brushstrokes of the painting.

*July, 2005, Famoro’s house, Harlem, New York City*

*I am on a mission to learn the timing in pattern two. I ask Famoro to help me understand the time in pattern two. I watch him clapping while singing pattern two. He is showing me where the downbeat is located in the song. He even counts it off from the “one,” or to be more precise, the first downbeat in pattern one.*

*I hear the last two claps line up with notes in the pattern, but the first two do not. Still, I consistently sing it back to Famoro wrong. I cannot tell if the clap comes one third, one half, or two thirds after the first beat of the pattern. Eventually, I determine the rhythm in the good old American way. I videotape Famoro who sings the melody and claps along on the downbeat. Then he plays the balafon while I clap the downbeat. I can only do this if I start the clapping before he starts the balafon. I take the video home to analyze it. Although I am not well trained in music theory, I am able to draw out a scale and assign one space per beat. I know this song has 12/8 time and that each beat is a triplet. I map out how pattern two fits with pattern one based on the 12/8 time of pattern one. I make eight lines representing the beats and then divide each beat into three parts representing the triplets. I intellectually understand it. I check myself several times with the video and then I teach myself how*

*to play the pattern on the balafon with the metronome.*

Like David Gilden who records jalis to learn the songs, I had to remove myself from the tense atmosphere of surveillance and figure it out in my own, idiosyncratic way. But soon I would check in with Famoro to make sure what I learned was correct. When I was late or early with respect to the metronome, it seems as though the metronome has made a mistake, but of course this cannot be. I realize that it's my perception that has the ability to warp time. The power of my own perception is a moment of epiphany in my reality. If I were playing with a person, I would have sworn the other person made a mistake. How can I be so sure, and still be wrong!

I must pause here to emphasize the importance of this realization for the world of cross-cultural studies, of which anthropology is a prime example. Underlying my musical studies is the realization that my own particular cultural orientation and lifetime of experiences can blindingly influence the way I understand Manding music, and by extension, Manding culture. This lesson made me recall certain anthropologists whose books about foreign cultures I admired, those of John Miller Chernoff (1979), Paul Berliner (1981), and Anthony Seeger (1987). These ethnographers analyzed their own fieldwork techniques openly to the reader. They made their revelations about the culture transparent by explaining their active participation in the culture. At times, they let the people in their lives speak. Through their works, they proved to me that to understand a culture on its own terms, one must participate fully in that culture to learn the lessons within the context of that culture. It is a question of approach in fieldwork.

There is a wide spectrum of possibilities for which no person functions entirely, one way or the other. On one end of the spectrum, the anthropologist places herself in the position of a student within that society, which, if we are foreigners, we must be. She must use self-reflection and feedback from those born and raised in that

culture to judge the appropriateness and effectiveness of her actions. In the second case, the anthropologist enters the society as a doctor-in-training, one who seeks answers to a particular question formulated outside of the cultural context. Taking that stance, she observes people as they perform their daily tasks, ceremonies and events that relate to her preconceived ideas. She asks questions of informants outside of the context within which a member of that society might learn the same information. In doing so, she might gain the information she “wants,” but it will be superficial in that it will lack the true understanding within the context of the cultural framework.

Different anthropologists comment on their fieldwork practice. Anthony Seeger recounts in “Why Suyu Sing” how he learned the Suyu aesthetic. Seeger made many recordings of Suyu singing. He analyzed them on his own, but then played the recordings back to the Suyu to get their opinions. The one recording that he felt was damaged (It played back in slow-time, making their voices slower and deeper than they really are) they felt was the most beautiful. This feedback opened Seeger’s eyes to Suyu values within their own society (Seeger 1987).

Paul Berliner recounts a story about asking an elder member of Shona society about the names for the mbira keys. He had been studying the culture for several years, both within and outside of the society itself. He pieced together some notions about mbira organization and went off to verify his information. The elder to whom he asked intentionally gave Berliner inaccurate information to confuse him until he felt that Berliner was worthy of such knowledge.

*I will long remember the lesson that Bandambira and the members of his village taught me about field research technique and about the nature of knowledge as privileged information. As implied by the Shona proverb, the elders who are the guardians of an oral tradition do not treat their knowledge lightly. Rather, ‘they give what they like.’ Moreover, they give only the amount of information they believe to be appropriate to the situation and to the persons involved. In my own*



*relationship with Bandambira, for example, he decided that I was worthy of being entrusted with the single piece of information that I sought to collect from him only after six years of studying mbira music, three trips to Africa, and many rigorous tests (Berliner 1978: 7).*

Similarly, John Miller Chernoff speaks of his “fieldwork” in Ghana, West Africa, if it can even be termed as such. Chernoff came to a point of relinquishing hopes of conducting fieldwork and returning to the university. Instead, he joined Ghanaian society to learn the music because he wanted to. Upon returning to his own culture, he was urged to write about his experiences. The result is a book that explains West African music and culture as it were understood within West African context. Chernoff explains,

*To arrive at the point where one sees the life of another culture as an alternative is to reach a fundamental notion of the humanistic perspective, and to accept the reality of one’s actions to the people who live there is to understand that one has become part of their history. This insight can become a pathway to responsibility and an opening toward one’s own human love....when there was no reason for me to be trying to learn the music except for my love of it, and when in my training I realized through my most personal self-consciousness that I could be socially and aesthetically criticized at every moment for what I did, I began to understand what involvement with music means in Africa. (Chernoff 1979: 9).*

I realize from my own experience, as well as some of my favorite anthropologists, that to learn a culture according to its own context is very hard. One never knows whether she is successful or not. But, one must approach fieldwork as a humble student willing to be corrected again and again as she tries to act appropriately. It is not just a matter of time spent in that culture, as many observer-oriented anthropologists have spent years abroad doing fieldwork. It is a matter of attitude, dedication, patience and love for what you are doing. Only when one sees the other culture as a viable alternative for living can one begin to understand what it is to understand from their point of view.

After a few days of practice, I improve on playing pattern two with the right

feel. I return to Famoro's house for a visit.

*I climb the four floors to his Harlem apartment in the summer heat. I flop down on the couch across from him and I start to clap. Then I sing pattern two to my clapping. He looks up. "Yeah, you got it!"*

*I marvel at my learning process. I can finally play these two rhythms back to back, with a run in it, all while tapping my foot, but it is not easy! The feeling of "Soli" patterns one and two, with relation to the downbeat is still not completely natural to me, though every day it becomes more so. To get to the point I am at now, maybe intermediate level, I personally had to put the patterns into Western musical notation, or my version of it to help me understand. Then I could combine my intellectualization with the feeling I had learned by observing the workshop without playing. Sometimes the natural feeling comes through me, but when it subsides, it pushes me back toward my American inclination. I rely on my intellect to keep checking up on my performance. I know that my first strike of pattern two, the B/E comes just before the downbeat, so I have to hear that downbeat a hair after my double strike. Sometimes, I hit that double strike just on the downbeat and I know I am wrong. Other times I think I have slipped back into my American mindset and when I check myself off of another player or the metronome, I realize that I have not. Eventually, the intellect must be sublimated entirely so that the playing emerges by feeling alone. Then I will know that I am becoming more habituated to the West African sensibility.*

The irony in this whole learning production is that melody two *does* match up with melody one on the first downbeat of pattern one! Pattern two also matches up on the second downbeat, and even on the four. So the melody the way Bacar teaches it to us starts off on the one place where the two rhythms do *not* match up. I went through months of trying to figure this out, and now I wonder, would I have learned the whole

song easily had Bacar only taught us pattern two from the “one?!” If we were to play the pattern from the “one,” it would sound quite different to us because the structural and embellishing notes would shift.

The idea of teaching this melody in any other way but from the “one” is seemingly absurd to a Westerner. Why would anyone teach a melodic pattern that did not start on the “one”? Surely Bacar was not trying to make this more difficult than necessary. I thought of the possibility that in West Africa the cultural proclivity is to start where the two patterns are misaligned. But I see now that that was not quite true either. Bacar *did* teach us from the beginning- the “one” of pattern one. The lead-in that we struggled to learn was supposedly meant to convey that very message. I missed it.

If we are to explain where, in time, the melody of pattern two begins, it would be on the third triplet of the second beat. Intellectualizing actions verbally, and writing time and notes on paper is a very useful Western tool to understand Manding music intellectually, and it can lead us into playing it in the right place.<sup>93</sup> We can figure out how the patterns sit with respect to one another and come to expect what we should hear.<sup>94</sup> But we do ourselves an injustice if we rely entirely on this kind of explanation because a logical understanding does not replace feeling it. Often you can hear the stilted quality in a person’s playing who relies on the written music, only.

Doug tells a story of a time that he was able to write down a drum set pattern with reference to a balafon part for a gig he was playing, but if he could not see the balafon, he could not keep the time. He played the song without having the feeling, and he felt he played it poorly. The West Africans, however, were pleased that Doug

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<sup>93</sup> Mike Bennett, a learned Jazz musician, says that after six years of learning sabar rhythms on the drum, he can now learn new patterns faster than his African friends *because* he has the added advantage of being musically literate.

<sup>94</sup> Some Americans learned in music theory, like Doug, have the capacity to help Americans in learning this music because they can translate between the two logics.

maintained the beat in the proper place, which most foreign drummers could not do.

In our own culture, a music student who has understood the correct timing and notes also needs to add the feeling to the piece. Sometimes a teacher tries to encourage the student to do this, but only after understanding the “fundamentals.” In Manding music, the feeling is part of the fundamentals. Sometimes Famoro will let me strike the wrong notes so long as I have the right feeling in rhythm. Bacar does this with Ella as well. West Africans value the reproduction of feeling, which they locate in the rhythm first, then in the notes. In our Western culture we tend to do the opposite, privileging the correct note order over the time. It frustrates Bacar and Famoro to hear me practice the notes without the rhythm though they are getting used to it.

Whether West Africans think of the third triplet of the second downbeat as the “start” of the melody, I do not know for sure, but I believe so. Whether they consider where we learned to start pattern one to be the start of the melody, I can only imagine that they do. But I also support the viewpoint that in the West African perspective there is no determined idea of the “one” in the melodic pattern. The patterns lie in the particular relationship to the downbeat and one another at all times, but they are cyclical. For anyone who ever tried to ask their West African teacher (or even a Brazilian teacher) where is the one, they will often be confused by the question. It is a Western cultural fabrication that the Africans do not share. Bacar, among others, have begun to understand this Western fabrication and have begun to use it when teaching Westerners.

First it is essential to realize that *the downbeat, whether heard or not, plays a significant part in the rhythm.* It remains in the minds of the musicians and dancers at all times, and that makes it possible to play these rhythms correctly. West Africans always have a consistent downbeat to which all musicians and dancers pay attention.

That downbeat may not be played, but only imagined in everyone's minds at the same moment in the music. Sometimes the unspoken may be a stronger bonding force than the obvious. The downbeat might only become apparent when danced or clapped, as if to respond to the musician that we know where is home. In the case of "Soli" the downbeat is on the consistently hit G in 4/4 time of pattern one. Although pattern two aligns with pattern one on three of the four downbeats, (the fourth downbeat being the second and optional strike of the double hit to the same G note in pattern one) the consistent time-keeper of pattern two, the left hand that goes back and forth between the G and B, holds the time on the triplet that comes just *before* the downbeat. So in essence, *this pattern has its own, syncopated melody to the third triplet of the downbeat, while at the same time it calls our attention to the actual downbeat as dictated by pattern one.* This is the vital essence of "Soli" that characterizes a large aspect of Manding music and confuses the heck out of the inexperienced listener.

This lesson exposes the limitations of verbal language particularly in cross-cultural communication that may be circumvented by direct experience. Once we have gained "original intelligence" through the body-mind experience we are afforded an infinite number of ways to relay the information. A West African who understands the mindset of the American may even be able to translate to an American student where the "one" that they want to imagine is, in a particular situation and context. We negotiate mutually comprehensible verbal communication. However, understanding through mere verbal explanations will *never* supercede the embodied experience of it. Our jali teachers remind us of this fact by emphasizing the body-in-action as they teach us Manding music. Their music lessons not only teach us Manding music, but they teach us also *the way jalis think*, and by association, some of the values promoted in West African society.

This way of composing rhythms does not merely exemplify Manding

creativity, but also deeply embedded cultural values that relate to a larger web of African and African diasporas characteristics. Steve Pond highlights some of these reasons in his analysis of Herbie Hancock's album, *Headhunters*. Throughout Africa and the Diaspora, certain similar characteristics surface again and again, and usually relate to music and word games, often characterized by multiple, syncopated rhythmic or melodic lines and double entendres in word meanings. The uncertainty of meaning relates to the divine. Henry Louis Gates Jr. recalls the minor deity, Esu-Elegba, "the god of divination and gatekeeper of communication with the spiritual world" (Pond 2005: 37). Esu-Elegba plays tricks on the people of society by shifting meanings of the same object from one moment to the next. His actions serve as a metaphor for communication with the gods, which is never straightforward. In essence, the invocation of simultaneous, multiple meanings offer a criticism of logical order that we tend to cling to, as humans, and at the same time promotes a release from the attachment of the logical human mind to reality. This deity originates in Yoruba religion in Nigeria and Ghana, but the same notions exist throughout West Africa in different forms, such as in jali music. The trickster may be found in specific culture's practices in the world at large, and provide a means for checking run-away schismogenesis in the sense that it reminds us that nothing is ever entirely the way it seems. This promotes a sense of humility in humans that serves an essential function in African society.

The divine realm is often mediated by certain individuals, spiritual leaders, jalis, shamans, and become interwoven into the secular practices of that society through cultural values to provide solutions to human social problems. Pond offers an explanation from Ghanaian drummer C.K. Ladzekpo, where the cross-rhythms in West African music fulfill a "cultural and moral imperative" on the earthly level (Ladzekpo, in Pond 2005: 38).

*To Ladzekpo, the composite rhythm both reinforces a main meter for dancers' feet (usually with a duple or quadruple feel) and presents a single, multitimbral pattern, with each musician's line contributing to the whole, patterns coordinated rather than opposed. The patterns interlace, 'simulating the dynamics of contrasting moments or emotional stress phenomena likely to occur in actual human existence.' These composite rhythms act as more than a metaphor for the stresses of life, serving also as a 'preventative prescription for extreme uneasiness of mind.' A training ground of 'simulated stress phenomenon' against which the players 'hone alertness, singleness of purpose, and resolute fearlessness.'* (Ladzekpo and Pond in Pond 2005: 38).

For one who has lived in a West African family compound for months at a time, I can attest that the skills one develops in West African music are quite useful for living in West African society, where people normally have large families and share scarce resources. People do not value "alone time" as they do in our culture, for to be alone is to be sad, and someone will inevitably come to sit with you. To accomplish any personal task under these circumstances, the individual necessarily develops a strong sense of will to focus the mind without shutting out the social world that buzzes around in the immediate vicinity.

But it is not only in West African society that these lessons are useful. When the American student learns to play Manding jali polyrhythms such as the one presented in "Soli" she is not only forced to open her mind to a new way of organizing music that differs from her own culture, she is learning an important personal lesson. This music trains the human mind to both focus on her individual path and release the stress of external pressures represented by the counter-rhythms played by the others, as well as maintain a sense of rhythm with others. I, personally, have found my own voice and personal will strengthen over time by practicing West African music in groups. In every culture, even within individuals themselves, we have sources of distractions that we must curtail. The practice of any music will help focus the mind, but West African polyrhythmic music, played in groups, caters to this purpose *par*

*excellence*, through the use of cyclical tensions and resolutions in cross-rhythms. The same purpose that the music serves for the West African society serves the American society as well because the musical compositions address a condition of human nature.

The Western cultural affinity for a “one” tells us something about our own culture as well. In music, the agreed upon “one” does help us to intellectualize and teach our music more efficiently according to our own cultural standards. But at last, the “one” is but an illusion that we reconstruct in order to convey our verbal explanations. Again, we compromise a certain kind of creativity and perhaps a more accurate expression of reality in our cultural proclivity to embed life relationships in a bed of logics. This Western proclivity has its roots in ancient history.

European-oriented music has its roots in Christian chants. Speech, derived from Christian texts, were elongated into verse, which formed hymns. Hymns served the purpose of a pneumatic device so that people could remember the moral instructions and repeat them en masse. Harmony arose from two texts in interaction. Western music originated in this linear in form. This Western musical characteristic is not so dissimilar from our scientific descriptions of the world we live in. We tend to base much of our reality, social organization, politics, human interactions on our scientific and written descriptions of things, unchangeable without revolution in thought. Reality is likely to be much closer to the Esu-Elegba notion of uncertainty and double entendres.<sup>95</sup>

In Manding music, the teachings that come through oral tradition match the compositions of the music. As the musical and cultural lessons are passed from generation to generation, they are necessarily explained in context, through embodied experience, so that they are relevant to the current situation. Ironically, by *not* using

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<sup>95</sup> In our society we are just beginning to close the gap between the spiritual and scientific realms of intelligence in quantum physics, string theory, the embrace of Eastern practices such as yoga and meditation, and a growing interest in West African music.



written and verbal descriptions, the essence of the musical feeling may be passed more directly than in Western culture, where paper can actually abstract the feeling of the music. What emerges from these lessons is the importance of interpersonal relationships in West African culture, without which feeling is muted. I see our intercultural relations with Bacar and Famoro in a new light. Doug and my trip to the airport takes on new meaning now. Interpersonal relations are more significant than reaching an end goal. Spending time with Bacar reinforces the teacher/apprentice relationship.

### *Into the Groove*

Groove may be described as “a persistently repeated pattern,” or “unspecifiable sense of something that is sustained in a distinctive, regular, and attractive way working to draw the listener in. It compels the body to move.” Also, it is described as a “sense of pleasure,” “African derived,” and “single most important quality” in music (Feld in *Grove Dictionary of Music*, online 08/16/06). If you are “in the groove” you get the feeling, and it exists at different levels. There are the structured grooves—knowing where the downbeat is in relation to your rhythm—then there is the swing. Swing is described as a “rhythmic phenomenon—a conflict between a fixed pulse and the wide variety of actual durations and accents—a jazz player plays against that pulse.” Swing is also created by “the manipulation of timbre, attack, vibrato, intonation, or other means” (Grove). Swing is a subtler component of groove.

The groove is manipulated by the elements of swing, but also by the order of notes that make up the melody and the rhythms. One could argue that it even includes the feedback loop of feeling between the musicians and audience. But it is the musician’s responsibility first to induce a groove that will entice the audience to participate in either increased attention, or, normative to Manding society, bodily

movement and vocalizations, as we see in chapter 3. If the audience grooves to a different feeling than the musician expects, there is a cross-cultural misreading. As the parties repeat the new action-reaction loop, new expectations form out of this situation, and new meaning develops between the two parties that differs from the cultural meaning.

Doug explains to me one day that to learn this music you must first get the technicalities and then you can learn the “feeling.” The technicalities to which he refers are the polyrhythmic structures. The “feeling” to which Doug refers in this statement is what Famoro refers to when he speaks about the subtle level- the swing, and Charles Keil calls the “participatory discrepancies” (Feld and Keil 1994).<sup>96</sup>

“Participatory discrepancies” are found in subtle degrees of out-of-time-ness and out-of-tune-ness (Feld and Keil 1994: 104).

Learning to produce participatory discrepancies in another cultural medium such as Manding, is difficult because it is so subtle. It is easier to hear and feel than to reproduce, like the local pronunciation of a sentence. In this sense, it is very much like verbal language. We are, each of us, absolute experts in recognizing intonations and accents in our mother tongue. Deep meaning is embedded within such nuances. In fact, a slight change in rhythm can shift the whole feeling of the sentence and give an entirely different meaning. For example, “you went to the store” can be heard as a question or a statement depending on the rise or fall of the tone toward the end of the sentence and the context in which it is said. (For now, the context is too specific for our concern. We will encounter the significance of the context in chapters 5 and 6.)

The emphasis on certain words in the sentence may indicate different emotions behind

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<sup>96</sup> It is no accident that I have used both groove and feeling above in a different context. Let’s just say it is Esu-Elegba’s influence on me, my way of critiquing the strict rules of academia. The words apply equally in both situations and have several different entendres in each. I will discuss the multiple uses of these words explicitly in the final chapter though I am sure the reader will catch my drift by going with the flow.

the textual meaning. For example, “YOU went to the *store*? Might indicate disbelief, because the person never does this chore. And, “You went to the STORE?!” may indicate disbelief that the person went to the store instead of completing some other necessary task. “You went to the store!” could also be said with enthusiasm and appreciation. These little nuances are a necessary part of learning a foreign language. Some people never get the intonations exactly like the native people but still establish some sense of rhythm in their speech. Sometimes a foreign rhythm makes it difficult to infer actual meaning. It may be nearly impossible to perfectly imitate a foreign language, but some people come very close. When they do, native speakers are amazed, and they instantly have a particular ease in talking with that person. The same is true of music.

Doug tells me that Manding swings differ from the jazz swings that he learned in his prior musical experiences. There are various types of Manding swings. He explains to me that sometimes the swing changes when the song changes tempo. Swings also change through the passing of generations. For example, the old generation’s “Lasidan” is swung like present-day “Soko.” And “Soko”, when played fast, is swung like “Soli.” He describes that many of the swings are versions of “triplets with a twist” (Fieldnotes, 4/14/05).

Like all of the patterns to “Soli”, I heard the third pattern of “Soli” according to my American sensibility, and again, I was tricked! I thought of the notes as six groups of four, or 3/4 time, again. Again, the Manding think of it as 12/8 time with the emphasis on the first of every three eighth notes.. I heard them in groups of four. When considering the 12/8 time, the Western notation actually clarifies the sense of Manding swing here and groups them into threes.

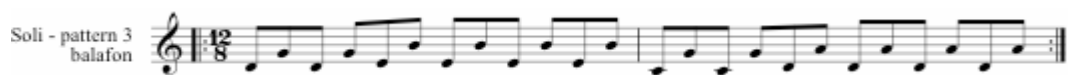


Figure 5: “Soli” pattern three.

Intuitively I hear the sounds and group them into fours so that when I play the sequence, my tendency is to either swing the rhythm in 2s or 4s, or at the very least, play the sequence very straight. I could not help orienting my ear to the melody of the notes over the rhythm, as do other American students when learning this part. This reinforces the stereotype that a Western-rooted cultural affliction reflects the primacy of melody over other musical elements (Steve Pond, comments). We automatically want to hear a melodic progression like this in 4/4 meter. But the Manding have a different tendency, which is to think of the melody into eight groups of three, where the pattern seems to be broken up as:

DGD GEB EBE BEB CGC GEA EAE AEA. But not exactly.

*I sit in Peg’s living room after a balafon workshop one evening, practicing pattern three of “Soli” Doug tells me that my emphasis is wrong. I stop and let him demonstrate what he means. I detect a difference in the way he is thinking about it, but it is subtle. The clearest thing I hear is the shift between EBE BEB. I feel that a note on either side, like a sandwich, surrounds the center note. I hear EE and BB emphasized. I recall hearing a similar phenomenon in djembe drumming. I listen to Doug, and then try to play it. I play DGD GEB EBE BEB CGC GEA EAE AEA with a rest in between each group of three. Although I knew the pattern well just five minutes ago, this shift in emphasis causes me to get stuck several times. Once I smooth it out, Doug stops me. “Close,” he tells me. “But you’re putting too much emphasis on the rest between groups.” (Notice how we verbalize the phenomenon to one another, something Bacar would not be likely to do.) “Find a middle ground between the two ways of playing it.” He plays it again and his rests are subtle. I try to hear where there is more space between notes and less space between notes. I think there is more*



In both of these cases, I do not even know how to *think* about making this discrepancy. That is because it is really a feeling- it comes from the heart. One would have difficulty even trying to write it, so there is no chance to fall back on my cultural habits. This is a different sort of wall I encounter than when I struggled to learn where pattern two began in the meter. In this case, I know when to start the pattern, and I know that each note corresponds to a beat in the 12/8 subdivision. But there is a subtle way in which West Africans feel it that makes it sound differently from what I am playing. It has to do with the fact that I group these notes into fours, while they think of them in threes but that is as far as I can get at that point.

*This afternoon I stop by Famoro's house. He had been trying to teach me the correct way to feel the pulse in pattern two. We chat for a while, catching up, then he starts chatting with Sara, his housemate, in Malinke. I lay down a balafon (there are about five leaning against the walls) and diddle away on pattern three. I don't want to ask him with words because words often create confusion. Demonstration is better.<sup>97</sup>*

Like Manding groove, I am learning to be more sensitive about the timing and method of my questions in social relations, particularly about when to and how to ask a question to my jali teachers. You can premeditate on a question, but you have a better chance at receiving an answer that you understand if you ask the question naturally and appropriately, in context and with inspiration. I have also curtailed my desire to ask questions that will be answered for me if I wait for the experience to unfold. Sometimes, I still jump the gun, and my jali teacher is likely to snub the question. I reflect on the ways and context with which I asked the question, and feel the jali's slight is just another interesting lesson for me to learn. Will my question be answered this time?

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*I start to play it with the American feel in groups of four. I want Famoro to correct me. He sits, watching, but does not say a word. Sometimes Manding teachers have resigned themselves to letting Americans play their music with the wrong feel. He does not know I have been trying to learn the correct feel with Doug and that I should know better. I stop and look up at him. "I don't have the right feeling," I confess, using the typical Manding description. "How do you do it?"*

*He does not have a balafon in front of him and indicates no desire to get up from his reclining position on the couch. I know not to push. I am disappointed because I think I won't learn what I wanted to today. After a few minutes, Famoro starts to sing out a rhythm for me with no tones, just emphasis. "Da-di-di-Da-di-di-Da-di-di-Da-di-di," marking the beat with his hand on the Da of every beat. I catch on to what he is telling me, and I am shocked that the rhythm is so absolutely simple for me to hear because there are no pitches to confuse me. Easy! I sing it back to him in the same way, and he nods yeah. I cannot believe that something that simple seemed so hard. Sometimes a person teaches you in a way that clicks. I attribute it to my learned patience in the jali world. Don't press, let them give it to you when they are ready, and maybe if the time is right (and Allah is willing), you'll get it. In the jali world, timing is everything, and the jalis are the ones who control the time.*

*I return to the balafon to play out this very simple rhythm, and I find I cannot do it without messing up. Like before, the rhythm that I can clearly distinguish now becomes confused when I hear the pitch of the notes. Grouping them into threes and keeping a consistent Da-di-di proves difficult when I hear the melody in groups of four. I practice a few minutes and get much closer now than I ever have. I can tell when I am doing it almost correctly. A little more practice and I know I'll get it. I wonder what Famoro thinks of me. He has expressed to me that he is amazed at how much trouble rhythm gives Americans. I try to tell Famoro that in my culture I have*

*excellent sense of rhythm, but there are ways that the Manding think of music that runs counter to our internalized perceptions. Famoro does not understand, and I think that he thinks that I am making an excuse.*

There are many subtle ways of swinging Da-di-di-Da-di-di, and I tend to fall into a jazz-style swing when I sing this. The Manding make it a little more “choppy”, and each player has his own degree of chop and swing. By “choppy” I mean that they leave more space between swung notes meant to come closer together than would be typical of a jazz-swing.<sup>98</sup> It is impossible to explain this in words. One has to listen to it and to really understand, try to produce it through the body, either by playing the music or dancing to it, which ultimately amounts to the same thing. The feeling, the subtle tensions between notes, makes the participatory discrepancies, and they can only be understood in the practice of them. That which can be felt in practice and not written, Keil describes as a processual analysis, distinct from the older, more syntactical analysis of music (Feld and Keil 1994: 55).

There are no rests between the groups of three, really. There is only a subtle emphasis on the first of the triplet. I can only hear this when Famoro takes the melody out of the equation. The melody makes it more difficult to produce this swing because it plays with my preconceived Western notions of how to group melodic sounds together.<sup>99</sup> The spacing between the Da, di and di are not typical of, say, a jazz swing produced on the cymbal or the high hat.

And that is part of the genius of Manding music to me. And maybe even to them. It may be that the notes and the creative ways of arranging cross-rhythms is part of the beauty of Manding music to its own people as well, even if they are accustomed to hearing it. Famoro tells me one day that in American music, the melody is always

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<sup>98</sup> That said, I borrow the term, “choppy” from Keil who uses the term to describe a kind of jazz drumming style as distinct from other styles.

<sup>99</sup> I do not know if Famoro realizes that this is the problem for Americans, but the more experience he has with teaching us, the more he will learn *how* to teach us.



straight, straight, straight. This comment pertains to our lack of polyrhythm. However, in music such as Jazz, polyrhythms are used for evocative effects. Still, the swing in “Soli” is not the same as a Jazz swing, and it is also more than a mere emphasis on the first note of three in a triplet whose melody invokes grouping notes into fours.

*All* music, not just Manding, or African-rooted music, is more nuanced than paper notation could ever allow. Each cultural group just has their own, unique expression. Keil shows that participatory discrepancies are present in the music of all cultures and different cultures have different ways of producing those subtle nuances. These nuances are not generally verbalized, and the attempts to do so can never depict the true feeling anyhow. They are what make up the magic in the music that makes us want to participate. They provide the meaning behind the music in society. If they are missing, these subtle tensions in microtiming and microtuning, then “the *orishas* will not descend” and the “polka dancers will sit tight” (Ibid. 108). For the unaccustomed American listener, the larger polyrhythmic structures of the music are enough to send their minds and bodies into a different reality from what they know. Finding groove there is hard enough. But if we cannot feel the participatory discrepancies in the music that take place on the subtle level, then we miss an essential aspect to the whole feeling of Manding music. Participation is essential here.

Professor Pond offers one insight from observing the Brazilian samba “suingue” that might apply to the swing in Manding music. It is possible that the Manding swing comes from the West African privilege of the body-in-motion—the dancer’s steps over other musical elements. The Western mindset privileges melody that the social body-in-motion does not represent (Steve Pond, written communication,

10/06).<sup>100</sup> If we watch a West African body of dancers, they will step on the four-count, which, in this 12/8 rhythm, would emphasize the first of every three notes in pattern three. But the time it takes for the foot to rise after the beat and land on the downbeat of four might be represented somehow in the space between the notes. The balafonist, like the drummers, emphasize the dancer's downbeats and might very well be mimicking some aspect of the bodily movement.

The subtle participatory discrepancies do not only apply to music, though music makes an excellent example. The structures of polyrhythms and the tensions that produce groove are the very foundation of culture at large, and recognizing it in the musical realm, and learning to produce and respond to it, is a lesson on how to learn foreign cultural practices in all aspects. In order to have meaning, the participators must have *facticity*, “a shared sense of reality” (Brinner 1995: 289), as in all cultural structures that we hold in our minds.

Musical patterns and their positions over meter represent, in fact they are, an example of cultural conventions from which we stretch and bend subtly for contextual and individual expression (Wagner 1975). This stretching and bending of conventions exemplifies the participatory discrepancies described above, and that which relativizes on the convention breathes life into music, makes for meaningful expression. In all cultural norms, knowing the conventions is necessary before individuals can express themselves by relativizing on them according to particular contexts.<sup>101</sup> It is in the practice of such “norms” that the subtle and unique ways that people relativize on convention becomes imbued with meaning. It is first necessary to learn the larger structures, just like it is necessary to know the rules before you can break them.

Breaking them has different meaning when you know they exist. Furthermore, there is

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<sup>100</sup> Keil mentions a similar point in thinking about an African mentality toward music. He quotes Hornbostel in a footnote at length (Feld and Keil 1994: 60) in which he says that Africans think about music from the beginning of motion, while we think of it from the moment we hear a sound.

<sup>101</sup> For more in depth reading on conventions and relativizations see Roy Wagner (1975)

a certain cultural feeling that comes out in the way the rule is relativized.<sup>102</sup> This is the essential lesson in groove. When the mind and body are in unison, in sync, as through the practice of a well-learned polyrhythmic pattern, the individual has the right frame of mind to produce the subtle feelings. Both Doug and Gray describe to me that upon playing the music for prolonged periods of time (over thirty minutes) there are shifts that happen in the consciousness.<sup>103</sup> The feeling, itself, is culturally prescribed to some degree, if not only for the fact that styles of participatory discrepancies are internalized through repeated exposure to them. This becomes quite difficult for the foreigner to reproduce. If one thinks about it too much, it can evade you. To produce it, the student player has to do it through heart-felt intention rather than intellect, perhaps through feeling. This is true of participatory discrepancies in any cultural medium. The groove necessarily comes about naturally.

There are many levels of cultural barriers to push through when learning to play Manding music. I have only begun to break through the first stages, and I am not well qualified to discuss the Manding swing. As I write this today, I realize that the same swing I try to describe in the third pattern exists in all three of the patterns of “Soli.” It was only through the third pattern that I began to discover it.

I recall playing pattern one proficiently while Famoro played pattern two. “Give it feeling,” he kept urging me. Though I felt comfortable, relaxed, and graceful even, he was probably urging me to put some tension between the notes, Manding style. He could not find inspiration in my playing style. It is a slight intonation, a *groove* that I miss when I play Manding balafon. This groove is like the difference between Manding talk and a foreigner trying to imitate Manding talk. Though I am

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<sup>102</sup> Bateson approaches a similar idea when he discusses Balinese “ethos” (Bateson 1958).

<sup>103</sup> I believe the shifts in consciousness that I perceive in longer meditation sessions are similar. At a certain point, the mind is loosened from the constant thoughts that play through it, and the freed space allows inspiration to flow through. When I emerge from a meditation like this, I feel in sync with the world. I find what I need during my day. I find more inspired ideas for my thesis. I make new connections between ideas that before I held in tight formations. Creativity flows.

learning the grammar rules and vocabulary meanings, I still have quite an accent in my pronunciation of Manding music. Sometimes my meaning goes misunderstood.

### *Analysis*

In this chapter we experienced how Manding jalis teach American students how to play their music on the balafon in workshops in the Northeastern United States. By following the learning process, we found that Manding musical composition, as well as the teaching process, were delivered, intertwined, and both components of Manding culture presented difficulties for American students.

In analyzing this cross-cultural learning process we are able to identify some key elements to cross-cultural study that affect the nature of the information extrapolated. Most importantly, in approaching cross-cultural studies it is helpful and more respectful to endure the learning process according to the value system of the culture one is studying. In doing so, one not only learns about, in this case, Manding music, but one learns the value that each aspect of the music has in the culture itself.

Music serves as an excellent model for such a lesson, as music is the epitome of timing and grace. However, any aspect of the cultural process, if delivered well, contains its own “reasons of the heart” and its “reasons of reason.” Anthropology in practice should also follow social grace in its pursuit to learn about another culture. Only by learning to practice the rhythms and subtle nuances according to another cultural ethos may we really begin to understand what motivates the people in that culture to act “culturally.”

In the case of our American relationships to Manding music, we have learned that the music is polyrhythmic, that melodic lines may be syncopated, that the notes are played with particular discrepancies that are similar to but have a different feeling from Western-oriented music. By studying with these teachers, we have learned that

they take their musical teaching seriously, but they find balance in relaxation at the end of the day. They value their social relationships with their students. They are highly sensitive to the subtleties of timing and feeling between notes in music and between people in social interactions. By practicing this balance in every aspect of life, they teach us how they live gracefully. When we develop trust in our teachers, we, too, can learn how to live gracefully according to the Manding value system. And this grace requires a different focus of mind, body and feeling than to that which we are accustomed. We learn to live a new ethos.

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Two years later, Bacar and Famoro's constant requests for money and assistance are no longer offensive to me, though they still can aggravate at times. Their disappointment in my learning ability does not affect our relationship in other aspects. I have begun to respond to them perhaps as a West African would. They have begun to grow accustomed to my non-African idiosyncrasies. I have learned to distinguish what is most important to them, and what fuels our relationship. It is not my continual financial support, nor the rate of my progression in my balafon studies. What is most important is that we remain open and honest in our intentions to one another, and that those intentions be heart-felt. I cannot take offense to Famoro's requests for assistance, and I am also not obligated to give more than what is in my heart, for to do so would, equally, tarnish the good-standing of our relationship. Like the music teaches us, stick to your pattern, let the tensions between yours and other patterns resolve themselves with the passing of the cycles. This is only possible by sticking to your path through honesty and an open heart. This lesson transcends cultural boundaries, but it is through my relationships with jalis and their music that it has become more prominent in my life. Perhaps it is the jali's business in America to remind us of this lesson.

Those of us who learn this music from an African teacher gain first-hand cultural experience to a degree, but at the same time, the West African teacher who surrounds himself with Americans will start to learn how Americans experience the music as well. Bacar, who spends a lot of time with Americans, may become habituated to, or complacent about making us adhere strictly to West African standards. Similarly, in chapter 3, Famoro may grow accustomed to the American response to his music, and may cater and grow his creativity within that realm differently than he would within a West African realm.

After hearing our musical and social “accent” in Manding music for many years, jalis may not even realize that we have one. Cultural changes grow out of long-term exchanges like this. Nevertheless, the musical lessons in this chapter provide essential lessons that will serve us well in the Manding social scene. We must participate in it actively, bodily. If we do not, it will be impossible to tell if what we perceive is not an American reading on Manding cultural norms, which, as we see above, can be quite misleading. It is only through gauging Manding people’s reactions to your actions as consistent with their reactions to one another that we can approach an understanding of Manding cultural meaning in the music. The more contexts, and the more West African contexts in which we perform these actions, the more complete our image of Manding musical culture will be. That is the subject of chapter 5.

### **Interlude 5: Balafons from Guinea**

*Over a year after my first trip to Guinea, I returned as a cultural and linguistic interpreter for a five-week job for an environmental organization. I was to be on the road in the Futa-Djallon region, but I managed to orchestrate staying with Famoro's family in Conakry for the first few days. Though I had met his wife Aisha and his child, Timé last time when I stayed in Bacar's compound, I had never been to their house.*

*The organization for which I worked arranged for me to stay in a hotel in town, but I opted to stay with my "family." The house was in a crowded area of the city and space was sparse. Aisha gave me her room, in which she and her daughter usually slept. I let Timé, who is eight, sleep with me too. She wanted to be close to anyone who was close to her dad, who she has not seen since she was one year old. We slept in a sweltering bedroom with a queen size bed and mosquito net, but no ventilation. I gave them small amounts of money throughout my stay, and a little more upon my departure. Famoro called us every day. It was amusing and emotional to be on the other side, talking to Famoro from his family's house. How strange that Famoro has not been able to see them in so many years, but I could fly across the ocean and back in the blink of the eye. Everyone was excited that I was with there. I brought a video taped message from Famoro to them. Timé was obsessed with it. I also brought presents for the family and for Oumou, Missia's sister: A black leather handbag and high-heeled shoes.*

*I called Oumou to retrieve her present and she invited me to bring it to her house and stay over. In the end, my time did not allow. I made the famous jalimuso star come to Famoro's family's house on my last day before I left for Futa-Djallon. She had a driver and a black luxury car. I apologized for not accepting her invitation*

*and assured her that I just had no time left due to my work situation. She accepted her gift and hugged me, but remained aloof. She was not pleased.*

*Famoro calls me to add one more request of me before I left for the field. He knew that on my return from Futa-Djallon I would have but a few hours to say my farewells to his family and give any last presents. But he had something particular in mind.*

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*Famoro calls Aisha and wants to talk to me. She hands me the little, pink cell phone with children's stickers stuck to it and Famoro greets me on the other end. I know his family thinks its cool that we are speaking English to each other. They have not heard Famoro speak English much. Timé jumps and prances around me as I talk to her dad. "Hey, Lisa, how are you!" I tell him how nice it is to spend time with his family. He asks me to give them school funds, and I promise I will. Then comes the real request. Famoro wants a new balafon and wants me to give his brother \$100 to have it made. Then I have to carry it back to NY myself. It is another test of my devotion. How can I refuse? "It'll cost you lots of free lessons!" I chide him. "No problem." Untrue. The problem is that I never seem to collect on these lessons which are inevitably cut short- too tired, has a gig, there's a party he needs to attend. I am building up credit.*

*Before returning from my in-country trip, I call Famoro's brother, Sourakata, and warn him he needs to wrap the balafon for me to take on the plane. I will pick it up on my way to the airport. I figure if I tell him that, there won't be any way they can swindle me into wrapping it myself. "Le 28, á15 heures" I tell him, though I did not plan to get there until at least 16 heures. I'm thinking on AMT<sup>104</sup>. "Pas de problème" he says, just like Famoro. Insha'allah, I think to myself. When I arrive, Sourakata is*

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<sup>104</sup> "African Maybe Time"



on his front porch with another man, in the process of enveloping not one, not two, but three, balafons in burlap bags. I get out of the truck. “Mais c’est quoi, ca?! Eh, Allah!” I am pacing back and forth, incredulously. I plead my case to Sourakata. “Three balafon! How do you expect me, a single woman, to carry three balafons! C’est pas vrai! Three balafons? How much extra will they charge me for it? Museum tax, overweight luggage tax.” I am yelling, but with a hint of amusement in my voice. Here I am, a ranting and raving toubab woman in accented French with Arabic/West African punctuations on their front step in a small frenzy. I am increasing my social value for when I finally conceded and take the package. They know I’ll take it. They know I am increasing my social value. And they know I cannot make it too easy for them or I would be a pushover. We are performing our roles.

They finished wrapping, and put the entire package in the flatbed of the pick-up. Famoro calls. Hellooooo, Mama Lisa. I give him a piece of what I just gave to his brother. Somehow, Famoro manages to laugh me off and soothe me down at once. He tells me what a big, big favor I was doing, and how great I am for doing it. Ha! Just like a jali. Before I leave, I made Sourakata and everyone else bless me and my bags for a safe passage to New York. “Buy kola nuts and give them as charity!” I instruct them as I leave.

My trip home was not an easy one. I made it to Dakar for my connection to New York, but somehow the airline lost my reservation and there were no more seats on the plane. They told me I might have to wait a week or more because a big festival just ended and flights were full. There I was, with three balafons draped over a luggage cart, and my own luggage slung over my shoulders. After hours of desperate pleading, they managed a new solution for my problems. I was re-routed through Casablanca and then to New York. Three airplane rides and 30 hours later, and with no extra charge, the balafon package, my luggage and myself made it safely to New

*York, exhausted, but fairly in tact.*

*When I made it to Harlem with the three balafons in my car, I called Famoro to come down stairs for a special delivery. He was there, waiting when I pulled up in front of his apartment, with a wide grin on his face. I popped the trunk. Whaa! Famoro was in heaven, and I was responsible. I was building major credit. I had to start cashing in soon.*

## Chapter 5: Observations of Manding Action

*The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement or confusion in a situation, which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings that have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment that serves to generate a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation* (Schön: 1983: 68).

*Oumou Diabaté et Missia Missia Diabaté, Deux Soeurs, Face à Face*, boasted the glossy postcard in French. I held up the advertisement for the upcoming show to get a closer look. It described a competition between two jalimuso sisters. Directly under the title, each of two photos portrayed one of the sisters singing, their images juxtaposed as if facing off. Written over the pictures was the necessary information: 127<sup>th</sup> Street between Lenox and 5th. High school auditorium, Harlem 10:00 P.M. on May 21, 2005. The names of the *marraine* and *parrain*<sup>105</sup> and ten guests d'honneur were listed. I did not recognize anybody's name. The cards were spread around Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx in the most popular West African restaurants. Famoro also had a stack on his dining room table. He grabbed a handful every time he left the house. One sat on the dashboard of my car, facing outward for the public to read. Another sat on my desk at home. They were ubiquitous.

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In the previous two chapters we visited scenes where jalis and toubabs interacted with one another through a musical medium. In chapter 3, depicting live music scenes from American venues, the music acted as a social cohesion between people of different cultural backgrounds and with different levels of cross-cultural experience. In chapter 4, music lessons provided a forum in which jalis and toubabs

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<sup>105</sup> Every West African musical event has a *marraine* and a *parrain*, translated as the godmother and godfather of the party. They receive special recognition from the jalis and are expected to help out financially by offering the lead jalis what they need to make themselves more comfortable.

interacted person-to-person in musical and extra-musical social relationships. We also saw that the music that attracts people together also exposes our cultural differences. The participation process exposed to us aspects of our own minds that differ from the Manding way. I begin to apply the self-knowledge I gain from reflecting on my musical lessons to the difficulties in overcoming cross-cultural social interactions in non-musical situations, as my relationship with my music teachers grows.

In this chapter we encounter Manding jali music as it is performed for a West African audience in New York City. For the first time the music emphasizes jali praise-singing over the music. The performance contrasts sharply with the live musical scenes geared for an American audience, described in chapter 3. Observing this scene recalls my previous experiences with jalis in both Africa and New York, leading me to reanalyze the events of the past. The course of my realizations about the social reality around the jali's music parallels my learning process of the polyrhythms, syncopated melodies and grooves in the previous chapter. While I draw upon the past to help me understand the present, my experience of the present helps me understand the past more completely as well. I reassess the social scenes in which I participated and come to a more complete understanding of jali-patron relationships, and my own position as both limited and privileged in this reality.

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#### *The Oumou-Missia Concert*

Oumou Diabaté is famous throughout West Africa, and particularly among women in Guinea. She has many CDs on the regional market, and her songs are played on the radio in Guinea, as well as in the Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, and other West African countries with Manding populations. Oumou sings in Malinké for the larger Manding community, most of whom speak Malinké or a related language such as Mandinka or Bambara. Her songs often address female issues,

encouraging women's empowerment. The expatriate Manding communities in the United States, Europe and elsewhere are also familiar with Oumou's music. She tours in all of these places, playing concerts for predominately Manding West Africans, the largest percentage of whom are Guinean. An entirely West African production team put this show together and the advertisement is geared solely for an expatriate West African market. In New York, the only non-West Africans who come to these shows are invited guests of the tightly-knit West African community. Although invited, these cultural outsiders play little or no role in the social scene taking place. Oumou does not have a world-renowned, international reputation as does Youssou N'Dour or Salif Keita. Nor would these two more famous West African artists claim to be jalis. It is relevant that the West African singers that do not function, first, as jali praise-singers, are more likely to gain popularity outside of West African social circles, as we will see as the chapter develops.

Missia Diabaté is Oumou's sister of the same mother, same father. She is also a popular jalimuso in Conakry, Guinea and is even known a little in Paris, France. She has recorded and distributed two albums in Guinea, one of which was reproduced and distributed in France. Her music combines horns and electric rhythm resulting in a danceable mix of Guinean electro-Mandingo music (Frank Bessem's review, [www.geocities/fbessem/html](http://www.geocities/fbessem/html)). One hears Missia's CDs in restaurants, bars, taxi cabs and stores throughout Conakry, and rumor has it she has difficulty going out in the streets because her fans are many (Sylvain Leroux, personal conversations). She is known in Guinea for being "a little spicy." Missia boasts her own fashion and personality style, being more risqué and less adherent to a Muslim sense of modesty than her older sister's: Missia often dresses in sexy European clothing and dances provocatively on stage. At the same time she maintains the essential jalimuso characteristics singing powerfully and convincingly to her patrons. Her trans-border

reputation is not as large as her sister's; nevertheless, she appears to be following a similar path to stardom. She has lived abroad, mostly in France, for many years. She had been in New York for about eight months by the time of this concert, and spoke little English. Oumou speaks almost no English as well. We converse in French.

Oumou and Missia are not really competing, Famoro explained to me as I read the postcard. The promoters organized the concert this way as a means of raising Missia's popularity in New York among the Guinean immigrant community. Some of the expatriates have been living in the United States for a long time, before Missia's popularity grew in Conakry. More New Yorker-Guineans are more familiar with Oumou because her music is distributed across the international market. They can find her cassettes and CDs in the local African music stores all over Harlem. Oumou's tour managers have a network of Guineans in most of the populated Guinean ex-patriot communities in Europe and the United States. Many come to see Oumou because she is an international jalimuso star. By making a pseudo-duel with her sister, Missia, many people are simultaneously introduced to a new and local jalimuso with a reputation in Guinea, as they would soon discover through their cell phones. Missia would be the new star available to sing for West African events and ceremonies.

*Doug and I pick up Famoro in Brooklyn, where he is playing another gig with Haitians at the B.A.M. Café. During the whole drive up town from Brooklyn to Harlem, Famoro is talking to the other musicians on his cell phone, non-stop. We arrive at the Harlem school auditorium around 11:30 pm. Almost no guests are there, and the musicians are just starting to set up on the big stage in front. Each arriving musician shakes hands with everyone else on stage before he starts to set up. Even while people are busy talking or setting up equipment, they stop to greet the recently arrived. When I greet Cheik, he pauses to admire my bogolon indigo wrap skirt and*

shawl. He calls it a lep and says it comes from his area of Labé, high in the hills of the Futa-Djallon region of Guinea. I tell him I bought it in Kindia.<sup>106</sup>

Some of the musicians want to pile into my car to chill out before the show, out of sight of the incoming crowd. Famoro is in the front passenger seat. Djoss is in the back with Makanyi, who is dressed in his best, bright red patent-leather shoes, a suit, white shirt with red tie, and a black hat. Sharp dresser, I think, and I compliment him. He tells me he may not have money but he respects himself. "It is nice to look nice," he says. Djoss is dressed sharply too, as usual, as is Mamadou, who walks by and greets us as he passes. Makanyi spreads some thanks and praises to us from the back seat about the night's event. The Africans blah blah about different people while their friends keep stopping by outside our windows to greet them. Yacuba Sissoko, the great, young kora jali, comes by, and Famoro opens his window to shake hands. When we get out, I see a lot of finely dressed women coming out of taxis and cars, gathering in front of the building. They pay their \$20 entrance fee and congregate in the lobby to meet friends, gossip, and check each other out. I hear the typical greetings of how is the family, where is the husband, how are the children. All are there, all are in peace.

Inside, the first two rows are reserved for invited guests, guests d'honneur, la marraine, le parrain, and for me. I did not have to pay because I came with the band. I clutch my little video camera in one hand. Once the band members are on stage, my only friend is a curious, bi-lingual, bi-cultural eight-year old. He is the son of West African immigrants and goes to an American school. I think he is excited to see a White American who knows the two sides of his every day bi-cultural reality. In the first two rows we see some very finely dressed African ladies. Their grand boubous

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<sup>106</sup> Labé is a town in the hills of the Futa-Djallon region of Guinea. Kindia sits one hour outside of Conakry, on the road to Labé, and hosts a large market with fabrics from the inner regions of Guinea.

*are shiny, sparkly, lacey, elaborately tie-dyed with stars and dots of various sizes in eye boggling patterns. Their head wraps are tied around their heads and starched straight up, or out in different directions. Though I am dressed in indigo-dyed African home-spun cotton, my clothing is embarrassingly bland and country-style compared to these women. Nevertheless, I receive a few sparse compliments and amused glances. Generally, I find that they are happy to see a white woman wrapped in their clothing. As the rows go back, the people are dressed more and more in Euro-American clothing and many are less fancy. Some women wear slinky dresses, some wear business suits. The men, of which there are fewer, are mostly wearing slacks and jackets. Aside from Doug, I see only one man in a grand boubou and cap. The men mostly stay in the back, and many of them remain standing. Are they tentative because Oumou appeals to a female audience? Almost everyone chews gum. There is plenty of thick, gold jewelry and things that sparkle and dangle.*

*The show begins close to 1:00 A.M., obviously AMT. Mousbi, Famoro's deejay friend from Guinea, emcees the show. He welcomes the guests and makes some announcements. I have met Mousbi before, hanging out in Famoro's apartment. He is young and friendly, vibrant and good-natured. He deejays in Greenwich Village in a Caribbean and African music club. There are a few other helpers who come on and off of the stage throughout the night, making announcements and speeches. I do not know who they are. One guy seems to lurk around and on the stage, trying to organize people, dancing to the music, or doing nothing. I wonder what his purpose is. There is also a camera man with a large video camera on his shoulder. The camera has a spotlight on top, and he often comes within a foot of the singers.*

*The house lights fully illuminate the stage and the audience throughout the show. When Missia first appears on stage, she is dressed conservatively in a rose colored African dress, and she sings to a fairly subdued audience. She is singing to*



*Mamadou and explaining a story in her song. She turns to the audience and sings at them as if explaining something dramatic, then falls into the chorus and pumps the audience up by singing lively and strutting across the stage. She brings many women to their feet, and a crowd has gathered in front of the stage. A few people throw money up at Missia.*

*When Oumou appears, the crowd needs no revving. They cheer. Some stand and dance. Oumou is wearing a baby pink African dress with a fake pregnant belly strapped underneath her shirt, singing “Muso de Siguiri,” one of her most famous tunes about the hardships of pregnancy. The women cheer and some stand up to dance. Within a few minutes, a crowd of women makes their way to the front of the stage and women start throwing money. The song quickly turns to praise-singing. A group of women walk up the side stairs and on to the stage, itself. They position themselves in front of the singer who turns side stage to face them as they approach. I suppose that Oumou is praising the one who stands in front. That woman pulls out a wad of cash to distribute to the singer. The others behind the leading woman open up their purses and take out their wallets while the jalimuso sings at the woman, telling her about her greatness. Oumou sings repeated syllables percussively, then she belts long, drawn out notes<sup>107</sup> at the one who is being praised. Friends of the praised woman stand behind her and hand her piles of money, or throw it themselves from next to her at the jalimuso. Eventually the woman in front distributes the piles of cash to the jalimuso too, throwing it over her head and letting it rain down all around her to the floor.*

*The rest of the band plays behind these women but the music and the musicians remain in the background. I focus the camera on Famoro, then on Djoss, Mamadou and Cheik. They seem to be mellow and enjoying the easy sway. The*

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<sup>107</sup> The correct term is that she sings a melisma, followed by a sustained note.

*balafon's highest notes stand out the most, and sometimes, when the jalimuso is in between lines, the guitarist echoes the balafon. Occasionally, the djembe, balafon, or guitar punctuates what the jalimuso sings by matching or responding to a part of her phrase in notes and rhythm. But the focus of the attention in the room remains on the jalimuso.*

*Over the course of the next few hours, Oumou and Missia change outfits four times. Oumou maintains fairly modest African dress. Fancy, long wrap skirts and matching shirts, or full-length sun dresses. Missia starts the night in a modest, glitzy red lacey African-style dress, but toward the end of the evening she dresses scantily, according to the standards of modesty in Muslim West Africa.<sup>108</sup> Short skirts or tight pants that lace up the sides, lacey shirts and crop tops. She dresses like an American pop singer from MTV, but her singing is very refined according to the Manding West African aesthetic. She sings deeply and passionately.*

*The spraying and praise-singing continues for several hours and I become dazed by the loud decibel level of music that drones on, and my limited understanding of the event that surrounds me on all sides. The event functions almost entirely in Malinké with the occasional few words in French. I do not know anyone being sung to and I do not understand what is being sung, so everything seems fairly repetitive. I watch people offer folded fabrics (for making clothing), gold jewelry, even a gold credit card to the jalimuso. Mousbi and another woman who has been on and around the stage all night keep talking into the jalimuso's ear. What are they telling her? One finely dressed man distributes a wad of cash to Oumou, staring at her with a stone-*

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<sup>108</sup> Jalimuso are not expected to follow the same dress code as the rest of Muslim West African society.. Jalis often stretch or break codes of behavior to which other members of society adhere. Modesty in West Africa says that women of child-bearing age should wear full-length skirts that cover the bifurcation of the legs. Married women display their social position by wearing head-wraps. Elder women tend to show the highest respect for Allah by draping a veil over their heads, but not their faces, as well. In big cities such as Conakry, these standards are becoming much more relaxed, as it is common to see women in pants.

*cold face. The cash gone, he reaches into the breast pocket of his suit for the next wad. Standing next to him, his friends spray too.*

*At about 3:30 A.M. it seems that the audience is tiring. I am exhausted too. Now Missia comes out dressed in tight knit pants. She arouses the audience and starts to enliven the crowd by dancing. Male dancers from the audience come on stage and dance with her. She shakes her derriere to Makanyi's djembe. She struts to one end of the stage, then the other, singing to the audience. Several younger men approach the stage and take turns dancing with her. She hands her mike to the back-up singers and starts to dance with one of them. They are both talented dancers. The dancing is provocative, wild even, and the crowd cheers them on. They imitate fellatio and sodomy, and I am shocked. So is the audience, from their initial gasp, but they like it. At least the younger ones do. They stand, cheer and dance, their sleepiness now forgotten. I have also rejuvenated. I am standing at the back of the auditorium, trying to film the spectacle.*

*At the end of this number, Doug stands up from behind the drum set as if to say, that's enough! It's 4A.M. The band members make him sit back down for one more. Both of the jalimuso come on stage together to praise-sing a few last people. Then, quite suddenly, around 4:15 A.M., the singing comes to an end and the people filter out. The band members gather the bags of money thrown, count it, and distribute it among themselves. I get to bed about 5:30 A.M. NYT<sup>109</sup>. I drift off seeing piles of money floating down all around me.*

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<sup>109</sup> New York Time, or in other words, on time, as opposed to African Maybe Time, which is always hours or days late.

When I imagined a concert with a famous singer such as Oumou Diabaté especially after witnessing the rehearsal, I imagined other smaller concerts I had attended in my life, from a Sting concert in Beacon Theater to a Kakande concert in Satalla World Music Café, or even a concert featuring Bacar and New York-based tap dancers, performed in Guinea. Knowing that it was a concert geared towards West Africans, I imagined that many people would be dressed in fancy African and New York styles and that they would come in and take their seats, the audience lights would go down, and the stage lights would go up. I imagined that the performers would come to the stage and sing and play their famous songs, and maybe some of the musicians would take a solo. The people in the audience would watch from their seats, stand up in their places and dance and sing. They would applaud after the songs and sometimes they would come to the stage and throw money at the jalimuso or a musician when they sang or played particularly well. I figured that people would spray Oumou and Missia when the singers sang a particularly emotive or expressive part, perhaps about an occasional, known audience member, or a personal friend of the singers, or perhaps about a famous figure in history. I expected to participate by dancing, if not by throwing a few bucks at the jalimuso myself. I figured that everyone would applaud at the end, the house lights would come up and people would filter out. Though some of the acts were not completely foreign to me, most of what I expected was quite different than what actually transpired.

I had never imagined that the bulk of the night would become a long parade of (mostly) women from their seats to the stage. I had never imagined that massive amounts of spraying would envelop the emotive singing most of the time. I had thought that I would pay a lot more attention to the balafon and other instruments. I had thought I would fit in more completely, knowing all of the musicians and a handful of songs. Instead, I remained a passive observer to the social scene that

unfolded around me. I had never imagined the degree to which this concert was a direct interaction between the audience members and the jalimuso and I had not imagined I would gauge the singers' success based on how many people came to the stage. My images of a famous jali concert had to shift to reflect the reality I had seen. My notions of what *is* Manding music began to shift as well.

My expectations prior to the concert came from several past experiences that I had stored in my memory. Upon experiencing the reality of the show, I had to reformulate my ideas of a pop jali concert by assessing the actual social reality and drawing new links to past experiences. I had experienced jalimuso singing in Guinea, and during that time, I had learned about praise-singing and spraying money to the praise-singer in gratitude. Much of the Oumou/Missia concert was structured closely to these local ceremonies. Now, witnessing the concert, I recalled what I knew about praise-singing in Guinea. I had been included in such events. Now, my expectations of what this concert would be shifted and a more complete picture of jali music began to emerge, one that highlighted what it is that Manding people value across cultural contexts.

In December 2004, I traveled to Guinea with Bacar Sylla and a New York-based African music and tap company called *Feraba*, many of whom I knew from New York. Bacar and the group welcomed me to join them and enjoy the musical experience.<sup>110</sup> We stayed at Bacar's family compound and I took balafon lessons with Bacar and his brothers. Meanwhile, the *Feraba* group rehearsed for their upcoming show at the Centre Culturel Franco-Guinéen. Living in a jali's compound I also took part in the lives of some of the local jali functions, such as attending ceremonies and parties.

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<sup>110</sup> Doug, balafonist and drum set player in African bands, and Raul of Kakande and Jumbie Records were both in Guinea as well.

### *Feraba's Performance*

Bacar and an Austrian tap dancer, Irene, had created, directed and performed in this Manding music and tap company for seven years in New York City. They had met one day when Bacar, newly arrived to New York, appeared as the live music in Irene's tap dance class. She had been intrigued by the music, and had asked Bacar if he wanted to jam together some time. They did, and after a few jams, Bacar suggested that they start a rhythm and tap company. Bacar would compose the music based on a Manding repertoire, and Irene would choreograph the tap dances. Through the years, Irene began to know and understand a bit about Manding music and culture, and Bacar had learned about toubab culture. They had recruited a revolving crew of New York based musicians and tap dancers from all nationalities and had performed regularly in the New York City area. They had often collaborated with New York-based West African djembe drum groups. Now I was joining them on their first trip to Guinea, as they set out to test their unconventional performance on a West African audience. The music was strictly Manding, mostly balafon and drums. The tap dancers were French, Japanese and Austrian by nationality, but all of them lived permanently in New York since adulthood, and all had been educated in tap, ballet, and some African dance. The choreography and costumes represented a blend of New York- and West African-styles. The dancers sometimes tapped out African polyrhythms while adding West African arm movements. In this performance, Feraba collaborated with a local *boté* percussion group consisting of three drummers and with two female Guinean dancers from local ballet companies<sup>111</sup>.

The show was to be held in the Franco-Guinean Cultural Center's auditorium,

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<sup>111</sup> Boté percussion is native to the Sousou who live in guinea. The drums are small and slung around the players' necks. The player beats the drum with a stick with one hand, and rings a bell with the other hand.

which contained about 500 seats facing an elevated stage. Feraba ran two rehearsals on the stage prior to the concert in which the performers marked spaces on the floor and stage technicians arranged the lighting and sound systems. The show began at 8:20 P.M., almost on time, and it drew an audience of special guests and family members of the musicians, some political dignitaries, and some Guineans and Europeans out for cultural entertainment. They filled about three quarters of the auditorium. Tickets were about \$5 each, a steep price for Guineans, thus most audience members had some economic stature in the society. Among the toubabs, we each invited Bacar's older children, since they could not pay their own way, and other Guinean friends.

The audience members arrived in cars and taxis, and filtered into the center's lobby between 7:30 and 8:15, decked out in beautifully colored grand boubous, caps, elaborate head wraps, and their finest shoes. The women painted their lips boldly with deep brown or bright pink lipstick, they clutched small purses, and held their heads high. The elder men greeted one another with handshakes and the usual asking after one another's family members health. *How is your wife? She is there. How is the father? He is there. How is the body? It is strong. Alhumdilillah!* As the auditorium filled, the elders took the front row. Ninety-two- year- old legendary Master balafonist El Hajj Djeli Sory Kouyate took the most important seat, front row and center.<sup>112</sup> It was a social scene as much as any concert would be.

The lights dimmed on the audience and came up on the stage as the musicians marched out playing their first song. The show unfurled, scene after scene, with a blend of Manding and New York cultures. In the first scene, Doug, Bacar and Bacar's nephew played Manding balafon while European and Asian Feraba tap dancers

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<sup>112</sup> Djeli Sory Kouyate is Famoro's maternal grandfather, and one of the most respected balafon jalis in Manding West Africa.

tapped. This scene gave way to West African performers and Doug, playing sabar style drums and dancing, which gave way to an all-Guinean boté percussion performance, followed by American jazz style traps and New York classis Jazz tap, which re-combined with tap and balafon, and so on. Each scene blended with the next so that each scene's flavor melted into the next. Poetry was read in French and Sousou about the birth and development of tap dancing and jazz in New York, as directly related to the coming of slavery. The Feraba dance troupe performed one piece to the song "Soli." "Soli" is the song for the initiation ceremony in West Africa. One dancer gave a small speech preceding the dance, suggesting that the audience members consider the effects of genital excision on the health and freedom of women. Then three tap dancers performed a piece with three balafonists and two drummers. Toward the end of the piece, the African women dancers came out to join the non-Africans in a circle dance.

Bacar played balafon throughout most of the concert, accompanied by Doug and another Guinean, which allowed him to solo over the back-up patterns. He also put down his balafon to sing a little bit, something he does not usually do. Bacar even played djembe, which is considered virtually taboo among the jalis. Djembe, beating animal skin, is considered inferior to playing jali instruments, and the music is considered less advanced.<sup>113</sup>

The first time people came to spray Bacar, he was playing "Lasidan" and doing a call and response with a tap dancer. He would play a bar or two of improvisation, and she would try to tap out a similar rhythm. Then they switched. Audience members came up to the stage, and some walked on to the stage to spray money at Bacar. The next opportunity came during the song "Fasson." Now Bacar's closest

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<sup>113</sup> Famoro told me this one day while he was speaking about the American fascination with djembe drums.



family members came on stage, his son, his daughter, his nephew, and his wife, and even El Hajj, the eldest and most respected balafonist in the country.

For the most part, the concert mirrored the types of jali shows I had seen in New York venues played for American audiences. The auditorium remained dark throughout the concert. The audience members mostly stayed in their seats. During very upbeat times, the audience members sometimes clapped along. Where the performers acted out humorous dramas, the audience laughed. When a musician or tap dancer performed a particularly difficult piece well, some people called out an approving holler, and the audience exploded in applause at the end of the segment as an audience might do after a jazz solo in the middle of a piece. They applauded the end of each number. When the show ended, the performers came out in a line and took several bows while the audience clapped.

Though I was familiar with spraying, this was the first time I ever saw people spray like this. One, two, even three people at a time would walk on to stage, take out a stack of bills, and nonchalantly peel them off, one by one, and let them float to the floor around Bacar's feet. Others would just walk to the stage front and throw the money in crumpled balls. As a guest of the Sylla family, I felt appropriate in joining my hosts by taking my turn to throw money at Bacar as well. I had sprayed Bacar and Famoro both, back in the United States, throwing a few dollars at them during their solos when they played either with Kakande or one of their numerous other bands. Now, I observed my possibilities for action, and when I thought the time was right, I got up from the front row seat off to the side where I was filming the show, and threw a few bills at Bacar. I did not make a grandiose display of my action. I did not walk onto stage, and I did not spray bill after bill. I merely threw four or five at once, as I had seen others do. I felt appropriate and at ease for doing so because it was not hard to transfer what I had known in America to this situation.

Just after the show, I wrote:

*It is customary in West Africa for audience members to show their appreciation of jali musicians by showering them with money. This stems from an age-old tradition where particular family lineages were jalis, musicians and singers who composed music and songs in which they praised people, told oral histories, and sang about righting the wrongs in the village social life. For many centuries, important politicians boasted their own, private jalis who spoke for them and praised them and wrote musical histories for them that are still sung today as a form of oral history. It is the duty of a spectator to give the jali money while he sings or plays for him; likewise, the jali must honor the giver with his own gift of musical praise. Today, it is a common form of audience appreciation, when hearing a master player, to spray him with money. Throughout this performance, Bacar made lengthy, tasteful, improvised solos on his balafon that won over the audience several times. Each distinguished guest took his or her turn to approach the stage, or even walk onto it, and dish out bills, one by one, as they floated to the floor. Sometimes several people would spray money at once. What might look like an impressive amount of bills floating around the stage, in all amounted to maybe \$25. In Guinea, the smallest bill, 100 Guinean Francs equals about 3 cents. If you shower five of them, and even a few 500 Guinean Franc bill, it still would not amount to a dollar! Nevertheless, the gesture duly flatters the musician and inspires his performance while displaying the sprayer's good measure. From his closest family members Bacar received not only bills, but also a cap, a head wrap, a necklace from his daughter, a kiss on the forehead from his son, and an embrace from his wife, all of which was done with lots of affection. But the largest display of flattery came from none other than El Hajj Djeli Sory Kouyate, supported by a younger gentleman. The old man stretched out a meager arm to throw money at Bacar, who walked to the stage's edge to meet him. Bacar had received El*

*Hajj's blessings (Lisa Feder, March 2005).*

This excerpt comes from an article I wrote just after the show, revealing that I was not unaware of the deeper meanings of spraying a jali. I included an explanation of the more historical jali roles that I had read and heard about. However, in my analysis at the time, I describe the spraying in the Feraba show as merely a token of appreciation for Bacar's superior musical talents. Up to that time, my experience of spraying had been in mixed toubab and West African audiences, and that was how I understood the act. Looking back now, after having seen how West Africans react socially to this music when the show is made by them and for them, there had been more meaning to the notes that Bacar was playing of which I was unaware.

Famoro brought this to my attention when I showed him the video of the performance about a month later. "He was thinking of me there." "Where," I asked him. "How do you know?" Famoro rewound the tape and pointed out a little riff in Bacar's solo in "Fasson." "He learned that from me, that part. He was thinking of me when he played it." Famoro was taking credit for the musical line, but at the same time he was expressing pleasure in knowing that he and Bacar were connected at that moment, a poignancy that Famoro, who has not returned to Guinea in eight years, felt even more acutely. This is the first time it came to my direct attention that the music has the ability to invoke people who are not present, and the significance this has in Manding culture. This new awareness leads me to further insights on meaning in Manding music in chapter 6.

The experience I had at the Feraba performance in Guinea, 2004 better prepared me to understand the Oumou/Missia concert in New York. In Guinea, the audience was mostly West African, and the entrance scene, what people wore, how they greeted one another, was similar to the scene that took place in the Oumou/Missia concert. The audience members went onto the stage to spray Bacar with a laid back

attitude, similar to the Oumou/Missia show. People walked onto stage and stood right next to Bacar, dishing out bill after bill right at him while he continued to play his heart out. There was no sense that the sprayers were intruding on the balafonist's space.

However, the style of the performance and the stage display (spotlights on the stage, audience lights dimmed) were closer to what one might expect in an American musical venue. The spraying was a side factor in the Feraba concert and the reasons for spraying seemed different. People were spraying Bacar because they were proud of him, they loved him (personally), and because they wanted to show their appreciation for his talent on balafon. The spraying had the intention of raising Bacar's status first and foremost, rather than that of the audience members. It seemed very close to the American notion of applause, just carried out differently.

This was not the case in the Oumou/Missia concert. In the Oumou/Missia concert, the interactions between individuals and the jalimuso were the purpose for the show. Therefore, similar gestures that in one context may be understood in one way came to have a different social purpose, that of displaying and negotiating social status and wealth of both the audience members and the jalimuso, in subsequent contexts. At the Oumou/Missia concert the spraying was ubiquitous and continual and the emotion behind the actions were not as warm because there were strangers spraying strangers rather than family members spraying Bacar.

There is also a marked difference in that the content of the Oumou/Missia show was largely directed by the actions of audience members. A song would be introduced that was suggestive of a certain theme or family, but the people who approached the stage directed the jalimuso's singing. In the Feraba show, the spraying did not affect the general performance. Sprayers might have inspired Bacar to play particular riffs during his improvised balafon solos for moments, if anything, but the

show did not depend on the audience participation for its content, as it did in the Oumou/Missia show.

### *Singing*

The Oumou/Missia concert highlighted the singing jalimuso over the instrumentalists. I had only experienced praise-singing in local, community settings in Bacar's compound, not in a concert hall. Because I was more accustomed to spraying the musicians than the singers, I watched for a possible time in which it might be appropriate to spray Famoro on the balafon, but to no avail. The center of attention was clearly the singers and they commanded the room's attention. The musicians' roles were to support the singers. Sometimes one would add a few extra notes or a short solo as punctuation to what the singer said, but never enough to warrant spraying. This was quite different from the context of a predominantly American audience, such as at Makor or Satalla, in which people sprayed Famoro as the star musician and Missia's role as singer was usually secondary to the music and praise-singing was limited. There is (almost) no shared cultural context for praises0singing and spraying of this sort. However it was also quite different from the predominantly Guinean audience at the Feraba show, which featured Bacar's balafon and the dancers. This is because the format of the Feraba show was almost entirely arranged according to performance-as-entertainment as opposed to jali-performance.<sup>114</sup>

It was then that I learned that there is a distinctive difference between a jali musician and a jali praise-singer. It is uncommon to have a popular jali music concert without a praise-singer. In that, the praise-singer identifies and sings for particular individuals with the intention of motivating to spray the jalimuso. They are not spraying only to inspire and praise the jalimuso, but to display their own social

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<sup>114</sup> These are imperfect descriptions to be elaborated upon in the conclusion.

standing as well. Although there are many distinctions, this aspect of spraying is not unlike the spraying in juju music (Waterman 1990).

The first time I had this kind of experience was on the same trip to Guinea. The first time a jali sang to me, for me, was in Bacar's compound on the Feraba trip. Bacar's first of two wives, Junta Diabaté, is a Malinké jalimuso. She used to be a dancer and a prominent singer in Conakry and she used to accompany Famoro in performance, years ago. But Junta suffered from a difficult birthing of her last child seven years ago, and since then she cannot walk without assistance. She gave up singing in public, though she can still sing, as we were honored to find out one afternoon.

It was Raul's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and that afternoon our compound invited friends, many of them musicians, to stop by.<sup>115</sup> Junta came down from her house on the hill, dressed in formal African attire. Accompanying her were some of her younger girlfriends who gave her assistance. We sat in a big circle on wooden benches, low wooden stools and plastic chairs outside, in the common area. Bacar played balafon; Irene, Haja-Saran, Bacar's daughter, and I played accompanying balafon. Raul played his cello and Raul's teacher played his instrument, the *ninyeroo*.<sup>116</sup> When we finally coordinated ourselves to play a song, Junta started to sing. She sang in Malinké, addressing everyone in the area, but especially we, the visitors. She sang with a pleasant, if not sometimes forced, smile on her face.<sup>117</sup> She sang for me, for Irene, for Doug, for Raul, and we smiled back, played music, and enjoyed the passing hours.

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<sup>115</sup> Raul plays cello in Famoro's Kakande back in New York. He was visiting Guinea the same time as us, and spent a few days in Bacar's compound.

<sup>116</sup> The *ninyeroo* is a Fulani instrument. It is a small gourd with a long pole and a reed. It is a monochord viol, tension-strung to a long pole, fitted with a small gourd sound chamber, and played with a bow. It is also an instrument of the *nyamakalas*, meaning the men who play it work with the world of spirits. Other Sahelian language groups use different versions of it for possession ceremonies.

<sup>117</sup> The whole scene seemed a little tense because neither side knew what to expect. The *foté* did not know how to respond to the praising, nor what it meant, culturally. Likewise, on her side, Junta realized that *foté* were awkward in this position to which we were unaccustomed.

She sang “Lasidan” and I understood how the balafon parts corresponded to the chorus for the first time. Her daughter, Haja-Saran, even took the opportunity to practice a few balafon patterns her father had been teaching her on the balafon, American-style.<sup>118</sup> At one point, Haja-Saran broke out in song too. Her mother was quite amused at her daughter’s attempts at being a jalimuso, and she was pleased. Haja-Saran quickly relinquished her performance to her mother. Chicako (another dancer in Feraba), Irene and I took the opportunity to film Junta and the social scene with our video cameras. Junta sang for the camera, too, all with a big smile on her face. I thought of the experience as a jam session.

As the afternoon came to a close, it was time for Junta to go back to her own house, up the hill from the compound. A car came to pick her up because she could not make the walk. Before she got into the car, she called me over. “Lisa, tu n’as pas donné d’argent? Et Irene!” (Lisa, you didn’t give money? And Irene!) She reprimanded me that no one gave her any money. It was then that I learned that when a jali or jalimuso sings and plays, especially for you in person, it is customary that you spray money, give thanks and complements, display humility, and offer any other small gifts you may find appropriate, to the jali. Even a pauper, not having anything to give, would bow down in humility, as if to offer a present. I realized my lack of social grace, almost an insult toward Junta by *not* spraying her. I knew something about the social etiquette around jaliya but I was, alas, a mere beginner at fulfilling my part. Embarrassed at my lack of respect for the custom, I signaled for her to wait. I went to tell Irene of our fatal mistake. She absolutely refused to give Junta any

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<sup>118</sup> It is not customary for women to play balafon and it is not customary for Jalis to give lessons to their children. Bacar set up two balafons and had Haja-Saran imitate his notes in the same fashion that he did in the balafon lessons in the United States. He told me this was a big change from the way he taught his first apprentice, Fode, twenty years ago. He used to demand Fode to play songs and then beat him for playing them wrong. Bacar learned that beating children was not the best way to teach children from his American friends (private conversations, 2004).

money. She felt that she had already been entirely drained and used up by giving money to every family member, including large amounts, to Bacar, prior to the trip. (And she was). I tried to explain that even the amount of a dollar would be fine, that it was the culturally sensitive custom. Nothing convinced her. So I ran to my room and dug out a wad of bills that probably amounted to \$4 or \$5, a generous amount in Guinea, and pranced back down the wide steps. I figured maybe my generosity would help cover Irene too.

Junta was already in the front seat of the car, and she opened the window half way. I floated one bill at a time through the window on to her lap, saying praises and thanks. She smiled and sang a few more lines to me. She was pleased, and I think she realized that I had learned my lesson. The impression continued strong in my mind, and undoubtedly, in hers as well. Junta and I remained on very good terms throughout my stay, and she always made sure to give me special attention, food, song, conversation when I saw her. By the end of our time in Guinea, Junta had forgotten how to say Irene's name properly.

During the act itself, I had not even realized that Junta was singing to honor me. Though I was accustomed to spraying Bacar or Famoro as skilled instrumentalists in music venues, I had failed to realize that even in this informal environment within our family compound there was still a customary display of jali/patron interaction. I had never seen it like this before, but it felt appropriate when it was brought to my attention. I accepted and welcomed that Junta placed me in the position of patron, and took the opportunity to act out the part, even though my performance was ungraceful. This original experience would lead me into this position again, a situation I eventually learned to manipulate as a West African patron might (see chapter 6).

I had a second opportunity to make use of the lesson Junta taught me on the same trip, the day before we left Guinea, but this time in the forum of a celebration



party. Bacar was in the final stages of building the house where we stayed. It was likely that all of the begging he did in the United States for money, and the large sum he charged us to stay in his house that month, went to the house construction, among other things. He told us on the afternoon before we left that he would be throwing a farewell/new house party that evening. We told him it was not necessary and to save his money (which mostly came from us) but he refused. With no further discussion, at about 4 P.M. a car came and unloaded huge speakers and a sound control board. N’fa Muso, our balafon-maker, arrived on his motorcycle with three new balafons stacked up on the back. Impressive. Women started coming in with huge pots, and started building make-shift outdoor fire pits on one end of the compound commons area. The younger men dragged fancy, wood-framed couches and chairs with velour-covered cushions from neighboring homes and businesses. We, the toubabs, could only watch the scene unfurl in front of our eyes. If we tried to ask how the night would develop, they would only tell us to wait and see. We never seemed to be in the know until we see things happen before our eyes. “Africa is like that.”<sup>119</sup>

By 10 P. M. the sound system was blaring with balafons and singing jalimusos, all turned up to distortion. They like it that way.<sup>120</sup> The distortion created buzzing timbres of the same nature as the plastic-covered holes of the gourds of the balafon. They were just warming up when a lady took the mike. She remained seated on the sidelines, with the rest of the singers, and she started singing for Doug and me. The only words I understood were our names, but I knew she was honoring us as Junta had done days earlier. I was videotaping the event, but I handed my camera over to someone and the camera caught me slapping a few bills into the woman’s hand. I did

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<sup>119</sup> Famoro often says “Life is like that” when we notice the obvious. This is taken from a Manding saying.

<sup>120</sup> Different ethnomusicologists have referred to this in their accounts (Chernoff 1975; Waterman 1990).

not know who she was, but apparently she knew who we were. I couldn't help but feel as though she was praising us just to get a few bucks. The situation seemed a bit forced, so I offered her only a small token of appreciation.

The balafonists sat in a line, with Bacar in the center. Sometimes Doug played, sometimes Bacar's brothers or a former student of Bacar's. A boté percussionist arrived with an accompanying djembe player to add a dancing component.<sup>121</sup> The percussionists sat to one side. Throughout the night, the jalimuso singers took turns taking the lead, and they alternated songs with the boté percussionists. When a jalimuso was to sing, Bacar took the mike and announced the song and to whom it was dedicated. Then he handed the mike back to a woman who handed it off to the next jalimuso. The jalimuso took the "stage" right in front of the balafons, facing the people to whom she sang. Each jalimuso sang praises in long verse, and the verses meandered on over the rhythms of the balafons.<sup>122</sup>

When the jalimuso started singing praises to one of the guests or family members, that person would mosey his or her way over, nonchalantly, and with no sense of urgency, to the singer, with money or a wallet in hand. Friends and family members would follow behind. They would either hand the money to the person being praised or place it directly on the money tray. At one point, they even praised little Bengali, Bacar's sixth child, a sweet and intelligent boy of about eleven. The whole family gathered around Bengali, who beamed with joy as they gave him money.

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<sup>121</sup> When jalis play balafons or koras, dancing remains at a gentle sway. The main purpose of the music is to facilitate the display and distribution of social status, values and wealth. The drummers are meant to rile the audience to dance. Generally, I realize this in retrospect, and at the same time I can think of one exception to the rule. One evening in Casamance, Senegal, the women of the compound solicited Jali Seikou Jobarteh and Gray Parrot to play kora music for them. They sat in chairs to listen, but quickly it developed into a dance scene. The women clapped, sang and danced in front of the mellow kora music all evening, almost eclipsing the sounds of the koras at times.

<sup>122</sup> It is very interesting to note where the verses started with relationship to the balafon rhythms, and how the tones made in the songs interacted, tonally with the balafon to form different harmonies at different times. There was clearly an aesthetic that matched that which we heard in from Oumou and Missia. The singing was distinctively Manding griotte style.

We, the toubabs, did not know why Bengali or anyone else was praised; most of the night transpired in Sousou. But I joined the crowd a few times, when it was a family member of Bacar's, and I contributed money to the pot. My inclusion into the circle provided me the opportunity to show my support and affection for the person being praised in their cultural terms, by offering a symbolic amount of money. When the song ended, the crowd dispersed back to the sidelines and the tray was placed in front of Bacar. I do not know if he kept the money, gave it to the jalimuso, or split it between the musicians but I would come to take note of these things as I witnessed similar scenes in the future. In this scene, it seemed that the money served as a token of love and blessings for the person being praised rather than a means for the jalimuso to raise her social status through spraying. The fact that the concert was held within the family compound among local people adds to my belief of this. However, I recognize that I may have missed subtle tensions of competition between jalimuso singers. I was just beginning to understand the social response to praise-singing jalis, which seemed to differ from the response to balafonists. Singing seemed to have a greater, more powerful effect on most people because the words could be spoken directly to a person, about that person. The jali's role seemed closer to that which I had read about in books. The jalis sang about individuals, offered praises and identified them socially to the rest of the audience.

Though Bacar told us the party was to bid us farewell, no jali formally sang to us. For a large part of the night, Doug sat next to Bacar and played accompaniment on balafon. Later, Doug told me they mostly played "Mané" the entire time, though the singers, the song, and the person praised changed. It was an honor for Doug to accompany Bacar on the balafons and it proved that Doug was worthy of the job. Irene and I sat on one of the couches; we had the first rights and privileges, as toubab guests, of occupying the best seats, alongside one of the Guinean high diplomats and a

few elder men. We yelled at each other over the music in English and in French with our Guinean friends. Bacar's children periodically ran over to hang out with us. Our attention drifted in and out of the scene taking place in front of us. Late in the evening, Bacar grabbed our attention by suddenly switching to English. He started in a typical speech of praises and thanks for his guests, who had accompanied him on this trip and made a successful Feraba performance. He thanked us for staying in his home. He wished us a safe journey back to our home. Then he translated our speech into a longer version in Sousou for everyone else, and invited us to come up and dance.

We were touched. It was our turn to come to the front, before the balafonists, and be seen. Doug handed his mallets over to Bengali senior, Bacar's older brother, who was sitting behind him. Irene, her little son, Niko and I got up from our cushy couches, and we went out to dance. There was no jalimuso to sing for us. The song highlighted the percussionists, whose purpose was to make us dance. A few of Bacar's family members and our new friends came out to dance with us. A young man picked up the microphone and started singing for us. Was he praising us? His performance seemed quite impromptu; none of us sprayed him.

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When Junta sang to me that day in the compound, she sang about where we came from, *Amerique*, and she sang that we would travel to Kindia and Dalaba. And I called out, "Abaraka, jalimuso!" Her singing was pleasant, soothing, characteristic of a lazy afternoon. But she did not sing to us the same way she might to a Guinean because we did not feel the meaning of her gesture and did not respond the same way a Guinean would. The fact that we did not spray her without her solicitation was because we did not yet understand the customary role in which she was putting us. The returned respect that one gives a jali for playing or singing returns to that jali and

encourages her to sing with more intention for her patrons. Without being able to show appreciation, and I emphasize that the financial value of money as secondary to the display of appreciation that it symbolizes, Junta, likewise, was not as inspired to praise us. It was merely a first attempt at crossing over a cultural divide.<sup>123</sup>

When the singers in Bacar's farewell party sang, they fulfilled a local community role to praise and honor the people in the family. The singers at Bacar's were not star jalinusos; rather, they were local women. Some of them might perform in local shows and at family parties and community festivals. They knew how to praise-sing, and they knew how to honor people in the compound and make people spray the musicians. Similar to Oumou and Missia, they served the purpose of motivating people to circulate social value. They made soft hand gestures to emphasize their points. None, however, sang or moved with the intensity of Oumou and Missia.

When I cross-reference the feeling behind the praise-singing and spraying across these different contexts—the Feraba performance, Junta's singing, the farewell party and the Oumou/Missia concert—different components of jaliya are highlighted, all of which exist in all of the contexts in varying degrees. Oumou and Missia both exhibit emphatic gestures and intense singing with passion in praising audience members. This may have roots in the time that jalis praised kings in front of their court in order to augment their credibility. However it is not necessarily indicative of a person's good deeds in society, as the patron and jali may have no connection to one another, and the patron may quite literally, buy good standing by forming a financial

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<sup>123</sup> It is necessary for me to make a distinction here, between my experience with Junta and my subsequent experience with Jali Seikou Jobarteh in Casamance, Senegal. Jali Seikou has known Gray for ten years, and I am part of the Jobarteh family by association (Aminata Jobarteh). When Seikou sings our names, we do not offer him money and I do not think he expects it. Instead we give him our thanks (abaraka, jali) and praises (a ning bara). However we also pay for Seikou's needs while we are with him and Gray gives him money for kora lessons every day. This sort of compensation would not be adequate, necessarily, among Guinean jalis who exhibit stronger links to the global economy international culture (based on experience, 3/06, Senegal).

relationship with the jali. Sweetness in singing and playing music and personal anecdotes as demonstrated in the more intimate contexts works effectively to touch listener's hearts and provides a more realistic, heartfelt message to the listeners. In this sense, pop jalis can be construed as good actors in the passion and drama they display through singing to unknown patrons. This is not always the case in pop concerts. There are some personal connections and praises based on actual events, but even those are often embellished. While dramatic singing and powerful speech has a definite place in jaliya even in the village context, this aspect of the profession might have become overdeveloped in the pop scene as a necessary means to convey the *nyama* more effectively in public audiences. (Remember that the audience at the Feraba show, though similar in size to the Oumou/Missia concert, was made up of many of Bacar's closest family and friends and did not require such flamboyant display of jali talent.)

### *Nyama*

Jali's music and singing contains power called *nyama* from the spiritual dimension.<sup>124</sup> It is a power that certain professions in West Africa may wield, particularly those of the *nyamakalou* caste who work with leather and other animal products, and those who work with words and music. The talent of a balafon or kora jali is said to depend on his ability to manipulate his power through the music in a way that touches people. Wielding *nyama* through the music he plays, a jali acts as an intermediary between the human and spiritual worlds. If his listeners feel it, they are compelled to respect it by offering the jali money, presents, or merely humility.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> This power has some similarities to Afro-Brazilian *axé*, which originated in Yoruban culture as the power contained in blood and speech.

<sup>125</sup> All musicians have the power to touch their audience members with the sweetness or power of their singing and playing. The difference in jaliya is that the primary intention of the music is to convey this power, and particularly to individuals in the audience. The musician is displaying a talent that West

It was at the Oumou/Missia concert that I first glimpsed what nyama meant in the realm of singing, and this marked a notable difference from all of the singing I had heard in Bacar's compound. There was a palpable sense of power in Missia and Oumou's singing that I registered in my own reaction of straightening upright in my seat to pay careful attention to the singer's message. Anthropologist Hale explains that the most respected and powerful jali, the *ngara*, is one who can "split the air with singing, stand before crowds without flinching, and compose words that roll off her tongue with fluidity and clarity, so that her audience understands the content of the text and is moved by it" (Hale, 164). Never mind that I did not understand many words in Malinké. Never mind that they were not singing for me. These singers made me shake with the emotion in their voices. They made me understand them with their emphatic hand motions. It moved me, although I had no forum to express my emotion. In American contexts this kind of effect on the audience makes them erupt in applause at the end, perhaps give standing ovations. In jali socio-musical scenes there is an appropriate outlet for this kind of aroused emotion, and that is, spraying (and vocalities of praise and approval).

The nyama in Bacar's compound, was not conveyed in emphatic passionate vocalities and gestures, nor from Bacar, though Bacar played balafon hard, all night long. The power came from the intimacy and sweetness of singing for particular family members, surrounding the praised person with the rest of the family, and in donating our money on that person's behalf.

At the time, the toubabs commented on the fact that the PA system was turned up to distortion, preventing us from enjoying the music as we might have at an American venue. We had not yet embraced this side of West African musical

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African listeners value, respect and even fear. There are similarities, for example, in jazz when the musician and listener are said to be "sent" by the music.

appreciation. I was not sure we ever would. But we also noticed that listening to the music at distortion levels for many hours had a certain, almost peaceful effect on the mind and body. Some American friends believe that the distortion in a PA system provides the same effect as the buzz of the gourds under the balafon and facilitates communication with the spiritual realm. Perhaps distortion, buzzes, and rattles reminds the listeners of chaos, or the unknown that exists beyond the clarity we find in culturally performed patterns. The chaos.<sup>126</sup>

At the Oumou/Missia concert the music was likewise turned up to the highest decibel level, and it produced an almost soporific effect on my mind and body. Again, I could not concentrate on the music as I would in an American concert hall. Yet the singing emanated over the loud buzz, and the singers often engaged my attention with their emphatic gestures and long, vibrato-laden melismas. I could not react in my cultural way by singing along or dancing. And I could not feel comfortable spraying them either, as I did in Bacar's compound; I was not part of the social scene. But the singing was clearly imbued with power and it moved the Guinean women, who had no personal relationship with the singers, or musicians for the most part, into spraying the jalimuso all night long.

#### *A different kind of interview*

While what I had imagined would happen at the Oumou/Missia concert did not come about, my previous experiences resurfaced to help me understand the event. As I reviewed my own video recording of the show, I noticed new details that I had missed the first time. Though I had spent a fair amount of time with Manding jalis and their

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<sup>126</sup> In this comment I refer loosely to Gregory Bateson's theory on the stochastic process. This is the process in which a random element is selected from a bed of chaos and becomes incorporated into a cultural pattern, and is thus attributed meaning in context (Bateson 1979). The chaos can be akin to the vast unknown in the universe from which we pluck our ideas, and I suggest, may be represented in African and African Diasporic music as the buzz, the rattles and the distortion in a PA system.



music, I was quite surprised with the amount of emphasis placed on the praise-singing that I saw on the evening of the Oumou/Missia concert. The concert was more like a ceremony in a private home, except that a large number of the people did not know one another well. How did they manage to praise-sing without knowing the people? I wanted to ask Missia about some of the things I did not understand but I never knew when I would see her. I also felt uncomfortable asking her, as we did not know each other all that well. Should I offer her money for her time?

Some of my questions that arise from the films are: What is Oumou singing about that makes all of these women walk up to the front of the stage? When she belts out a prolonged blue note is it flattering someone? She repeats a lot of things, why? What was in the envelope that the woman gave to Missia? Who are the certain prominent figures who wear flashier clothes than the rest. Why does a younger crowd of girls and women approach the stage in this song? Is Missia calling Mamadou's name? What about when a man gives a woman money to give to the jalimuso? Why does that woman keep whispering in the jalimuso's ear while she sings? One woman gave Missia a credit card!

The next time I visited Famoro, I happened to bring my video camera and the Oumou/Missia tape with me, rather incidentally. As fate would have it, Missia was sitting in Famoro's bedroom, watching TV, while Famoro gave Brian a balafon lesson in the kitchen. I mentioned I had the tape with me, and Missia immediately lit up and asked if we could watch it. So I hooked up the camera to the TV, and sat beside her on the floor. She chatted with friends and her sister on her cell phone throughout the viewing, but she was also happy to answer my questions about the event as they popped up.

Missia told me that Oumou and she sang praises first and foremost to the people who put on the show, to the parrain, to the guests of honor. "Everyone wants

his name to be called,” she told me in French. She said she did not know most of the people there. Neither did Oumou. This puzzled me because they made it seem as if it were a family function where everyone knows everyone else. Missia told me that the names to praise were fed to them by other jalimuso who have lived in New York far longer. Missia pointed out two of them on the stage. These were the people that I had noticed, whispering to the singers. She pointed out her best friend, in lime green, too. This woman scurried back and forth from the audience to the stage as well. Maybe she was bringing names from the audience.

Famoro came to the doorway to catch a glimpse of the video. He told me that the current song on the video was about the teenagers and unmarried young women. These women, mostly dressed in European attire, wore no head-wraps. They approached the foot of the stage to dance and throw some money, but nothing like the display that their elders put on. During the really popular songs like this one, Famoro told me, a lot of people come up just to dance.

Then, Missia explained that Oumou was singing this song about the first man who ever brought her to America, to honor him. All of the man’s friends came up with him to show their support, to throw money. Missia pointed out Oumou’s son, dressed in a nice suit. He helped collect the money that showered down on Oumou’s head.

Toward the end of the night, the stage scene grew more risqué and Missia appeared clad in a skimpy black mini dress and tall black leather boots, dancing provocatively. While we watched the TV screen, Missia pointed out a big dancer guy in red. “He’s sick,” she tells me, not specifying. I wonder if it is AIDS. This man and Missia had some moments where they mimicked graphic sex in their dance. Fellatio, sodomy, things that normal jalis would never do. In fact, they remind me of Madonna. I told her I had never seen a jalimuso do those things, nor any West African dancer. “I

do them!” Missia declared this without a hint of excuse or shame. I asked, “In Guinea too?” Yes in Guinea too. “What do people think there?” “Un peu picante,” she answered. A little spicy. Missia’s second album is entitled *Petite Pimente*, also her nickname in Guinea.

Missia reaffirmed to me that one woman did, in fact, give her a credit card. It was a Macy’s gold card, and the elegant woman that gave it to her told Missia she could buy anything she wants there. Even “deux valises,” Missia tells me matter-of-factly. She means two suitcases filled with clothes. Then I ask her if she’ll ever use it. “Whenever I want,” she responds. “Famoro is going to take me next week to shop!” I am surprised that someone would give Missia a credit card. Could she use it for whatever she wanted? Would the woman pay the bill forever? It was a symbol of the woman’s wealth and her long term dedication to Missia.

After the video was finished, Missia got up to have a smoke. I went with her to hang out. Missia was born in Guinea but spent a lot of time living in Paris near Place d’Italie. Now she lives on 116<sup>th</sup> Street in New York with a girlfriend but she does not like it here very much. English is hard for her, so she wants to return to Guinea in December. She has only been here for eight months. She has an estranged Guinean husband who is still there, and a 12-year-old son who is in school in Dakar, Senegal and living with his aunt. Missia sends him presents when she can. Most recently he asked for a pair of roller blades, but a specific brand with a specific wheel speed. Missia will send the gift through a friend who is traveling there next week.

Missia did not expect me to give her money for her time, for we were just hanging out. Rather, she was happy that I had appeared with the video tape, and asked me if I could make her a copy. I was pleased with the way that the afternoon events had worked out. I decided to honor Missia after the fact, and spray her then and there. I slapped a \$10 onto her forehead—a common technique that sprayers use on

balafonists and singers. She was happy, and immediately started singing for me, honoring me for the donation as I exited the apartment.

### *The Jali World Across Contexts*

From my experiences I began to develop a framework for understanding the multifaceted and international role of the jali through time. I drew upon DVDs and CDs to expand my knowledge of live jali music (Badenya, Mandekalou). In the past, jalis sang strictly for the rulers of the land. Their function was multifold. The jali was expected to praise the king and calm his head before making important decisions, and before battle. He would speak publicly and eloquently for the king, who would tell the jali what to say. The jali composed songs about the king's great achievements and through verse he remembered and recounted family histories. Music and powerful speech reveals itself as a means to convey history with the added component of feeling that lacks in our written historical accounts.

In the course of the past 800 years, the patron body has expanded greatly. Jalis no longer praise only the rulers and nobles of the land, but the ordinary people of their local villages as well. It is likely that jalis wanted to expand their economic base by appealing to more people. As a result, the jalis traveled between villages of a region recalling not only the most important names in histories, but local people's genealogies and family histories as well. A person could win a jali's praises by treating him with respect as well as offering him gifts, and a commoner who treated a jali well could create a history for herself if she inspired the jali to write a song or tell a story about her (Ebron 2002).

Aspects of jali responsibilities are still present today. Ethnomusicologists Paulla Ebron and Bonnie Wright have learned that in Manding culture there is still a separation between politicians and those who can speak well publicly (Ebron 2002:

199). Famoro Dioubate tells me that the president of Senegal would not speak publicly without listening to his jali first. According to Ebron's research, politicians in Banjul today still sometimes use jalis to witness important meetings, praise the politician and speak on the politician's behalf to the public. Jalis still write songs of praise for people today. Mamadou Diabaté dedicated one song to his American music agent, Sandra Peevers (CD: *Heritage* 2006). Jali popular CDs on the Guinean, Malian and international markets are laden with praises for family members, friends, and public figures (CD *Missia Saran Petit Piment* Diabate 1995?; CD: *Sans Motif* Kouyate 2006).

The pop jali concert enlists powerful jalimusos to create the social interactions that are required for a successful evening. The jalimuso wields the ability to *create* a community of Guinean expatriates where one may not have existed before. The sense of community is highly valued in Manding culture. The local jalis also orchestrate a similar ritual, but they re-create and reinforce a community that already largely exists. In both situations the jalis provide a forum in which particular individuals in the community may be noted. Praise-singing may honor certain people for their merit; but the praise may be equally as likely to fall on people with wads of money to spray or with personal connections to the jali.

### *Social scene*

In the words of Ebron, "the parade to the stage and back to the seats gave people an opportunity to publicly exhibit their distinction, showing off their fine clothes as they greeted appropriate members of the audience" (Ebron, 65). They take an active part in the making of the performance by walking onto the stage and throwing money at the jali singer who praises the individuals, accordingly. A jali concert is distinguished by the lack of boundary between performers on stage and

audience members. The less pronounced this divide, the more “jali-like” is the concert.

In her book, *Performing Africa*, Ebron gives a fine analysis of a concert of the most popular jali in The Gambia, Jaliba Kouyateh.

*The performance site was not restricted to what was formally happening on stage; rather, the stage extended to include audience members as well. The performance generated a variety of distinctions. Performers differed in status from their patrons; jali marked their distinction in manner, speech, and dress. The play of praises, donations, and self-presentations contrasted rank, individual power, and prestige. Social networks were displayed when associates of an honored guest made public donations to further praise the important person, and by extension, his jali (Ebron, 65).*

The jali concert serves as a functional means of displaying and exchanging social capital in a highly organized fashion. That capital should come in the form of recognizing the good deeds of people. In the popular format this usually translates as the patron’s financial support of the jali. In a more intimate setting it such as Bacar’s compound, the patrons might be the family members who spray on behalf of a person who has done an honorable deed for society. In such as case, the do-gooder cannot be suspected of ‘buying’ his praises because it is not he who gives the bulk of the money.

The music provides the foundation for this organization in that each song is meant to speak to a particular contingency—the young women, the Keita family, the men with girlfriends, and so on. It is the jali or jalimuso singer’s responsibility to know the most important people in the audience who correspond to the song, and call their names to announce their social status to the rest of the audience.

A jali who does not know the most important people will not have strong social power as a jali and could indirectly insult the honorable guests by not mentioning them. Important people might include politicians or wealthy people, and especially those who carry out good deeds for the jalis and others in the community.

The jali will also sing for the people responsible for putting the show together. Assistants deliver names of any other people who want to be honored. An individual might tell the assistants themselves, or, more likely, a family member or friend poses the request on someone's behalf. The more important the person, or the more important the person wants to appear, the more money he or she will spray. In that way she hopes to inspire the singer to sing more passionately, thereby raising her social status. Likewise, the jali who continues to sing for a patron entices the patron to spray more money. She does this in various ways such as belting a melisma just after saying the person's name, or repeating the person's name several times in percussive way. It is the jali who decides who is most important, and in that way she has power to control the negotiation of social status in the community. But conversely, she only has as much power as is afforded her by her patrons' generosity and wealth.

The praise-singing becomes a game that leads to the nonchalant and unhurried attitude of the patrons. The jali has the power and the patrons know that. The patrons must not appear too eager to spray or to be in need of the jali's power. This makes the jali sing harder and work to appeal to their generosity. The jali begs money, but the patron needs her to beg, in order to raise her own social status. In portioning out money, the jali's social value increases, plus she is reinforcing good qualities in the patron. Ebron says, "in the historical epics jali tell, they continually taunt their patrons, reminding them of their cowardice and their stinginess or poverty to make them more courageous and more giving. Without such stimulation, even those of the most noble ancestry might not live up to their great names. Patrons are thus dependent on their jali for greatness." (Ebron, 103).

Sometimes the patron will hold a wad of money in front of the singer, displaying that she intends for the jali to sing for her for a while. Then the patron can portion out the bills as slowly as she wants. Sometimes the jali will move on, even if

all the bills have not been given. The patron can continue to spray the jali even if she praises someone else or sings choruses, just because she is powerful. Or the patron might put some bills back in her pocketbook and return to her seat. This is not necessarily an insult either way. The point is that, there is a balance to be negotiated between the singer and the patron, how much to praise and how much to spray. If the jali can no longer praise a person with credibility, then she best move on to the next person or she will insult the patron and decrease her own ability to sing powerfully.

### *Singing versus Playing*

There is a difference between a jali's power displayed through music and a jali's power displayed through praise-singing. They serve the same purposes of inspiring people to action, but they appeal to people differently, both within Manding culture and cross-culturally in that praise-singing is a more direct and more detailed means of appealing to a patron. The Oumou/Missia concert was the first time I witnessed the power in the singer's voices and gestures. The singer's vocal quality and the words she uses appeals more directly to audience members, and generally prompts a more intense social response. Hale speaks about the power of the word. "The praise song is usually a description in words of what an individual has done and the qualities that he or she demonstrated in carrying out the deeds. The words of the jalis in the form of praises—or insults—hold enormous power over people" (Hale, 116).

At the same time the music has powerful significance that we miss, cross-culturally. It speaks to particular members of the audience as well. Music, whether in Africa or elsewhere, acts mnemonically, recalling events or emotions to people. If Famoro knew that Bacar was thinking about him during that riff of "Fasson," then how much of the jali's musical performance referred to cultural and historical events,



or to people that were generally unknown to me?<sup>127</sup> I started to surmise that there was more meaning to the moments that people came up on stage during the Feraba performance than merely Bacar's superior solo demonstrations. Was it possible that Bacar played riffs that also referred to El Hajj, or other famous balafonists? In those cases some audience members, especially El Hajj, might recognize them and take the opportunity to spray Bacar in recognition. There was one point where Bacar's elder brother, Bengali, threw a few bills at Bacar when no one else did. Was that a special moment of communication between them? My analysis was devoid of any culturally-specific interpretations of that kind because I was not aware of them. To me, the songs Bacar played only made me recall the rehearsals and a few balafon workshops. In chapter 6, my experience with the music grows and I unravel the deeper cultural significance.

I began to understand the diverse positions of jali-oriented performances. The style of performance dictated whether social response called for entertainment, dancing or the negotiation of social status through praise-singing and spraying. The style of performance was not limited to geographical location nor strictly to the cultural origins of the band or audience members. It was limited to the social knowledge of the participants, which can be distinguished generally by whether they were West African or American. Still, West Africans are very familiar with the European-American convention of watching a performance from their seats, and some Americans are familiar with African dance and spraying techniques. However, an American who has no prior experience with a West African-oriented jali social scene would not be able to fathom the extent of the meaning.

Ebron points out that "these examples of misrecognition across a divide of

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<sup>127</sup> In Chapter 7 this dawns on me again when Missia plays an entire song on the balafon and only at the end announces that it was for her mom. The song was one that honors the Kante family, her maternal lineage.

aesthetic conventions give insight into how audience and performance conventions are learned and not just absorbed through the music...The ways people make meanings should be understood within the histories that shape them and that serve as a lens through which interpretations are filtered.” (Ebron 2002: 66-67). This complicates, but does not dismiss, our initial discovery in chapter 3 that music facilitates the making of a temporary society. Indeed, the original intent of jali music was, in part, to soothe potential tensions that could develop between disparate people, such as the case of Sumanguru and his jali-to-be, Bala Fasigi Kouyate. Likewise, the musical background in a praise-singing context serves to unite the audience around a common theme. In the cross-cultural context, the music still serves as a common frame of reference for everyone in the audience no matter how they find meaning in it.

#### *Schismogenesis in Jali/Patron Relationships*

Anthropologist Barbara Hoffman explains that mutual hostility (tension) between jali and patron helps to delineate the social boundaries between jali and patron, and considers it a classic example of Batesonian schismogenesis. “The continual generation of social distance between groups with different cultures living together in the same community, or schismogenesis, occurs frequently in heterogeneous societies...This tension is often expressed through nobles’ criticism of griots’ empty speech or griots’ disdain for nobles’ lack of self-knowledge. It is important to see such negative statements as markers of boundaries rather than as reflections of some pervasive underlying sentiment or, worse still, as an indicator of the presence of hierarchy” (Hoffman 2000: 53). It is in this way that the patrons ensure that jalis are performing their jali duties, the reconnaissance du bien, and the jalis ensure that the people in the community are inspired to act in ways that contribute to social well-being. A jali must convince the patron to give him money by

demonstrating his unique skill at controlling this power. The patron, likewise, must continually demand assistance of the jali to recognize his good behavior.

In chapter 4 we discovered how difficult it is to reproduce a foreign cultural aesthetic, musically. Our minds play tricks on us based on our own epistemological understanding of the world so that we think what we are hearing is one thing when it is actually another. The same is true of cross-cultural relations. For example, tension builds up when West Africans ask Americans for money and favors. We gradually get used to the requests and learn not to get fed up with them. However, having spent some time watching and participating in jali culture, I have come to see what feels like begging is a normal part of the relationship and that there are culturally sensitive ways to manage these constant requests. Furthermore, the patron receives something for his gifts that we do not value in this format in American society, the value of being praised, publicly. Each time the patron gave money, even when I gave money to Missia, I was increasing my social worth, in that she had an obligation to praise me to society and give me encouragement in my endeavors. Though I did not know how to use that to my immediate advantage, I stored that knowledge and recalled it at a later date, in chapter 6. I am in the process of learning new schismogenic relationships in both music and in culture.

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This particular concert was framed as a competition between the two sisters as an effort to raise Missia's popularity among the New York, expatriate community, a sort of "coming out" party. And the Guineans came out in droves. Many came to see the famous Oumou, known to them from her CDs and radio time. A handful of people knew her more personally. Missia had her own contingency there as well, many of whom knew her personally. Both Oumou and Missia have Guinean sponsors, and they have their share of friends. But for the most part, Missia was a new jalimuso on the

New York Guinean block. This was her opportunity to show her skills as a jalimuso. The friends she already knew helped build her status by publicly displaying their confidence in her by spraying. Those who did not know Missia ahead of time had the chance to become acquainted. It was fertile ground for the development of new jali/patron relationships. Depending on her continued social contact with the same people and their attendance at future Missia shows, Missia would become a jalimuso in this community too. Little did I know, I would be one of her patrons.

In this chapter we observed and took part in the social scenes that occur around a jali musical performance. The first time I ever heard a jali, I had little notion how spraying and jali performance fit together. Then, through the course of my experiences with jalis, I drew connections between the actions in separate contexts. Certain patterns began to emerge, such as the nonchalance with which people move to the stage to throw money, or how jalis and patrons circulate money in ways that we never would. Slowly a deeper understanding of the meaning of jali culture began to emerge and with it, a deeper understanding of both the social significance of the music and extra-musical social relations around money and sense of community.

In anthropology, we discuss the role of the participant-observer. In chapter five at the Oumou/Missia concert I was not a participant in the social scene but an observer. If I had taken an active role I would have been inappropriate and inauthentic—forcing a situation of which I was not a part. My passive role was conducive to my learning about what was happening. As Famoro assured me when I was learning to play balafon, sometimes it is necessary to sit back and catch the groove before learning to play it. It is important to let the mind-body absorb the feeling of the music and the actions of the people before attempting to join in. At the concert, I was absorbing the social scene, the attitude of the people, the speed at which they moved, and (I could only guess) with what intentions. Certain images brought

back memories of things I had seen before, both in Africa and in New York. A more complete understanding of jali music began to emerge and I knew better how I might act in such an event in the future. Nevertheless, my analysis of this show draws upon previously learned knowledge from scholarly literature, through conversations with friends, and from direct experience in various circumstances. While the observer role is important to the learning process, to stop at that point would be to limit my ability to understand the situation more fully. My initial analysis of the pop jali concert lacks the depth that only comes from true understanding through direct participation, reflection upon my actions, and verification that my actions are accepted according to those native to the culture.

In chapter 6, I am given the opportunity to test my knowledge in the West African socio-musical context. My analysis of a Manding jali concert deepens as I become an active participant in the West African social scene. My growing relationships with Missia and Famoro outside of the music scene place me in a social role in the jali musical performances through which I am able to reassess my previous experiences and add an emotional component to my understanding from firsthand experience.

### **Interlude 6: Fula Flute Ensemble**

*On Saturday night Fula Flute played at Symphony Space in Manhattan. The auditorium is large and that night it was filled with many New Yorkers who can afford to pay the \$30-\$40 per ticket. People were not very familiar with West African music. The band consists of Bailo Bah from Guinea on the Fulani tambin<sup>128</sup>, Sylvain Leroux, the Canadian flutist, Yacuba Sissoko, Guinean kora player, American Peter Fand, upright bass, and Malian Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté, singer, conga player and guitarist. The men appeared in pastel grand boubous looking elegant as ever. Yacuba started the show with a kora solo. Bailo wore a blue African sash wrapped around his sky blue boubou. Peter wore forest green, Sylvain’s wore warm grey, and Djoss, oh, Djoss, he wore violet. The blue backlighting on the stage illuminated his already glowing presence, casting a purplish glow around his shoulders.*

*Djoss organized the music on stage as a jali singer will, with finesse. First, he sang powerfully in praising style, pointing to the sky to invoke Allah, counting off family members’ names, remembering pieces of history. I looked around the audience to gauge what they might be feeling. They were calmer than me. I was sitting on the edge of my seat trying to contain myself from not yelling out, “Namu!” or “Amin!” or “Jaliba!”<sup>129</sup> I was finding it hard to refrain from expressing my appreciation.*

*Djoss filled a spiritual/religious role, like that of a preacher. He belted into the microphone powerfully, his throat and his chest wide open in full cry. But he had the ability to be soothing and subtle too. Apparently I was not the only one who*

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<sup>128</sup> The tambin is a long wooden flute that the Fulani people play. They combine blows with speaking into the flute, giving them the power to be both speakers and musicians at once.

<sup>129</sup> “Namu” is Mandinka/Malinke for “indeed” and is the common response said during the pause between a jali’s sentences as a form of confirmation. “Amin” is “Amen”. “Jaliba” means “big jali,” exclaimed as a form of approval for a jali’s skill.

wanted to express my gratitude, for a few moments later I heard someone yell out something in Malinké from the back of the auditorium. That opened the auditorium up a little for expression. Several more Africans in the audience chimed in their approvals. I called out “Jali!” and immediately felt relieved to get that off my chest. Djoss smiled out at us. He was happy to receive the warm welcome that he would expect from a home environment.

Djoss invited musicians to solo by walking up to each one in turn and listening to what he had to say. Djoss cocks his head to one side to get a better ear-full when he does this, like many jalis do. He points his finger up, he follows the sound in the air with his finger tip, he steps from foot to foot on the beat. Then he shakes his head slowly from side to side and says Ahhhh! Before going to the next player to listen to what he has to say. The solos are do not exhibit fancy melodic contours, but rather they highlight rhythmic variations with subtle melodic contours.

The musicians blend softly, beautifully, though each one is quite distinguished, just like the colors of their dress. The music is highly polyrhythmic. In fact, without taking visual cues from Djoss’s step or consistent conga rhythm I cannot follow the downbeat. Peter’s bass lines up with the kora’s base while the higher kora parts and the flutes provide a syncopated melody. When Djoss returned to the microphone he stood about a foot away and sang with his arms spread wide open to the sky, head cocked slightly back and he blended into the sounds of the other instruments, adding a soft “aaaahhhhhhhh” over the polyrhythmic music. It sent me to a state of bliss and it is at moments like this that I know that jalis have something on us, a magical ability to take us away on their trip. When Djoss sings like this he has the ability to ask me for anything. I want to help him. I want to give him what he needs to make a good life in America.

## Chapter 6: The Making of a Jatigi

*It is also a grave responsibility which becomes all the more serious as the relationship continues through time...there is often a special, more permanent relationship between horon jatigiw and their jeliw; often these relationships take on the form of a pact of mutual aid that extends through time as generations move through the life cycle (Hoffman 2000: 54).*

Barbara Hoffman gives a lengthy explanation of the relationship between a *jatigi* and a *jali*. She translates *ja* as part of the soul or spirit, and *tigi*, master or owner. So one who calls another his *jatigi* places his well-being in that person's care. "It is a great honor to be chosen someone's *jatigi*," Hoffman explains (Hoffman 2000:54).

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I had seen the titles *marraine* and *parrain* on every *jali* party invitation, including the Oumou/ Missia concert, I had watched *jalis* sing their praises to them, but I was not quite sure what kind of honorary role I was meant to play. I remembered from events past that the *marraine* and *parrain* sat in the front two seats in the center of the room, or auditorium, directly before the stage, dressed and positioned like the king and queen. I remembered that they sprayed a lot of money, and the *jali* or *jalimuso* sang more praises to them than most others. It seemed as though the *marraine* and *parrain* held a special place in the *jalimuso*'s life at that moment. The *jali*'s praises were directed toward the public recognition of the honorable actions of the honored guests. Now I was to share that title with Raul. It is not something one would be likely to refuse.

On Famoro's dining room table were the glossy postcards again, announcing the birthday party. This one said *Anniversaire* across the top. I picked one up to read it and immediately Missia and Famoro started excusing the mistake and expressing annoyance at the man who printed the cards. They forgot to put my name down as la



marraine. An African woman's name was written there. Was I really the marraine? Who was this other person? Was it just a ploy to get a generous gift from me? Part of the honor of being a marraine is social, documented, proof that you have this honorary title. It is like a public announcement, and I admit, I was a little hurt that my name was not on the card. Should I be annoyed at them? Should I accept the role and spend money on a gift as a good marraine would do? Was I being taken advantage of? I decided that I had to give Famoro and Missia the benefit of the doubt, and trust that really meant for me to be the marraine. Once I chose to fulfill my role graciously, I assured them that it was an accident that did not affect the honor with which I was bestowed.

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This chapter lays out the reality of crossing cultural barriers in two different directions from Manding to American and from American to Manding, and where we meet in between. In this chapter I become an actor in West African socio-musical contexts. My deeper social involvement shifts my understanding of the role of the jali in society because my actions now take on personal significance. I am moved to act because of Manding cultural reasons, and, I often feel self-conscious while I try to act within their cultural habitus and still remain genuine. Sometimes my actions lack confidence, and sometimes they are mixed with my pre-Manding habitus. In several ways, my social learning parallels my experience in learning to play, and learning the music helped facilitate the larger cultural process.

The first half of this chapter focuses on my greater involvement in the Manding social context. I reflect on the process of becoming an actor in Manding society and how I am limited in doing so; when I am successful, doors are open that allow me to go deeper into their world. It is up to me how and how far to go, because part of the process is knowing when to not persist—to remain a toubab, to observe,

and to stay quiet. It is also about creating balance. I do not want to become totally Manding, so I maintain cultural barriers as well.

In the second half of the chapter, we look at how the jali becomes more deeply involved in American social contexts. The jalis, too, are learning how to act in a foreign cultural milieu. Music is their entrance into our society as well. They do not enter quickly into the social realm; rather, they wait for invitation and guidance. They encounter many boundaries as well. We judge them on their social graces and they reflect back to us some of our own cultural proclivities. Together, we create a new reality as we live it cross-culturally. Some new conventions concretize while some are more Manding and others are more American.

#### *The First Test: La Murraine*

In December 2005, Famoro moved in with Missia, only ten blocks from my studio. We lived in Harlem in neighborhoods that were predominantly West African, Jamaican, and African-American. I fell into the “other” category with Caucasians from the United States and Europe. Now that Famoro and Missia lived so close, we began to see a lot more of one another. I came to visit, take a music lesson, pick them up for a gig, or just hang out. Missia and I had French in common, Missia and Famoro had Malinké, and Famoro and I spoke in English. Sometimes she cooked a meal while I was there, usually a bowl of rice with meat in sauce. Missia always gave Famoro and I a large bowl to share, which we ate with big metal spoons. She took her own bowl and ate the rice with her right hand. In West Africa I was accustomed to eating out of a common family bowl with my right hand in West Africa. One day I told Missia, “Next time, I will use my hand and we will share a bowl.” She did not forget. Neither did I.

During this time, I was helping Famoro and Missia arrange some gigs around

New York. I also assisted Famoro with money now and then, as did other members of his band, Kakande, Raul, particularly. Raul's Jumbie Records is in the process of producing the first Kakande CD. Raul also helps Famoro with the phone bill, the rent, and more. Missia and Famoro count on both Raul and me as a sort of liaison to American society. They trust us because we know and respect their culture and are sensitive to their foreign needs. When Missia's birthday came up, she decided to have a party and she named Raul and me as the parrain and marraine. I was surprised and honored. I suspect Raul was, too.

About a week before the party I asked Famoro what would be expected of me, as la marraine. He said that I should bestow a generous gift on Missia, of course. Days before the event, I wondered if the gift should be given ahead of time, during the party, or after, if it should be wrapped and presented, or sprayed, or if it should be offered in another way. I imagined that clothing or jewelry would be an appropriate gift but I did not know exactly what to buy. I decided to give her cash, privately, in her own living room, a few days before the party. I sprayed money on Missia, twenty by twenty. She sang to me as I did it. Famoro thanked me and Missia gave me a hug, calling me *ehhh, la marraine!* When the actual day was upon us, I figured I had better not show up empty handed, so I picked up a few pair of silver-plated earrings at the African market as well.

I was planning to wear an elegant grand boubou when Famoro warned me that I should wear European clothes.<sup>130</sup> I pictured a social scene similar to, but much smaller than, the Oumou/Missia concert. The night of the party I wore a long (American) skirt, just to make sure I was respecting Muslim tradition. I did not have to. Missia wore white hip-hugger pants, a black crop top, and a white denim jacket. Everyone else was wearing New York bar-wear, nice slacks or jeans and button-down

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<sup>130</sup> In this context, European means Western.

or other stylish shirts. It was a younger crowd for the most part—twenty- to thirty-something year olds. People filtered into the bar between 12:30 and 1:00 am. The call time was 11:00 pm. People socialized while the DJ, Famoro’s good friend Mousbi, spun the latest West African pop tunes. A few people danced. When most of the guests arrived, greeted their friends, and found seats at round bar tables, Kakande took the stage and began to play the standard repertoire they normally play in American venues.

*The bar is small and dark. The room is illuminated by the disco ball that spins around and around overhead, casting fast-moving dots of light across the musicians’ faces, the wooden dance floor, and our faces in the audience. Most of the barmaids speak Spanish better than they speak English. I wonder what they think of this African affair. Beer is the choice of the few people who order alcohol. Most drink sodas. When I arrive I greet everyone I know. As usual, I know all the band members but almost no one in the audience. Missia shows me to my seat at the front table facing the dance floor and stage, and introduces me to the African woman who sits beside me. She is African, dressed in black slacks and a blouse, about my age. Is this the other marraine, I wonder. I did not catch her name, nor do I remember the name printed on the postcard announcement. Raul sits on stage with the band, of course, rather than taking the parrain seat of honor.*

*I am familiar with all the songs and choruses. Missia and Famoro sing call and response, all of which I know from their countless performances in downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn. Then Missia sings long, improvised, story-telling and praise-singing during the kumbengo rounds. She sings more than she normally would to an American audience because there are people in the audience she can praise. People come up in groups to spray her when she sings for them, but there is no competition to have one’s name sung this night. Those praised stand around in*

groups, swaying a little to the music, a little shyly, then they spray their money and return to their seats.

*I wonder when I am supposed to go up and spray. After a few songs go by, I get restless to participate. Missia launches into an emphatic, jali-style story about something, exclaiming things with a hand raised and waving with emphasis to back up her story. I know not what she says, but the power in her voice indicates that she is in the mode to be sprayed. She comes to a momentary pause in her speech, and I take the opportunity to approach her. The moment she sees me, she shifts her verse to address me. "Lisa! Liiiiisssaa! Lisa!" I peel off my bills and throw them at her systematically. She sings about me as the marraine and as a toubab who helps her. She mentions my connection to Famoro. I understand only key words-Lisa—marraine—Famoro--Toubab. In the middle of my stack of mostly \$1 bills I feel someone approaching. It is the other marraine. She sprays next to me while Missia sings to me, and I know that she is making a gesture of support for me. Her action is kind. I return with a smile to her. I also glow at Missia while she sings to me. I am not at all nonchalant about it. We return to our seats and I chat with the other marraine who speaks very good English.*

*Later in the evening, the music stops and they bring out the chocolate birthday cake aglow with candles and sing happy birthday. Missia calls up the special guests of honor: about six Africans, two of whom Missia refers to as her mom and dad, the woman who sits beside me, and Raul and I. We make a semicircle around the cake, we sing, we clap, we take pictures, we help blow out the candles, and we pass out birthday gifts, all the time standing in the middle of the dance floor. Raul presents Missia with a gift-wrapped box. He tells me that he did not know what to get until Bacar helped him out. It is a brand new wireless microphone. She loves it and gives Raul a big squeeze while I snap a picture. At about 3:30 A.M., after the birthday*

*obligations are through, I decide to leave before the full party has come to a close.*

Missia's birthday party was a West African affair that one might expect to encounter in the city of Conakry, Guinea equally as in New York City, except that Kakande was not an up-to-par Manding band because some of the band members were still learning to master the Manding feel. And I was *la imperfect marraine*. It was the ideal place for Famoro and Missia to introduce some of their American connections to their social scene and an ideal place for their American students to practice their Manding social and musical expression. Much more was at stake here than in an American musical venue, a rehearsal, or in a balafon workshop. If we did not act appropriately it could be potentially embarrassing for Missia and Famoro.

This was also the first time Kakande had ever performed for a predominantly West African audience. In most Manding parties, jalis play in all-jali bands with perhaps a non-African drum set player, or with Sylvain Leroux.<sup>131</sup> Kakande feels more like a world music dance band, although their repertoire is based entirely on a Manding set as directed by Famoro. They lack the full Manding groove that one feels from a predominantly Manding band. This makes them appropriate for an American venue in which the listeners will enjoy the dance beat more readily and not critique the finer Manding nuances. Famoro found that this was a good opportunity to introduce Kakande in a West African social context as the bar scene was casual, not a format that called for a full jali-style performance.

The band performed as usual, but they left plenty of kumbengo time during which Missia could sing praises and Famoro and Mamadi could accent them with emphatic musical punctuations. It differed from the jali concerts I had previously seen. It was nothing like the Oumou/Missia concert in that praise-singing and display

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<sup>131</sup> Sylvain Leroux plays flute and tambin and he may be the most prolific non-African in jali performances and on Manding and Fula recordings, if he is not part of the band himself, already. He is a well respected non-African musician of Manding style in New York and beyond.

of social values was not the primary function. It differed from the Feraba show (chapter 5) in that it was a modern-day electric band, without dancers, although both Bacar, in Feraba, and Famoro, in Kakande, played long jali-style solos. No one sprayed Famoro as they did Bacar because of the presence of a singing jali. The singer usually receives the money. If there is no singer, then the money is thrown to the musician. The venue being a bar, was closer to that of an American show in New York, rather than the auditoriums in which jali concerts are held. Nevertheless, the praising and spraying shared a quality with both the Oumou/Missia and the Feraba shows, as distinguished from an American Kakande show, in that it brought people from their separate tables to the front of the room to spray. On the other hand Famoro's balafon shared the limelight with the singer. The Manding people did not engage in call and respond to songs like "Sosisa" as Americans do. Famoro did not expect them to.

I was able to reflect on my act of spraying in detail particularly because I had kept my video camera rolling. Missia was singing to the Touré family just before I came up to spray her. Any Tourés in the audience would normally come up to spray at that time. But she switched to praise me easily, with grace. In retrospect, she probably would have praised me on her own accord had I waited until later in the evening, and I probably would have been more graceful had I waited until she chose to praise me. When reviewing the video, I worried that my action infringing on the Touré praises and that my timing was inappropriate. And look at how I smile at her! I display nothing in the way of nonchalance as the other sprayers do. Nothing was suave about my spraying except that I had the bills ready and could peel them off at Missia. I knew that, with time, I would come to know social graces better, and I could reflect upon this experience again. The fact that the other marraine came to spray at the same time was meaningful to me. Whether I was socially graceful or not, this woman's gesture

assured me that they knew that my action was carried out with good intentions and an open heart. That counted for something.

I recalled when I had first met Missia the year before. She was very cautious. I acted in my typical outgoing American manner, smiling a lot when I greeted her. She did not return the gestures warmly at first. Once I encountered her on the streets in Harlem. I was so pleased on the chance occasion that I greeted her with American-style joyful embraces. She remained stiff and I realized that my reaction was overzealous and uncalled for, to her. Thereafter I approached her more carefully. I held back my unwelcomed warmth. I felt she was observing me. She never asked me for money the way in which Bacar and Famoro did. She never offered me anything. But on certain occasions, Famoro made it so that I had to rely on Missia in her cultural milieu, or she, in mine. For example, he sent me with Missia to help her buy food, one day, because she did not speak any English. During the course of a few months, Missia found times to challenge me on different issues. She was testing my character. I openly explained my actions to her when she questioned them and, over time, she developed a trust in me.

The first time I sprayed Missia with money was in Famoro's apartment the day we watched the Oumou/Missia videotape (chapter 5). Though I did not realize it at the time, my gesture indicated that, although I could not spray her at the concert, I valued her as a *jalimuso* and was learning from her cultural explanations. This pleased her. She began to see that I had a genuine interest in the music and culture of the Manding people. She slowly warmed up. At the same time I learned how to respect her personal borders. They were a part of *jaliya*, as I would find out.

At the birthday party I took my responsibility and performed it to the best of my ability. Famoro and Missia recognized my good intentions and it opened a new passage for me into their culture. For the next year, Missia referred to me as her



marraine and to Raul as her parrain. The event bonded us all in a common personal history. We had a new connection to one another, one that allowed us to increase our social exchanges in a positive light.

As foreigners, when we spray jalis we put them in a position to represent us publicly to the society whether that is our intention or not. At the same time jalis place us in a position to become more deeply involved in their culture as foreigners. It requires an act of faith to invest in a cross-cultural relationship. It also requires a judgment of character in both directions. The relationship comes with responsibilities on *both* sides. My role as marraine launched me into a new position in my relationship with jalis in which I was to learn about these responsibilities.

During the course of the next year, Kakande played gigs throughout New York for American-oriented audiences in music bars and cafés. Now Missia sings not just to absent friends whose essence she has to feel in her heart, but to the band members as well as to new familiar faces in the audience, particularly mine. Knowledgeable audience members might spray Missia when she sings praises or just sings powerfully, or we might spray Famoro when he plays a riveting balafon solo. I always come to a show with \$5 or \$10 in singles in my pocket, prepared to spray. At first it seems that spraying in Makor or Satalla is not the same in a Manding context, but over time, the distinction becomes less clearcut. The purpose of spraying in American-oriented contexts is not to display wealth or increase the jali's financial wealth dramatically; however, I am displaying my connection to the musicians in front of my own social network. American-oriented praises are never as dramatic or drawn out as they are in a Manding social context; but they are exhibitions of our friendship and they do serve to illuminate my status, and the status of any other non-African who sprays and has befriended the musicians.

Most non-Africans who come to this show find something special and unique

about attending a West African concert. When Missia sings my name and I spray her, it affects my social status in the eyes of the other audience members, including my friends. Strangers approach me during the show to ask me questions about the band, and how I know them. It says something to them about my affiliations with and knowledge about West African music and culture. I am now an insider, and that gives me special reasons to approach the stage and relate to the musicians. At the same time, Missia uses me to raise her own social status in both her culture (if there are Africans in the audience) and in mine. Connecting herself to an American audience member who shows approval of her increases her own reputation in a foreign cultural milieu. Praise-singing and spraying thus does function cross-culturally, to some degree. It is the job of the jali in New York to enhance that function.

Spraying of Kakande members introduces a new concept to American culture, the Manding-oriented means of expressing gratitude to musicians. The deeper meanings of my actions still lie under the surface, but with repeated experience, inexperienced listeners will increase their understanding of these unusual practices just as I did. More people begin to spray the band when they play and sing well. Manding social patterns begin to cross into American-oriented contexts.

*Almost a year after Missia's birthday party, I find myself at Famoro and Missia's apartment. They have invited some friends over to make a little party. We have just returned from the big African market in the Bronx to get food supplies; Missia will cook fish tonight. Mousbi has come over early, before the rest of the party. Missia is making ginger juice in the blender. Mousbi has set up the tunes on the CD player. Famoro helps Missia and chats with us while Missia is scraping the bottom of the blender for the rest of the ginger pulp with her fingers. Famoro starts to scold her. I tell him to relax, I do it, women do this all the time. She is careful. Famoro says he does not want to see blood. This launches him into a whole*

*explanation of blood and jali sensitivity. He tells me that jali blood is sacred. "The lineage of a jali is special. We do not like to see the blood in the open. I feel everything. Every people. Jalis, we are sensitive to people. I feel pain. I feel your pain, his pain, her pain. Emotional pain too." As he speaks, Mousbi appears behind him and from over Famoro's left shoulder, Mousbi exclaims, "it's true!" "It's true!" "it's true," after every sentence. "This is part of jaliya." They are speaking in English. After he tells me these things he tells me to go and write it down in my notebook for my book, and we laugh.*

*Later in the evening, three friends arrive. They sit on the couches and Famoro chats with them when I come in from the kitchen and Famoro stands up and formally introduces me to his friends. He tells them I am a great friend, that I help Famoro and Missia a lot in America. He tells them that I helped to buy the food tonight for the party that brings us together. Famoro speaks half in Malinké and half in French and Mousbi stands behind him and says, "namu!" "namu!" namu!" after every sentence, backing up Famoro's claims. Each person takes my hand and thanks me several times for being a good friend to their jalis. I feel a little embarrassed and tell them how I love Famoro and Missia and their blessings. I tell them that Famoro and Missia will have many fans in America, to which they all answer, "Insha'allah." If I were living in Guinean society, I see that Famoro would have the power to make me very popular.*

*After our introduction, two of them say that they know me already. Missia comes in from the kitchen and recalls our first meeting. They were among the six people who came up to blow out the birthday candles and give Missia presents the night of her birthday last year when I was her marraine.*

*Famoro takes a seat on the couch and Mousbi sits down behind Famoro's balafon. Mousbi starts to tap the keys with a mallet, almost in time to the music in the CD player. Famoro stops talking. His balafon is speaking, and he does not like what*

*it says. He tells Mousbi to stop playing and I am relieved that I am not the only one who disturbs Famoro in this way. Mousbi and I have a good laugh over Famoro's sensitivity, but we both know that he has jali ears and that everything on the balafon is sacred to him.*

*Later in the evening we push the chairs out of the way and dance in this small living room. Mousbi spins the CDs and everyone is happy. We must have listened to Jali Seikou Kandia Kouyate's pop rendition of "Lasidan" renamed "Sans Motif" about ten times that night. I am self-conscious about dancing in a living room with Manding people I have just met, but my African dance moves have become well engrained, and somehow I manage to fit in without too much effort.<sup>132</sup>*

*End-of-Ramadan Party, October 27, 2006*

White is a holy color normally worn by jalis and Muslim holy men. Usually Missia has dressed scantily in tight pants, maybe with laced up sides, and a crop shirt, often in white if she is feeling holy, but for the Ramadan party she will wear a shiny white grand boubou that reaches to the floor. The elegant dress is to show respect for Allah. She has covered her ponytail of skinny dreadlocks with a matching white head wrap. At the end of the evening, she will drape that white head wrap over my shoulders as we dance to the music together.

As usual, I know every musician on stage: Mamadi "Gely K" Kouyate on rhythm guitar, Abraham, Seikouba Bambino's guitar player, Yacuba Sissoko on kora, Famoro on balafon (all of whom are jalis), Cheik on bass, Makanyi on djembe, and the

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<sup>132</sup> It is interesting to note that I had recently received this CD from Gray Parrot and had played it earlier that day for Famoro to ask his opinion of it. He told me it was very big, and he translated one song to me, "Sans Motif." The jali sings that true love has no other motives. He sings a moral lesson, as jalis typically do. Now it seems to be the theme of the evening, by coincidence. These types of coincidences occur more and more frequently as I spend more time with jalis.

great Fula Flutist, Mr. Bailo Bah. Doug, Bacar's apprentice, will be the only non-West African, an honored position to play drum set for this lineup of star Manding musicians. Of the ten singing jalis, I know Missia Saran Diabaté, and Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté.

*Famoro gas told me to come to his apartment at 9 pm this evening. He is not even there when I arrived on N.Y.T.<sup>133</sup> I expect it. Missia and I chat and watch TV. I help her change her cell phone ring. She does not like any of the options but eventually decided upon a techno beat. I strip down from my favorite African emerald green tunic, skirt and head wrap into my stockings and tee-shirt. I know it could be a long wait and the apartment is very hot.*

*At 10:30, Famoro arrives with Djoss, who collapses on the small couch and falls into a slumber Everything has shifted to A.M.T.<sup>134</sup> after I enter Famoro's apartment. Everyone's cell phones continually ring. I am startled when mine does too. It is my firend, Peter<sup>135</sup>. He is stuck in traffic in a taxi on the FDR and worried that he won't make it on time. He is still in the world of NYT. I glance at my surroundings. Missia had just put something on the stove, and Famoro is wearing sweatpants, talking loudly in Malinké on his cell phone. I tell Peter not to worry. He will make it with plenty of time to spare.*

*Famoro is talking to his family in Conakry. Isn't it the middle of the night, I ask him? He needed to know something from his wife. She doesn't care what time he calls. Before I can speak, his cell rings again. This goes on all night.<sup>136</sup>*

*At 11:30, Famoro appears from his bedroom, suddenly dressed and ready to*

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<sup>133</sup> New York Time (or regular Eastern Standard Time).

<sup>134</sup> African Maybe Time.

<sup>135</sup> Peter Bogardus is an American photographer, born and raised in New York. He travels to Senegal and takes photographs of festivals every year, and spends much of his social time in New York associating with West Africans.

<sup>136</sup> Cell phones have become ubiquitous among West Africans who can afford them; social interaction is much more important in their culture than ours.

*go. No advanced warning. “Wan Guy” (let’s go) he tells us in Sousou. I begin the process of redressing for winter again, wrapping African garments around my body. Missia is still in sweats. She is not coming with us, Famoro tells me. I know not to ask details. All would become clear as the night progresses.*

*Peter and I follow Djoss’s minivan to the concert site, which is to take place in a little banquet hall on 167<sup>th</sup> street in the Bronx. I know Djoss has his radio tuned to the jazz station. I have driven with him before. It is raining and cool. The rest of the musicians are outside, standing under the awning. I greet everyone and catch up with Gely K.<sup>137</sup> whom I haven’t seen for a while. Sometimes Gely K takes the time to explain cultural situations to me properly when no one else can be bothered. He sees I am interested and a special bond has developed between us. I always lend an eager ear.<sup>138</sup>*

*There are a few young men standing near us. They are dressed in NYC black jackets and look to me like they are from the local hood. I think they are American but Peter swears they are from Guinea. They dress just like my American neighbors in Harlem. We make a bet with one another and go inside. I lose the bet; these young men later came in and became part of the jali-patron scene.*

*Peter and I pay our \$20 entrance fee and go inside. The only people there are Mousbi and his colleague, the producers of this event. There is a big dance floor with a stage in front of it and a long row of tables down one side. The ceiling is decorated*

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<sup>137</sup> Gely K is Mamadi Diabaté’s nickname. It stands for Jali Kouyate. The Manding interchange hard and soft G sounds such that jali becomes geli.

<sup>138</sup> Gely K never drinks or smokes, like many of the younger griots in America. He always wears a nice-looking suit and exhibits the highest quality of dignity and respect for himself and others. When there is a social disturbance in the group, someone is mad at someone else, someone is drunk and speaking inappropriately, I look to Gely K for how to read the situation and what to do about it. Everyone respects him as the jali elder, and that he led both Bembeya Jazz Ensemble, and Les Ambassadors, two legendary Guinean bands. Les Ambassadors just rekindled in New York City this year with the arrival of their lead singer, Ismael “Bon Fils” Kouyate. They play at the same venues as Kakande but their style is old-style Manding Jazz, quite distinguished from Kakande’s World Music-style Manding pop.

*for a wedding with paper bells and pink ribbons. The room is fairly dark except for the wildly flashing disco lights around the stage area. Slowly, in pairs and in groups people start to trickle in. By 1:30 am, there are still only about 15 people in the room other than musicians. Mousbi walks past and asks me if I think the rain scared people off. He is concerned about the turnout, as it is he who has produced this event, and he does not want to start the concert until more people show up.*

*A.M.T. considered, people should still be pouring in the doors by now. This is worse than the Oumou/Missia concert! I walk outside to check out the scene. There are three or four cars double parked and running in front of the hall. African women dressed nicely in boubous and Western-style fancy dresses are talking on cell phones, keeping their friends informed. No one wants to go inside first. Inside, the sound system plays West African pop music. A few women are dancing in a circle, unenthusiastically. Another man dances off to the side by himself.<sup>139</sup>*

*By 2:30, the band has played a sound check and Mousbi figures we have as many people as we are going to get with this rain. He gives the call to start the show. Missia is still at home, resting. She has no need to wait around with the rest of us. She is in-the-know through the cell phone. Famoro comes to tell me she cannot find a taxi. I offer to pick her up so we can get on with the show already, or she will be singing our praises at 8 am. It is a quick drive from the Bronx to Harlem. Peter and Missia's friend. Soba Kanté accompany me. Do you sing? I ask her. Me, I am a griotte! She answers. We retrieve Missia who explains that Soba is a relative of her mother's side. Kanté. Of course. Being in no rush as usual, we stop by the convenience store for cigarettes, a six-pack of Guinness, and chewing gum, per request. We return to the hall with the star, and Peter escorts her in. Peter and I reconvene at our table. We*

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<sup>139</sup> It is not unusual to see a man dance by himself on the dance floor in African contexts. Couples dancing, European style, is not popular among Muslim West Africans.

*are tickled to be the ones to bring the star of the show, the show of which is well under way. It is now approaching 3:30 A.M.*

*The vocals are turned up so loudly! I wonder if the music is even important. A woman is singing. Famoro adds a little run; Ibrahim on guitar and Makanyi on djembe punctuate the jalimuso's statement. The singer has power in her voice. She is naming people's names. There is lots of energy in the room, if only from the sheer intensity of sound waves streaming from the PA system. People throw \$5s, \$10s, \$20s.*

*Each jali has his or her contingency of friends and patrons in the audience. One jalimsuo receives perfumes and fabrics. Her contingency sprays her plentifully and Peter notices a few Ben Franklin bills, four or five of them. Was she a famous singer or were her friends just generous? Maybe they were trying to increase her social status as a jalimuso. I could not see that her performance was unusually distinguished. Some jali-patron interactions are more impressive than others. Each one has a different feel to it, and the reasons behind the differences may not depend only on the virtuoso qualities of the performance.*

*Raul comes over to sit with us. We are the only three toubab in the joint. We evaluate each and agree that they are all capable, powerful, and strong. I observe the audience members as they approach the stage to spray because I know my turn is coming and I want to choose how I will act...if I can stay awake. I chew my gum more vigorously. How they move so calmly, casually toward the stage. No rush. AMT. Djoss takes the stage. His voice is beautiful and strong. He need not even call a name. People come to the stage and entice him to call them. Anyone would want his beautiful voice to honor them. I cannot help but throw \$5 at Djoss. He smiles at me but does not sing my name. Never mind that, I just wanted him to know my appreciation. His voice moves me. I can recall the first time I heard him sing, so sweetly, back in Famoro's first Brooklyn apartment. Famoro was playing balafon very quietly and the*



*two blended together, their music, permeating the room with a soft glow.*

*Missia finally comes to the stage. I lean over and tell Peter to come up behind me, and spray when Missia praises me. I think to myself that it will increase my social worth and exhibit our knowledge of the culture.. Missia sings a chorus and then calls out Raul's name. To show my good measure, I follow him up. I throw a few dollars I had in hand to increase his worth. When Missia sees me approach, she shifts her attention to me. "Lisa!" I become flustered because this was not the reaction I had intended. I had meant to support Raul and have my own praises later. I don't know whether to return for more money or stay and listen to my praises. I am confused. I stay and Peter appears along side of me to increase my status, as I requested of him. Missia shifts her attention to Peter. She hardly knows him but he escorted her in, and she sings as passionately for him as for us. This did not turn out as I thought it would. I stay, caught in the scene, and sway to the music with Peter and Raul. I meant to spray Missia with a lot more than just \$3 and I am feeling self-conscious about this, but she goes right on singing powerfully about the three of us. She shakes her finger and looks right at us as she sings. I feel the heat rise in my body. Is it embarrassment? Energy? Is this nyama? Then she says Famoro's name and points back to him and then back at us again. I figure she is connecting our relationship to her through Famoro. Within moments it is over and we return to our seats. Missia continues to praise other people. We have been presented to the West African community well this night.*

*At the end of the evening, all the singing jalis come out on stage for a finale. Each one takes a turn singing the lead while a second singer backs her up with exclamations of "namu!" and repeated choruses. Peter and I are surprised when the music cuts off on the jalimuso who had received the most gifts. She sings another bar, a capella, before she stops. Is it a power failure? Have we passed the curfew at the*

hall? Suddenly the music starts up again. Problem solved. After a few others sing their farewells, the jalimuso who was cut off before takes the microphone again. And again the music stops. This is no accident. We do not understand.

The DJ starts spinning pop Manding records and the audience members come out to the dance floor. The women instantly welcome me into their dancing circles. Soon, Missia comes out and dances with me too. She removes her head wrap, freeing her dreadlocks, and wraps it around my shoulders. When she leaves, I am incorporated into a circle of African women who welcome me to dance with them. I think Missia's praises worked.

Just when I think the evening is coming to a close, the band starts one more song. Missia returns to the stage. Mousbi and his cohost stand at one end of the stage and Missia faces them. She sings long emotional belts into the microphone, followed by Mousbi! Moouussbiii! Mousbi! Then she sings words powerfully, pointing her finger up into the air and shaking her head emphatically. The hair on my arms stands up on end. Though I do not understand the words, I know she is praising them for producing the concert and giving the jalis a chance to perform their social duties, a necessary and praiseworthy act. Mousbi keeps his hands in his pockets and looks from the floor in front of him to Missia, and back to the floor. He acts timid. I stand a few feet from the stage front, frozen, impressed with the force of Missia's sermon. It is almost as if Missia is a mother, scolding her children for their wrong-doings with anger. But it is actually quite the opposite. Rather, she is praising the two gentlemen passionately for their good efforts in making a concert to honor the jalis. They are duly honored. I even feel proud of Mousbi, and it almost brings me to tears. The song ends and the audience vacates the bar. It is almost 5 A.M.

Peter and I drive Missia and Famoro home. They are talking loudly in the back seat in Malinké. Famoro explains that the jalimuso who received all of the gifts

refused to put her money in the common pot that would be divided between the jali musicians and singers at the end of the night. This is why they stopped playing music when she sang. A singer is supposed to give a cut to her musicians, without whom she cannot sing effectively. This is the protocol. The group of jalis agreed ahead of time to divvy up the money, 70% for each singer, 30% for musicians. By holding on to her money, she ruined her own social status by revealing her lack of comraderie for her fellow jalis, which her fellow jalis made public by abruptly stopping the music.

Famoro also took the opportunity to translate what Missia sang to us. She sang that her skin is not black, it is white, because these white people, Raul, Lisa and Peter, support her in America. We came to her through Famoro, and Famoro spread these good relations to her. She said that now we are together in life. Peter and I are both honored and touched by the message. She is still forging a positive relationship between me, and the thing of it is, it is working. I tell Missia my experience of my own patronly faux pas. I explain that I meant to support Raul, but instead she sang to me. They understand that I felt self-conscious, but I do not think they understand why I think I made a mistake. I felt I never sprayed Missia properly. I only contributed a measly \$3 but I do not draw attention to that.<sup>140</sup>

Missia's words exaggerated the truth: we do not support Missia as much as she claimed. Still, she is not exactly lying. I consider the effect of her words on myself and my reputation in the West African community. Missia gave us public recognition in the West African community. Her purposes are multifold. First, she is raising the ante of our social obligations to her. If we live up to her high assessment of us, she will continue to praise us well in her culture. If we taper off in our support, her praises might not be as grand next time. I recall a sentence that Thomas Hale wrote. "As

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<sup>140</sup> My inquiry to them about my actions in their culture is part of a fieldwork technique called second-person inquiry (Torbert 2001) and the feedback loop (Marshall 2001).

flattering as such a situation may seem, it is charged with potential difficulties because those who are praised must fulfill their responsibilities and conduct themselves in the manner expected by society” (Hale 1998: 48). Second, she is increasing her own social and monetary value by making the connection between herself and American patrons. We have money and power and we may provide access for her into our society. Her association with us is an asset to her in her own community. Third, she is building our reputation in the West African community, announcing what we have done, and preparing us to continue on this path. Those present at the concert could note who we were so that if we should encounter them along our journey, our association with Missia at this show will facilitate our relations. Everything in West African society relies on interpersonal connections. Missia was connecting us, interpersonally, to herself and to everyone else in the room. I see how Famoro and Missia, both, are working me into their social system. Famoro did this the night of the private party in his living room.

This night also showed that jalis uphold particular ethical standards among themselves that they expect of their patrons. “In the historical epics jali tell, they continually taunt their patrons, reminding them of their cowardice and their stinginess or poverty to make them more courageous and more giving” (Ebron 2002: 103). In this context, the jalis live up to their own high standards. The dishonest jalimuso who failed to share her earnings was uncovered, publicly, when the music cut out on her. The jalis talked about this incident for weeks, shaking their heads and reciting the rules of conduct to each other. They purposely and rightfully tarnished this jalimuso’s reputation. This group of jalis also exhibited more than financial self-interest in their final praises for the concert producers. On that night Missia told me she and the singers earned \$50 each and the musicians, only \$20. Still they wholeheartedly praised Mousbi and his partner because they used their fortune to draw community

together with jaliya, and this takes precedence over money.

Famoro tells me that, historically, the jali would sit and play for a noble, telling him about his ancestors and all of their proud accomplishments. He would fill the noble with encouragement without stop, for days and weeks and months, never bothering to search for food or mend his tattered clothes. The noble, filled with the positive encouragement, would take pity on his jali and deliver him food and buy him new clothes. I still wonder if Famoro is teaching me history or training me to be a big patron.

*Marcus Garvey Park, Harlem: Two days later*

Famoro and I brought the pieces of a balafon to the park in the middle of the afternoon so that he could chop the keys and shave them into tune. He took out a big hatchet of sorts. It is obviously homemade in Africa for balafon-making purposes. It has a big wooden handle with a large slab of metal attached to it with rope, and the blade is curved into a wide U. It serves the purpose of hacking wood off the middle and ends of the balafon keys, which raises or lowers the key's pitch. Famoro explains he cannot perform this task in his apartment because the people downstairs complain about the noise. Now I see why. He must prop up each key on the picnic table and hack away with a bang, bang, bang. The balafon he is making will be sold to a twelve-year-old African-American boy, Famoro's newest student.

Selling a balafon does not always require Famoro's handicraft. In fact, this is the first time I had ever seen him do this. Of the three balafons I brought for Famoro from Guinea, they came completely assembled. I helped him sell one to a man in Minnesota. I drove to Famoro's to send off the bala. He was too tired to accompany me to UPS. Alone, I brought it to UPS, had it packed, and shipped off a balafon that I had brought home from Guinea. The man sent me a check for \$600. I gave \$75 to

UPS for packing, \$50 to David, the liaison between the balafon buyer and me, for commission. I took \$25 for myself, although I was the one most inconvenienced. The rest went to Famoro who was disappointed at receiving only \$400. Next time, I will make *him* pack the balafon properly, *and* send it off himself. I was being “jalied” and I was not sure I liked it.

While Famoro hacked away at the keys, I thought about the effects that the End-of-Ramadan concert had on me. I knew that Missia was exaggerating the role that I played in her life. We do not support her livelihood the way many West African patrons support their jalis. But Raul and I are Missia and Famoro’s closest American friends. They call us freely to request favors, but also just to keep in touch. We stay current on one another’s news and spend leisure time together. She conveyed this emotion in the way she sang her words to us. Her praises kept resurfacing in my mind and made me feel emotionally bonded to Missia. After this concert I sometimes referred to Missia as my sister.

I recall feeling complete loyalty to Famoro after he played a magnificent performance at the Grassroots Festival as well. Djoss does it to me every time he sings<sup>141</sup>, even though he has never praised me in his singing. Jalis appeal to our emotional sides by combining fine aesthetics and praises. They do it with words, with soothing vocals, and with music. It is not the words alone that Missia sang, but the heartfelt, passionate, and beautiful way that she sang them. This is part of the jali’s secret. They have mastered the art of appealing to people by touching us with their hearts. They find their aesthetic inspiration from the people in their community and their great deceased ancestors. That feeling is transmitted through their art. They must feel it in order to convey it powerfully. I was being “jalied” and I liked it, but it came

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<sup>141</sup> I also frequent Source (Afro-Jazz) and Fula Flute (Manding/Fula traditional) concerts of which Djoss is the lead singer.

at a price. I was entering the schismogenic relationship that Hoffman describes in her analysis of the tensions that exist between jali and patron but there were still times when I felt that I was being sucked dry.

I had had a conversation with my friend, Gray, in Maine. We were discussing how jalis wield these powers over their patrons in music and song, but the patrons have the right to call upon their jalis for blessings and advice outside of the musical context. The power, the nyama, comes from their ability to remain neutral in social situations whereby they can influence and predict the course of the future. I thought of the card game, *Huit Americain* and its relationship to the patterns in the balafon music. Jalis are able to record and maintain an enormous amount of social history. They feel the course of events as they unfold and can divine the course of the future by intuition. All of their training involves intuition and feeling on the interpersonal level and on the musical level. This helps them to win the card game with style. Jalis have powers from the spiritual realm, which they can impart to whomever they want, like a blessing. Sometimes the blessings come in disguised forms. This is part of nyama.

Famoro tells me this day that family names are still the source of tradition and strength. He says this as if it is a regular fact of any person's life. Great people in your family's past will encourage you to do great things. Not in my culture, I think to myself. Famoro tells me that I do not have a strong family line, and for that, I am "a little bit mixed up" on my path. It limits his ability to give me strength in the jali way. But he tells me that I have strength and power in that I have gone far in school. Then he tells me that I am smart because I have also gone straight to the original source: Africa.

Famoro says that in America people want money too much. "Your people are too crazy for money and it makes them to be angry," he tells me. It makes them break their TVs in frustration and shoot people in the streets. He is referring to a recent

incident on the street next to his in which an African-American youth shot his family member. Famoro tells me that he watches the society around him in Harlem. The whites sometimes act badly, but the blacks act worse. They have lost their pride and dignity. Then he tells me that even one of his band members to whom he calls a friend can forget their friendship and become mean. I used to think that it is the jalis who always want money, but I consider this viewpoint again.

The conga player and Famoro have spent a lot of time together. Famoro teaches him balafon and they hang out and spend leisure time together. Paying the jali's way is part of the friendly relationship. Sometimes this American man feels used up and he gets angry with Famoro when he no longer wants to pay. Famoro does not understand this because in his culture it is normal to ask for these favors. If a patron does not want to pay the jali's way, he is supposed to tell the jali, "Not today, I have spent enough money for now." This is not a common position to be in for an American, and this man has not learned how to do this gracefully yet. I understand why Famoro is insulted because he feels that his friend "closes his heart" to him. It is not the refusal to pay, but the inability to express his position open-heartedly. Famoro continues, "Il faut avoir la dignité!" He tells me that one must maintain dignity, self-respect as well as respect for one another. A person who helps the jali will find an easy path in life, but when he is unable, he must speak honestly. Good fortune may come his way again in the future, particularly if he has a loyal, unalienated jali to assist him.

*As evening falls, inside Famoro's apartment we are very cozy. The heat is high when it is cold outside. Missia likes it that way. She never opens a window for fresh air. She tells me that during the winter, when she has no place to be, she will stay in the apartment for three days at a time. Now she is in the kitchen cooking us a late lunch, or an early dinner. Rice and smoked meat with a spicy red sauce. She's wearing a yellow pajama shorts and tee set, and her skinny dreadlocks are pulled up*



*in a high ponytail. Two cowry shells poke out. I place two fresh apples from the farmer's market on the table for Missia and stick a little money in between them for the praises she gave me at the Ramadan party for which I hardly sprayed. She sees the apples, then the money and tells me I spoil her. I tell her, "Mais non! Tu es ma griotte!" She takes me in her arms and tells me to answer "amina"<sup>142</sup> to everything she says. I agree. She speaks words in Malinké that I do not understand. I answer, "amina." She continues a second time. I answer, "amina." She speaks a third time. I answer, "amina." She loosens her embrace and we look at each other in the eyes. Merci, I tell her. Abaraka, jalimuso. Abaraka. She grunts approval in return and gives me a nod of the head. It is done. I do not know the message yet, but I know it was sincere. And she knows that I trust her.*

I did not expect this blessing when I gave Missia the gift. I have given Missia presents before, but I had never received an embraced blessing like this. Did she know, intuitively that I needed reconfirmation of the value of our friendship today? Did I make my feeling known through my gesture? Was this a logical progression to the End-of-Ramadan interactions we had?

I recalled the year past when Missia remained apprehensive toward me. I still respect her tendency to remain reserved in large social contexts. She spends a lot of time by herself in her room. Famoro tells me that this is what Missia needs to maintain her power as a jalimuso. Famoro can do this by playing the balafon if there are many people around. He maintains a stable mind by playing music, and in this way he can "control the social scene." A jali needs to seek solitude to regain strength. That is why Missia stayed at home before the end-of-Ramadan concert. It also comes late at night, when jalis play music. He tells me that Missia and he will spend many late nights making music together.

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<sup>142</sup> Amen

Now I felt that when Missia embraced me or showed appreciation for my assistance, that her actions were sincere. She was not a greedy jalimuso, she did not expect handouts. When I gave her presents she took them to heart. If a jali sincerely loves you, you cannot help but love her back, for they have the ability and obligation to bless you with their spiritual energy through speech, song, or music. This is quite a shift in perspective from the antagonizing begging image that I formed of Bacar and Famoro when I first started to know jalis. I now no longer felt trapped by my position as patron. I had the ability to negotiate my needs within the Manding social constructs. I could refuse to give money when I had none to give. I could give with an open heart when I had it. And I could trust that Famoro and Missia, among other jalis I befriended, would look after me as I looked after them.

*Badenya on December 2, 2006, midnight.*

Badenya and Fadenya are two relationships in Manding culture described by Eric Charry as mother-childness and father-childness, respectively (Charry 2000). Badenya: from *ba* (mother) *den* (child) *ya* (ness)—is an integrating force encouraging submission to authority and cooperation. The complementing force is fadenya (father-child-ness) a motivating force for competitive behavior (Bird and Kendall 1980: 15, as quoted in Charry 2000: 55). Badenya refers to the cooperation, social cohesion, and solidarity between members of a community. Fadenya refers to competition and rivalry. Both are necessary for a healthy, functioning society. Too much badenya leads to stagnation and too much fadenya leads to social anarchy (Hoffman 2000). Fadenya is more apparent in the young jali's developmental stages. It manifests when the young, emerging jali distinguishes his playing style from that of his father (but might embrace that of his grandfather).

In *Griots at War* the griots that congregate at Kita invoke Badenya many times

as a means to refer to solidarity, brotherhood, or kinship among the griots. They do so to invoke a feeling of cooperation and ethical cohesion in light of past years of tensions between particular warring jali families (Hoffman 2000). *Badenya* is invoked frequently to solicit camaraderie and togetherness. It is the title to the only album comprised of Mande jaliya in New York City, on which many of the jalis in this thesis are a part (*Badenya 2002*).

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*Famoro sat on a chair in front of Mamadou and all but disappeared into the sounds that arose from his kora. We gathered in Famoro's living room, sleepy and happy with the reunion taking place. Mamadou Diabaté had been gigging in Philadelphia and after his gig came straight to Famoro's house in New York City before returning to his home in North Carolina the following day. It must have been about 1:00 A.M. when he arrived. He had driven two hours in the opposite direction from where he would be traveling tomorrow. Famoro told us several times how Mamadou gave up his free hotel room in Philadelphia just so he could spend time with his good friends in New York. Famoro was pleased. Prince Diabaté, electric kora player, has also come to visit New York from his home in Los Angeles, for the week. Prince, Mamadou, Famoro and Missia are talented, well-known jalis in their countries. Mamadou is from Mali, the rest are from Guinea, but they share one another's last name and have a special camaraderie as members of the same jali family lineage.*

*I met Famoro and Missia at their apartment around midnight just after seeing an opera at the Met. Famoro and I killed time by playing Huit Americain. Famoro won the first few rounds. Then I decided I wanted to win. I summoned Allah's assistance, and heightened my awareness of the flow of cards played in front of me. I won several times in a row. Missia took Famoro's place and proceeded to lick me*

*clean. She seemed to control the game with every move and eventually I gave up. She put Le Reve du Python in the VCR, Malinké with French subtitles. It made for a surreal background, the same that plays in Zebulon on the backdrop screen behind the stage while Kakande plays a gig.*

*How do those French bar owners know?*

Mamadou, Prince, and an elder gentleman named Diassa enter the apartment all at once. Diassa wanted to take Prince and the rest of us to a local bar where a handful of West Africans were hoping Prince would play. But the jalis refused. They wanted to have a private jali night in the confines of Famoro's warm apartment.

Famoro stood and made a semiformal welcome speech expressing his pleasure that they had come together to play, that this was a special jali occasion and he was happy to have everyone in his home. He explained they needed this time together to refuel their jali energies. This meeting brings them back to their roots.<sup>143</sup> He spoke in French and Malinké. Throughout the night, if they wanted me to understand, they mixed French or English into their Malinké. Otherwise, they spoke some derivation of Malinké or Bambara, Mamadou's native tongue, which is a close relative to Malinké.

They played a song, perhaps to appease Diassa before he departed. During the music, the elder spoke about Badenya. He said that friendship like this is essential, especially when we live far distances from one another. We must keep close contact with one another and come together when the situation permits. It seemed as though he were trying to give a blessing to the jalis' decision to refuse his offer.

They played a song, perhaps to appease Diassa before he left. When Diassa left, we broke for a late night snack of *dibi*- lamb and fried onions and potatoes. That

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<sup>143</sup> It was not until a few months later that Famoro explained to me the deeper significance of this meeting. He said that, in traditional times, after jalis were finished with their musical obligations, they would congregate late-night in the village after everyone was asleep to play for each other. This would renew their spiritual power. Mamadou's gesture to drive up to see them was invoking sweet memories of traditional times, and it touched Famoro deeply.

night, Missia, Famoro, Prince, Mamadou and I shared one bowl of food, Africa family style. Five heads together, four of which spoke Malinké, and I felt exactly as if we were in Africa. We *were* in Africa. I asked about the sauces and powders on the side, which one is hot and which one is bearable. Prince warned me not to eat the powder. Missia added that if I do I would not sleep tonight. “Spicy?” I asked. We chewed a few moments and then Prince said, “If you eat it, you will have sex before you sleep again.” Missia added in French, “You’ll be on your back all night, counting the stars. Do you still want to eat it?” Famoro, Prince and Mamadou looked up at me, waiting to see my response. Noooooooo! I answered emphatically, with a grin. I avoided the powder.

When we laid back to rest, Prince and Mamadou spoke about the music festivals on the West Coast where they have both played. Mamadou complained that the sound guys did not know what they were doing at one festival, and that the sound quality is essential for the kora to reach people. Then they discussed the best pickups to have on the kora, and how difficult it is to get really good sound out of the amplification system. Each string sound must be well-defined, clear to hear. I thought about the fortunate position of these jalis who had made it in America, There were many talented jalis back in West Africa who suffered to make ends meet.

Mamadou talked about captivating the American audience with his music. If the sound system is good, he can draw people into the music he plays. He claims that he does not change any of the Manding music to suit American ears. He said that his music influences many people who hear him, and that he maintains the Manding style of his music playing, although he learns from American musicians as well.<sup>144</sup> He and Famoro chuckle about the effect that their music has on American audiences.

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<sup>144</sup> I have seen Americans, such as Ithacan cellist Hank Roberts adjust their European instruments and playing styles to suit the Manding kora quite beautifully.

This gave Famoro the opportunity to retell a story I had heard before. When he was living in Paris, there was a French man who was taken by the music. He asked Famoro to teach him to play “Yankadee.” He asked Famoro if he had a TV, to which Famoro answered no. A telephone? No. The white Parisian man promised to give Famoro all of those things and whatever else he wanted because the Africans had something richer than he and the wealthy people. They had this music, and they had family and laughter and love, which amounted to much more than money.

This kind of speech is common to the jalis. They use opportune times to reassert their hierarchical position in society, which works in the United States as well as in Africa. They recognize that some Americans are dazzled by their music, that it contains a special quality that they are not used to. In Africa, the same music also works powerfully on the audiences, and it causes them to spray the musicians with money. Americans do not have the same socially prescribed outlets to appreciate through spraying. Their appreciation manifests in a variety of different ways.

When Mamadou picked up his kora about fifteen minutes later, he did not place it back down for a long time. When he stopped playing I was lying in fetal position on the couch, mostly asleep. I half-remember Missia covering me with a blanket. I croaked a “merci” and drifted back off. It was well after 4 A.M.

*While Mamadou plays, everyone listens. The music sounds as if it descended from the angels. It is delicate and sweet. I know the song very well. It is “Lambang”, a song about jalis for jalis. Mamadou’s kora plays the call, “Ehhh, Jaliya,” to which I sing the response out loud, “Alla le y ka jalia n’da.” The music is sweet, the lyrics are sweet. “Ahhh, jaliya, god has made the Jali.” It sets the tone of the evening, a joy, a peace, a love of the jali music and what it does for the people.*

*Mamadou and Prince share a couch. Mamadou plays and Prince asks Missia to sing. She sits in the corner with droopy eyes from allergies. She refuses, so he*

*sings instead. He sings sweetly to no one at first before turning to face Missia. In verse, he tells her a message emphatically, with eyes bulging out of his head and an exclamatory finger pointed up in the air. The only thing I understand is that he is praising her for being a good jalimuso, for making many people happy, but his verse goes on in Malinké, and Missia gives him a smile every now and then. He returns to a chorus softly, sweetly, sits back on the couch and sings up to the ceiling with eyes closed before fading out.*

*I recall a time back in Famoro's apartment in Brooklyn. One afternoon Djoss came over early before a rehearsal. Famoro sat on a folding chair with the balafon stretch across his lap and played softly, and Djoss's singing matched the sweetness of Famoro's balafon. Ala la k'é ka jaliyanda. I remember listening to Seikou sing sweetly in the afternoon breeze in Casamance, Senegal, at the foot of the family compound. As people passed by they whispered praises. Abaraka, jali. A ning bara. Sometimes they laid kola nuts or fresh picked fruit at his feet.*

*Mamadou plays a cycle of kumbengo around and around, makes some variations in the cycle, plays a line of birimintingo, returns to kumbengo, makes a long run and returns to kumbengo. He varies the kumbengo, makes it funky for a few minutes and returns to the basic pattern. Famoro sits back in a chair that faces Mamadou on the couch. They sit about two feet apart. Famoro's eyes are half-closed, his feet up on the little table in front of me on which we had eaten our dibi earlier. He almost appears to be sleeping until Mamadou makes a new shift in the kumbengo. Famoro grunts and throws his head back. Mamadou plays a fancy run and switches to a new kumbengo pattern and Famoro laughs out loud. Now Mamadou looks directly at Famoro as he plays, his face contorting to the different sounds as he plays. Famoro just gazes at him through sleepy eyes. Mamadou is speaking to Famoro through the music, I am sure. They go on like this for many minutes,*

*Mamadou playing, and Famoro making little reactions. What is he saying?*

*When the piece ends, Mamadou says “Eh, Toumani.” They start talking, and all I can understand is Toumani, Toumani, Toumani. Then Mamadou switches to French. He talks about his time spent with Toumani in Mali. He tells us that he and Toumani would pass the kora back and forth, every song, taking turns all night. He is proud of his friendship with the famous kora player and it increases his own self-worth to associate himself with the great Toumani Diabaté.*

*At one point, Famoro picks up the kora and, much to my surprise, plays it. Ala la ké ka jaliya. He tells us that once, in Fiji, the kora player in his band got sick and they had a performance at a tourist hotel that required the kora. So Famoro played this one song in kumbengo, which he played for thirty minutes while singing different verses over it. He received a big applause that night in Fiji. The tourists did not know that Famoro was not a kora player.*

*Then I take the kora. It is big and kingly compared to mine, which was made for my small hands. I play Jola Kelefa, my best track. A bit nervous, it takes me a few minutes to get warmed up, but I stick with it. Prince asks me how long I stayed in the Gambia. They could tell, by my playing style. I try to sing the chorus. They encouraged me, but I forget some of the words. When I ask for assistance they refused to help. They tell me I must remember. I played for a few minutes, slowly recapturing the words I had lost. Prince compliments my sweet singing. I tell him abaraka and turn the kora back to Mamadou.*

*I get up to go to the bathroom, and when I return, Mamadou has started another piece. I walk in, slowly, hunched over, each foot taking a deliberate step to the place where I believe the beat is. I pump my arms and move my shoulders as I have seen so many dancers do in West Africa. I am dancing to the kora. The others watch me with amusement. Am I on time? I ask them. Yeah, Yeah! they answer and I*



retort, “Americans never know.” They all laugh because they know it is true.<sup>145</sup>

*We settle in for another set, sinking comfortably into our seats. I think I hear a person humming, but no one is. It is the kora that hums. Maybe it is the overtones that ring out above the notes he plays. Maybe the motions make parts of the kora vibrate. The music is blissful. It seems to have descended from the angels. Prince never joins Mamadou on his kora. Famoro never picks up his balafon. We are all captivated by Mamadou’s playing; we are lost in a field of gentle emotions. Peace and tranquility permeates the room all night as Mamadou plays on and on. No one sprays any money tonight. No one applauds. We are all among jalis here. I drift off into a slumber.*

### *Intuitions and Self-Reflection*

When I first met Famoro, he and Mamadou had not been talking for several years.<sup>146</sup> I knew them separately, but they rekindled their friendship at the Grassroots Festival in July of 2005. They do not discuss what happened in the past, and Balla Kouyate, the younger Malian balafonist, continues to play for Mamadou. But when Famoro and Mamadou play the same festivals, they invite one another to share the stage. Famoro honored me by inviting me to attend this private meeting of jalis this night. Maybe it is because both Mamadou and Famoro see me as the catalyst to the resolution of their friendship. I was starting to realize that my actions, which came about quite naturally as a reflective practitioner, had repercussions on the jali contingency in the Northeastern United States, and their actions also affected me.

The next morning Mamadou walked me out to my car. He was leaving for home. None of us had gotten much sleep. I was so appreciative to be included in a

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<sup>145</sup> I demonstrate levels of intuition in Manding culture throughout the night, particularly here, where no one else was dancing, and dancing is not normally called for, but in the moment I felt my urge was appropriate and it was met with approval. It also happened when I responded with “ala la ké ka jalianda” to Mamadou’s song.

<sup>146</sup> Famoro played on Mamadou’s album, *Tunga* before their paths separated for several years.

night for jalis that I wanted to express my gratitude somehow. I felt that spraying that evening would not have been appropriate. So I asked Mamadou if he had any of his latest CDs for sale. He did. I bought a few copies and had him sign them. That was my patronly contribution and it was nothing compared to the performance he gave us. Again, I felt indebted to another jali. Perhaps I was acting like a toubab, and perhaps like a patron, perhaps both or neither. I acted how I felt.

### *Musical Reflections*

My role was a delicate one this night, as it is most nights when I am the sole toubab among West Africans. I am self-conscious of my own presence and reflect on my actions often, checking myself to make sure I am being appropriate. This is a special night for them and I did not want to be conspicuous. For the most part I stayed quietly on the couch, listening to the music.

When we listen to or watch a string of characteristic elements such as music, our minds group them according to (likely, culturally-influenced) patterns. The listener can shift her mental focus and relax her mind from grasping on to patterns. Instead she can hear the notes, one by one, as they emerge from Mamadou's fingertips and give them equal weight. The listener can "mutually tune in" to the musician, as explained in chapter 2's beginning to Lasidan's improvised rubato melody, as if there is no consistent meter. To do this is a means of neutralizing cultural proclivities tied to rhythmic patterns. The listener comes to hear 12 separate pulses. From that position any combination of grouping the notes is possible. In doing this, the listener can discover new patterns for herself within the music. If she has studied how to hear the music in the past, then her memory might recall the Manding aesthetic quite naturally without guidance of a Manding tapping foot.

From my reclining position on the couch, I played with different ways to

perceive the music. I could drift in and out of cultural perceptions and blur them too. If I let my mind take its natural course, I still succumbed to my American-oriented proclivity to hear the music as a three-beat measure instead of the two or four-beat against three-beat measure. When I felt a rhythm the Manding way, I knew it because it manifested in my body as the Manding motion and in my heart as the Manding feeling, distinct from the American motion and feeling. Now I could appreciate the spaces between notes that made up the Manding swing—that lilting ostinato, something we isolated in many of my balafon lessons. I could listen to the primary and secondary downbeats weave in and out of one another. I could hear several melodic lines, each one in different ways.

Sometimes I imagine the same kora line as I would play it on the balafon, which helped me to understand the complexities of the music. Learning “Soli” for example, helped me to intellectualize the syncopated call and response in melodies. It sharpened my ear to more subtle shifts that might have passed unnoticed before: it allowed me to recognize excerpts that had significance, even if I did not know what it was. This is not dissimilar from learning to define separate words and phrases in a foreign language even before knowing their meaning. The physical gesture and social response linked to these phrases allows the listener to move closer to the meaning behind them.

### *New Social Response*

The more familiar I become with the appropriate social responses and my ability to perform them to some degree of satisfaction, the more at ease I feel. Sometimes I do not even realize that I am acting according to Manding protocol until it emerges from me. Singing “Alla le y ka jaliya” was so second nature to me that the words sprang out of

my mouth spontaneously. Often, I became momentarily self-conscious and checked to see everyone's reactions to make sure that I did not commit an error. This is reflective practice and an essential part of the learning process. Not all anthropologists put themselves in this position, and the ones that do, often do not describe the essence of emotion that comes from the expression when it comes out.

Other times I am painfully aware of my effort but as the student, this is part of my learning process. I have to gently test my knowledge, as I did when I picked up the kora and played "Jola Kelefa." The motivation to try to play came naturally to me, as I have practiced little bits of kora over many years. Once I had the kora in my hands I became self-conscious and almost lost courage. My learning experiences reminded me that the only thing I do respectfully was to play it to the best of my ability, with confidence yet calmness as my teachers had taught me. I tried to feel the essence of the song, the Manding feel, as I had learned it. Part of learning is the willingness to put your lessons to the test and see if you are successful.

Dancing as I came out of the bathroom was a spontaneous expression of myself, rendered in Manding patterns that I learned from watching others. It is my tendency since childhood to represent music bodily—I've always danced. The motivation to dance translated easily into Manding, but the Manding aesthetic to the moves have become my own only in the past few years. This particular song had a lilt to it, a jump that Manding people may express in a jovial bouncing step and a shrug of the shoulders. I represented that feeling in my body quite intuitively. Of course the humor in my action came from my lack of ability to discern whether I expressed it on the correct downbeat. If I represented the bodily aesthetic correctly but on the wrong downbeat, all of my efforts would have been for naught.

### *Building Manding Emotion*

Socially, I understand what kind of culturally significant sentiment comes from the song and phrases in the song. Sometimes I know from which region a song comes. Sometimes I know other jalis who have played the song in the past. With each piece of knowledge I recall about a particular song, there is an associated sentiment, which is a vital part to understanding the culture. Sometimes my sentiment is not strong because I do not know enough. Sometimes my sentiments are mixed with my own non-Manding emotions, and other times my Manding sentiments are very strong. Sometimes I think can feel the sweetness for the same reasons that they can; it brings me closer to them and to Manding culture because we share sentiment.

“Lambang” is among the first kora tunes I heard over five years ago in Maine. My first kora teacher and mentor on African music and culture, Gray Parrot, used to play this song as a regular part of his repertoire. He would sing the call and I would respond. Through the years, I have learned that this song is a song by jalis, for jalis, honoring their special talents and gifts from the creator. The chorus says, “Ahhh, Jaliya, it is God who made the jali.” Silence. Peace, sweetness, love; these are the emotions this song brings, emotions that I’ve built from years of listening to live jali music with people I love—Gray in Maine, Seikou in the Gambia, Famoro and Missia, Djoss. And this experience, here in Famoro’s living room at 3 A.M., added my memories of this song even more. I feel what the song means; I feel gratitude for how this music, as the Mandingos have appropriately coined, “sweetens” my life. *Aninyata*, she says with a shake and bow of the head. (It is sweet).

My sentimental value and understanding of Manding music depends on both the contexts in which I have heard and played it, and the stories that the jalis tell me. The secondhand stories are not as powerful. For example, “Soli” does not conjure up feelings from the girl’s coming of age ceremony as much as it reminds me of the

endless balafon workshops with Bacar, and the Feraba show in Guinea. Nevertheless, while “Lasidan” recalls workshops and performances, it still emanates happiness and makes me want to dance as it does the West Africans. I recall the private party and Seikouba’s version of “Lasidan” as “Sans Motif” now as well, and this formulates part of my feeling for “Lasidan.” The music conveys the feeling across the cultural barriers when we celebrate the songs with the people who made them.

Observing Famoro and the others’ reactions to the music, I noticed that certain phrases were of particular significance based on the subtle reactions to them. Famoro tells me that throughout the night, everything Mamadou played had particular meaning to him. Each piece and each phrase recalled Manding epics, Jobarteh family characteristics, references to famous musicians who played the songs before. For example, in one piece, Mamadou honored Toumani Diabaté. His use of musical phrases combined his own style with elements of Toumani’s that worked to draw a connection between them. Mamadou was at once honoring Toumani and raising his status as jali by associating himself with the famous star.

My appreciation for the deeper meaning laden in musical phrases increased through my fieldwork. Still, my actual knowledge of what the phrases meant remained very small compared to the wealth of history contained in each piece. There was much that I did not understand. From my own cultural point of view, I imagined the best hip-hop artists who could combine elements of songs past and add their own lyrics, recombining elements in a way that drew on musical sentiments of the past to recreate them in the present in a new way. In Manding music, the traditions are much thicker still. Musical phrases may imitate verses from the Koran, or proverbs, or other meaningful speech (Gray Parrot’s field recordings, 1995). They may recall epics from hundreds of years ago. They may reference particular families and kings. They may invoke certain moral codes and values.

Regardless of my limited knowledge of the intricacies of meaning in Mamadou's playing, my appreciation for this night of musical sharing augments my sentiments for jaliya and therefore engages me more deeply. Months later, Famoro comments to me about the gesture Mamadou made on this night. "Long ago, back in the village," Famoro tells me, "after jalis finished their travels for the day, they came and sat together. It was at that time of day that they played the sweetest music. This gave them force to carry on their tradition. This is why Mamadou came to us that night. It is an old tradition. This is why he made us so happy" (Famoro, conversation 3-07). My gratitude for being included in this event continues to increase. I am being jaliied, again. If this makes me indebted to the jalis then I accept, willingly. Famoro gave me the opportunity to increase my emotional connection to Manding jali life in New York. There is affection in his gesture. I felt it then, but I feel it more now, in reflection. It becomes part of what Manding culture is to me.

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### *Christmas Money*

This year, 2006, Tabaski<sup>147</sup> and Christmas fell within days of each other. I know that Famoro needs money to send to his family. Every family in Muslim West Africa buys new clothes and a ram to slaughter on Tabaski if they can afford it. Since Famoro lives in the big city of New York, his family expects to receive a moneygram for the expenses. I requested Famoro and Missia's services for my upcoming Christmas eve party with the hopes that they might receive some fortune. Famoro tells me he cannot refuse his *jatigi*, and I see I have made a good request of his services.

Jatigi, he calls me. I read up on the word in Barbara Hoffman's *Griots at War*. Griots and nobles often build life-long relationships with one another that surpass generations (Hoffman). For example, if I were a noble of the Kanté family, such as

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<sup>147</sup> Muslim holiday

Sumanguru, then the jalis of the Kouyate family would tend to serve as my family lineage's jali. If my parents had a strong, ongoing jatigi-jali relationship, then it is likely that I will use that jali's son as my jali. The jali would recall my history from the time of his own great-grandfather, and would likely imbue the stories with similar emotions. The word also refers to a noble who takes care of a jali's needs, acting as a host, as the introducing quote of the chapter explains. I believe that Famoro is using *jatigi* as a term of endearment; that I am a host and guide for him in my culture and that our relationship may continue for a long time into the future.



### **Interlude 7: Across the Atlantic**

*I sit at home on the Jersey coast, a fire in the fireplace, typing away on my thesis. The soothing plunking of the kora punctuated by Seikou's voice comes through the speakers of my stereo. When Seikou starts talking about me I tune in to listen though I've heard the CD many times before. Each time I think I understand a little bit more, though my Mandinka is beginner level at best. He is telling the story of how I came to the Gambia through Ousman and Isatou. He uses his story-telling voice, coordinating lines of verse to the measures of the polyrhythmic loops. When he says my name I speak out "namu!" to my empty living room, acknowledging the validity of his story. A few minutes later, he says my American name, Lisa, followed by some Mandinka I do not understand, then, "Lisa, Lisa a bé New York City." I yell out, "Jali!" A few minutes later he starts to sing choruses and verses in his singing voice. He has the rustic, rough voice of an elder man, which he is, but the diabetes has aged him past his 57 years. Sometimes he strains to hit the high notes, but he always sings them with force. He sings about Bakary Kanyi, and the mention of Bakary goes straight to my heart. It is at Bakary's house that I stay when I am in the Gambia, and in Bakary, I have complete trust and faith. He treats me lovingly, like a daughter. Sometimes we stay up late, under the stars at night, once the heat of the day has finally given way to a cool breeze. I tell him about my life and he imparts fatherly wisdom to me. He and Seikou are close. Bakary spends a lot of time with Seikou, Ousman and I. He translates culturally and linguistically for us. There is a lot of blessing and well-wishing between us, and a lot of kora playing and singing.*

*Seikou's affection toward Bakary is transmitted through his voice and it is an affection that I share too. It immediately brings to my heart the memories we share. Then Seikou sings my African name, "Aminata New York City, Aminata Jobarteh" followed by a melancholy, soft singing of my American name, "Lisa, Lisa, Lisa." I*

*hold my heart in with one hand and yell out Abaraka Jali! my eyes welling up with tears. My neighbors, if they can hear me, must think I am crazy. When he comes to the chorus, I sing along with him just as I did on the day he called me jalimuso back in the Oceanside town of Kafuntine. I take a break from thesis writing to send off an e-mail to Bakary, tell him I am thinking of him and Seikou, that I am remembering our time together and wishing them both well. Then I walk out onto the New Jersey beach and look across the ocean to the southeast. I yell out a greeting to my friends on the other side just like my father does to me when I am there instead of here.*

*Bakary writes back the next day, calling me n' dimba, my daughter.*

## Chapter 7: Conclusion—Lessons from the Field

*This metaphoric predication of correspondences between musical or social order is not limited to formal or structural analogies. The tendency in Western analytical thought to divorce structure from content finds its counterpart in musicological approaches which presume a radical distinction between reified musical structures (forms, scales, melodic and rhythmic modes) and qualitative parameters such as timbre, texture, gesture and flow. This is not a meaningful distinction for Yoruba musicians and listeners. The experiential impact of the base metaphor, “good music is good consociation” depends upon the generation of sensuous textures. An effective performance of juju or fuji predicates not only the structure of ideal society, but also its interactive ethos, or “feel”: intensive, vibrant, buzzing and fluid (Waterman, Ethnomusicology 1990).*

Through the examples put forth in this study, I argue that the practice of learning music is useful as a common frame of reference from which we can expose our similarities and differences, and then move into deeper cross-cultural learning. Through the musical learning process the student learn not just the structures and content of Manding music, but how Manding people think about and feel the expression of the music in practice by learning to express themselves within that cultural medium. Learning music in this way prepares us for the process of understanding Manding social culture at large. It is also a useful exercise in learning how to learn in any foreign culture.

In chapters 2 and 3 we see that music, particularly rhythmic music, serves as a common frame of reference around which people of disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds may share a meaningful experience. Chapter 2 provided a general introduction to the perception of Manding jali music in Western-oriented terms such as polyrhythms, layered melodies, and runs, and suggested the ways we should think about this music according to a processual, as opposed to syntactical, mind/body approach.

Music mimics rhythms of the human body and mind as well as other activity in the world around us and serves as fertile ground for shared emotion across cultural barriers, even if only superficially.

In chapter 3 we saw how Jalis attract listeners to music by varying cyclical patterns and inspiring people through energy in music matched to energy, or feeling, in the human body. Then I showed the diverse ways in which the listeners are motivated to move to the music, both exposing their cultural differences and uniting them around a common point of reference. The cross-cultural learning process in practice begins when participants notice their expressive differences. Through active participation, we learn from one another how to coordinate our differences through physical expression, which brings us closer to a shared meaning.

In Chapter 4 the non-African and the jali form a student-teacher relationship. We realize that crossing cultural barriers is challenging in ways we did not expect. The experience highlights the degree to which our cultural epistemologies influence the ways we think, feel, and act, something which we cannot realize in full until we try to reproduce another cultural aesthetic and offer it up to the scrutiny of the people of that culture. What becomes apparent is that learning how to *think* about the musical composition and reproduce it with the right feeling is crucial to achieving higher levels of proficiency without which we cannot develop an intuition for how to act in real life contexts. Learning how to think about and feel the music may only be reached through the oral learning practice under the guidance of a Manding teacher, something that we miss when we study the music from live recordings and written notation.

In chapter 5 we shift from an American-oriented musical context to a Manding-oriented musical context and find that the disparities between the two are great. This chapter shows how observation that incorporates elements of surprise and reflection frame and orient the anthropologist to the Manding ethos as it exists across diverse

contexts and through time. Toward the end of the chapter, I begin to act, somewhat spontaneously, and perhaps intuitively, in the Manding ethos in my relations with Missia.

Chapter 6 stands in comparison to Chapter 5 as Chapter 3 does to chapter 2, in how understanding and meaning deepens, cross-culturally, through bodily participation in the culture. In this chapter, the jalis I know begin to incorporate me into their musical and social network. I begin to act, both intuitively and rationally, exposing the reader to my own *prises de conscience*, moments of self-doubt and intended messages. I realize more fully the role of Manding jaliya, how they use nyama, the meaning of badenya, the purpose of praise-singing and spraying, by participating in it on their cultural terms. Simultaneously I realize my own limitations and cultural barriers to being incorporated into the Manding system.

### **From ‘Characteristic Species of Grace’ to Cultural ‘Ethos’**

#### *The Individual and Community in Manding Music through Schismogenesis*

Schismogenesis is defined by the balance in tensions between aspects of society through which the motivations and values within the social system become apparent. Music provides a microcosm of schismogenic relationships in the ways it creates and resolves tensions. Furthermore, social response to the music demonstrates patterns of resolving tensions. It is possible to draw parallels between musical and extra-musical ways of building and resolving tensions in a case by case basis. Below I explore how Manding ethos reveals itself through its musical practice and I demonstrate how new forms of schismogenesis are negotiated cross-culturally between Manding and non-Manding people in musical and social relationships in New York.

One of the principle motivating factors in maintaining Manding culture from

West Africa to New York creates balance in the community through social participation in musical events. This ‘characteristic species of grace’ includes not only musical composition and creativity, but also the relationship between the audience and the musicians through praise-singing and spraying. Manding-style social relations which use time (music) and money (spraying) in the musical realm have parallels in the social realms as well. The Manding ethos requires a particular balance of mind and body that differs from my own cultural proclivity and serves to optimize heart-felt interpersonal expression.

In his book on musicking<sup>148</sup>, Christopher Small explains that musical styles have distinct ways of organizing tension and resolution indicating types of socio-musical relationships that listeners have with the music. He makes a contradistinction between Western symphony concert music and popular performance music such as Blues. They both present elements of surprise and predictability. Higher degree of surprise appeals to people who enjoy complex intellectual trains of thought, introducing unpredictable elements to the pattern and prolonging resolution in a linear fashion. A higher degree of predictability, where a cyclical pattern constant meter, and Keil would add, participatory discrepancies through tension between notes, inspires the listener’s physical participation (Small, 1998; 125, Keil and Feld 1998). Small equates higher predictability with popular or folk music because it entices greater audience participation and a feeling of gratification, as opposed to the delayed gratification that one experiences in linear harmonic progressions of symphonic music. Small’s definitions of folk and intellectual music do not play out the same way in Manding music.

Manding music is made up of kumbengo patterns and birimintingo

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<sup>148</sup> “Musicking” is the act of participating in a live music scene as a musician, dancer or listener.

ornamentation. The kumbengo, or cyclical patterns, are the foundation of the music. The base rhythms identify the downbeat, usually, and work to hold the music together. The higher melodies represent different voices that overlap within the polyrhythm in a way that builds tension and resolves each time the cycle repeats. Kumbengo represents Manding community in its ideal, balanced form. Non-African students of Manding music describe that the feeling of tension and resolution in this music is different than music in Euro-American society. The polyrhythm of two against three that characterizes most of the cyclical patterns gives the feeling of expansion and contraction, or the rise and fall of the chest in breathing, or the crests and troughs of waves. Doug described that the feel of tension and resolution in this music as “organic, like breathing in and out.” Jali music is relatively free from the tensions and resolutions manifested in harmonic progressions of variable lengths, more characteristic of European and American music.

In Manding music the tension and resolution depend on the musician’s manipulation of kumbengo and birimintingo, the singer’s choice of words, both of which are context specific, and the listeners’ mental and physical participation, which is culturally oriented. People identify the song through kumbengo patterns and the song provides the context for particular themes of meaningful content. For example, listeners the song for the King Sunjata, or the song about Malisajo, of which each has particular themes from the oral histories that accompany the songs. Some songs/stories have moral lessons, some are useful for encouraging people, some songs honor particular family lineages. The themes may be age-old, but the singer improvises lyrics on the appropriate theme to suit the present day situation.

Kumbengo requires the listeners’ participation both mentally and physically. The listeners imagine or move to the downbeat whether it is being emphasized or de-emphasized, or even played at all. The listener’s mental participation in adhering to

the downbeat makes it possible to feel the tensions and resolutions in the cyclical patterns, and makes it possible to feel the variations the musician makes in the kumbengo. If the mind wanders from the downbeat, as in the case of the inexperienced listener, tension and resolution become unclear. To get the right Manding feeling requires active mental participation, particularly for the inexperienced listener.

Birimintingo, or instrumental ornamentation is grounded in the particular accompanying kumbengo patterns and normally only lasts for less than one cycle to two cycles of kumbengo. When three musicians play together, such as three balafonists, normally two hold the kumbengo patterns and one, the more experienced, usually elder, one, is free to provide birimintingo and lapse back into kumbengo parts as appropriate to the social scene in front of him. Due to the limited palette of notes on the balafon and kora, great harmonic variation is not possible. Instead variety arises from the polyrhythms and swing. Still, the musician does not have the freedom to play any rhythmic variation, but must respect a certain character to the song in the same way that Manding-style improvisation always addresses the audience. The creativity comes from the ways in which the musician may conjure up appropriate phrases to suit the current situation to arouse emotions in the listeners. The more evocative phrases are ones that have a long history of meaning in the culture. Birimintingo is sometimes derived from speech such as the quoting of proverbs or koranic verses, or even every day language. The relationship between the music and words is very close though not well understood by foreigners to the society (Hale 1998: 171). Individual motivation to invent new birimintingo phrases is not highly valued as much as elevating audience emotion by using well-known birimintingo phrasing, which is distinct from the highly valued creative improvisation in jazz or rock soloing.



Manding music lacks predictability, or builds tensions in the music, when musicians play or sing phrases that target members of the audience, establishing an expectation of participation through spraying. Birimintingo and praise-singing cater to the particular audience members who are present, serving as a form of social commentary, whether as praise or admonishment. The proclamation, whether musical or verbal, is a means of establishing tension that can only be properly resolved through audience spraying. In the middle of kumbengo the jali mimics a proverb in his birimintingo that warns a husband to treat his wife with respect. This might be directed at a Keita among the listeners who might have fought with his wife recently, and understanding the jali's music, he will feel he was publicly recognized for his actions and will likely be shamed into acting better in the future. He will undoubtedly spray the musician to "take the nyama away" or reduce the tensions that the jali has produced. Musicians also recall particular events or people and their related memories and emotions through variations in kumbengo and birimintingo, such as Bacar's balafon solos during the Feraba concert (chapter 5) or Mamadou's kora solos for Famoro (chapter 6).

Praise-singing is a more direct means of social commentary, which also works to increase tensions by manipulating the targeted individual's emotions. This can also be mitigated through spraying. The surprise comes to the Manding listener how the singer creatively calls upon culturally charged words and vocal qualities to evoke emotions in the listeners. Again, the tensions are resolved when the listeners approach the stage to spray the musician in recognition of the jali's musical "speech." Barbara Hoffman describes a situation in *Griots at War* in which the jatigi, after being suitably praised, fails to spray the jalis. They continue to praise him and tensions keep mounting and

mounting, as they wait for the final resolution, the gift of money. It never comes, and it almost sends the jalis and other onlookers into a state of fury until finally an outside party fulfills the obligation in another way to dispel the high level of tension (Hoffman 2000).

In the words of Mamadi Kouyate, the jali's job is also the "reconnaissance du bien" (the recognition of good deeds). Today it is most common for jalis to focus on the good deeds of individuals in the audience. Good deeds usually contribute to the well-being of the community and may come in the form of donations to a community facility, helping the needy, receiving good marks in school, and especially the promotion of the jali arts. The jali's role to publicly recognize good deeds is necessary for those who want to create a positive reputation for themselves in society because proclamations of self-worth have no value in Manding society. The Manding ethos that promotes community over individual manifests in this form. In spraying for praises is a manner of reducing tensions in that, the patron must sanctify his position by appreciating the jali without which he would not have social support.

The Manding value of community over individual is apparent again in the ways that the jalis support one another's words as well. Recall that when the jalimuso in the End-of-Ramadan concert did not share her money with the other jalis they cut the music and took the power away from her words. When Missia or Oumou praise-sang in their concert, the musicians often punctuated their words by mimicking the sound of the sentence or adding an exclamatory phrase. The musicians support the singers and vice versa.

### *Pop Jali Concerts*

Jalis still serve an essential purpose in the lives of Manding people all over the world. They play baby-naming ceremonies, weddings, and hold big concerts that center around praising and spraying. Changes are prompted by the forces of globalization in migration to big cities, technology and mass communication. However, expatriate communities in Paris, New York and other cities contribute to the retention of cultural practices even when living abroad. Jalis stay in touch with their family members and friends worldwide through the phone, and there remains a high demand for jali music among Africans living abroad. The pop jali concerts such as the Oumou/Missia concert in New York geared to the West African audience is not much different than a pop jali concert in Banjul or Conakry, such as the Jaliba Kouyate concert that Paulla Ebron (Ebron 2002) and Gray Parrot describe (personal conversations). The difference is that jalis no longer always know many of their patrons personally and rely on informants in the audience to feed them the names, familial associations and good deeds. In this way, perhaps, jali concerts have become watered down. Nevertheless, these concerts still uphold Manding values of community and participation.

### *Badenya and Nyama*

Requests for money and other assistance are part of the common schismogenic relationship between jalis and patrons that reinforces the values of interpersonal relationships through heart-felt expression and balanced community. This is summed up in the Manding word, *Badenya*. Jalis skillfully combine moral lessons, instill pride, and otherwise evoke strong emotions in listeners by expressing sophisticated combinations of musical patterns and improvised lyrics evocatively through inspired, physical expression. They are

trained since childhood to master this art, and the patrons in society highly respect and fear this talent. It is in this sense that jalis wield power, or *nyama* in society.

In Manding culture, jalis are of the *namakala* caste in distinction from the noble caste. They specialize in wielding *nyama* or “occult powers” (Charry) through the craft of words, song and music. *Nyama* may be thought of as life force, or motivation, and jalis have the ability to channel this force through their art to influence the course of events in society. They do so by appealing to human emotions through evocative musical and verbal patterns. The length to which the jalis are masters of controlling this force, however, extends beyond the musical realm. It is well demonstrated in their skill in playing the card game *huit americain*. They say it is in their blood. I would describe it as a precarious balance of mind and body of which I will describe more fully, below.

### **Manding Ethos in Euro-American society**

#### *Musical creativity*

The difference between jazz-style soloing and birimintingo is replicated in the social values of the two societies. The American-oriented society values individual innovation by demonstrating skill in doing what no one else can do, whereas the West African society values tying everything back to the good of the community. Birimintingo, always refers back to the kumbengo and serves the purpose of appealing directly to the audience whereas the value in the jazz or rock solo is to mark individual expertise.

In jazz, the solo is generally framed within a 16 or 32 bar chordal progression during which time the soloist may extend as far out from the basic pattern as he wants.

The musician who extends far from the basic chordal progression in his solo and creatively finds his way back to the fundamental pattern before the progression ends is the most highly revered in many American socio-musical scenes.

The difference between the jazz/rock style solo versus the Manding/West African solo may be best represented in the relationship between the dancer and the musician (a body-based aesthetic, Feld and Keil 1994). When a West African musician solos on the djembe (also Mande music) for example, when Bacar played at Makor's Kakande gig (chapter 3) this was particularly a call for Missia or any dancer to come out and dance to the solo. There is an understood language between the dancer and the drummer. A person could not represent a jazz or rock solo through the body because there is no common frame of reference. The soloist is too individual.

### *Circulation of Money*

The circulation of money marks a difference between American and Manding values of which the former values individual strength to achieve economic, social and professional advancement and economic independence through competition against colleagues. In West African culture, generally speaking, personal advancement only comes with the support and recognition of friends and family members, and is facilitated by the jali's public praises. The jalis play an ancient role in advocating and speaking for individuals who are worthy of praise.

Mande people who gain economic achievement do not accumulate money for themselves easily. Money is almost immediately redistributed to family members, to jalis and to other things that improve the quality of life in the short-term, such as new clothes, food to feed friends and family, and health care. While Famoro asks me for money frequently, he will also occasionally buy and prepare a beautiful African dinner for me if he has the money in his pocket or a willing friend with money. Next week,

he will ask me for help with rent. The difference between the circulation of money versus the personal retention of money is another way in which individual relationship to the community is distinguished.

### *Time*

Americans and Mande people use time differently as well. The proper maintenance of interpersonal relations requires an investment of time. Mande people never rush when greeting one another in person or on the phone. Recall Lansana, Bacar's roommate who excused himself for not having greeted us properly, even as we rang his doorbell and woke him from bed at 6 A.M. (Interlude to chapter 4). Recall the greetings in the lobby of the Feraba and the Oumou/Missia concerts. When I call a jali friend, or she calls me, it does not matter if I have little time to talk. First, it is necessary to ask after the person and any of the people I know with whom that person associates. "Famoro. How are you? Where is Missia? How is Aisha?" et cetera. There is no rushing out the door for an appointment if visitors just arrived. Interpersonal relations are one of the biggest roots of A.M.T. and they often take precedence over N.Y.T.

### *Balance in Mind and Body*

The Manding ethos that privileges community over individual may be construed in the Manding relationship between the mind and body. It is not the rhythm of Mande culture to "get ahead of yourself" or to rush through things. This is also one of the causes of A.M.T. in Manding society. They would rather be late than rush and act improperly. Jalis represent this aspect of Manding social value par excellence, in the music that they play but also in the ways they move through life with grace and feeling.

For jalis to fulfill their social mandate they must maintain clarity in every day

life situations. They must be present, mentally and physically, to intuit situations correctly and to provide appropriate and influential feedback in the form of social commentary through their art. They do this by “tuning in” to interpersonal relations. Recall when Famoro told me that he feels everyone in the room, their tensions, their anxieties, their joy (chapter 6). Recall that Missia stays in her room and takes quiet time, especially before a show. We all have this ability to intuit people’s feelings, but jalis practice this ability as a life skill. When performing, they draw upon this skill to most effectively draw in listeners after which they can influence them through their music and words. This takes analytical forethought, but must be rooted in the present to be effectual.

Mental and physical action has rhythm to it. The rate at which our heart beats or we walk or we breathe or we speak or even the mental patterns in our brain—have a rhythm to their flow. Rhythm in human activity does not generally hold a constant tempo, but our rhythms do influence our ability to communicate and influence one another. We use rhythm in communication quite naturally in every day life. The jali is an expert in reading the rhythm and emotion in humans, which he can represent through the music he plays. This skill works cross-culturally as well, although it varies in style, as we see below.

This lesson in jaliya first became apparent to me in my balafon lessons with Bacar and Famoro. Our teachers did not like us to practice the correct order of notes without the proper time, or rhythm. They preferred us to play the proper rhythm and hit the wrong notes. The rhythm, or proper time, is the main root to the feeling. Also, Bacar refused to indulge our intellectualizations of the music. He wanted us to work it out through the physical act of playing it. Recall how he talked Emma through the timing of “Soli” by demonstrating hand motions rather than explaining it with words the way I might have done. Recall I used my own written representation of the musical

timing in “Soli” in order to train my body how to feel the rhythm properly. The danger they wish to avoid arises from in using the mind as a crutch long-term, as a substitute for true knowledge through feeling. Jali music teachers would just assume that we learn by feeling the music in our bodies first, then transposing the feeling onto balafon. Jalis also favor hearing the music as opposed to watching the strike of the keys. Vision can be another crutch in learning to produce the right feeling. I may clap where I see Bacar clap or strike a particular repeating note but that does not mean I feel the rhythm correctly for myself.

Since my first balafon lessons I have trained myself to learn new songs this way. Rather than watch a teacher strike the keys and break down the pattern into sequence of notes, I listen to the music, absorb the feeling, then place my hands over the balafon and start to represent what I have absorbed in my body and heart, through physical motion. The intellect can be a useful tool to train the body into producing the feeling, but should not replace true knowledge that comes through producing the feeling through the body and heart.

The closely knit relationship between the mind/body was demonstrated again in Bacar’s attitude of you’ll-see-when-you-get-there in response to my question of what a place will be like (chapter 4). Bacar asked me directly why toubabs always want to know things ahead of time rather than experiencing them for themselves in the practice. I used this self-realization in my future dealings with Mande people and in my life in general. Recall that I refrained from making interviews outside of the proper context. By staying in the present, the right opportunities appeared for me to ask questions or reframe my lessons according to the situations that my Manding friends presented to me. Video also provided a useful way to recreate a reality outside of context. during which time my questions became more appropriately rooted in the physical representation of the event on the T.V. screen.



Manding people have the same possibility of letting their minds get ahead of the present situation as anyone, but the society has built-in mechanisms to check “run-away” schismogenesis in cumulative escalation by allocating high value to maintaining heart-felt interpersonal relationships and community.

### **Building Cross-Cultural Schismogenesis**

Non-African/Manding cross-cultural relations in New York influence one another in different ways in the attempt to find a suitable balance. Manding people, while maintaining their value in interpersonal relations, have learned the value of using N.Y.T for rehearsals and music lessons, and have learned to tolerate our proclivities to establish and maintain fixed salaries for work rendered. The later does not work in their benefit, however, and they will resort to their own cultural means of requesting money from non-African “patrons” once interpersonal relationships are established. We, the non-Africans, likewise learn to appreciate at best, or cope with, at worst, Manding requests for money and A.M.T. in return for the many benefits in becoming a part of the musical and social relationships in the Manding world.

The attraction to Manding culture originates for most non-Africans in an appreciation of the music and dance aesthetic. Maybe we have an unconscious intuition to perceive the deeper cultural ethos that lies underneath, and the need to incorporate that kind of pattern into our own culture. Part of the attraction of this music to non-Africans lies in the polyrhythms and unique styles of creating groove. The ambiguity of two or more possible ways of hearing the music and the musician’s ability to manipulate the interwoven patterns challenges our minds and bodies at once. At the same time, particular styles of this music such as offbeat accentuation, call and response, emotion through vocal and physical gestures are familiar to us through music of the

African Diaspora, such as jazz, reggae and calypso (Wilson 1983; Floyd 1995; Gilroy 1993).

Manding qualities of building and resolving tension work differently on inexperienced non-African listeners. For example, we tend to value longer and more rhythmically complex birimintingo that appeals to sensibilities for jazz-style solos, and we tend to show appreciation through attendance and applause rather than spraying. It is at once “folk” (Small 1998) in its ability to draw in physical participation, and intellectual in that it challenges us to locate and maintain orientation to the downbeat. Eventually what becomes obvious to us as we learn to play and hear this music the Manding way is that there is a different feeling to the tensions and resolutions in this music from our own. Some toubabs describe the feeling as, “the rise and fall of the tide,” or “the in and out of the breath.” The tensions and resolutions come with each cycle of the music and arise out of the polyrhythmic pulse of two against three. The mix of ‘vital force’ produced in groove and ‘intellectual stimulation’ in our initial inability to grasp the organization may be why many well-educated musicians, ethnomusicologists and dancers are attracted to this music.

*“The Big Tree Has Fallen and the Birds Have Scattered”*  
Manding Proverb

*Griots are caught in a fundamental social shift brought on by the communications revolution of the second half of this (twentieth) century and the political changes occasioned by the transition from the colonial to the national era in Africa. They have married their own fundamental flexibility and audience sensitivity to the new audiences generated by this revolution (Hale 1998: 271).*

*The changes emerging from contact with these new, external audiences developing outside of Africa match in some ways the changes at home. Meaning that when the source of patronage in Africa has shifted, the jali finds new styles of patrons in other places around the globe (Hale quoting Lucy Duran 1998: 274).*

There are inevitable shifts in Manding music as a result of the interactions with a global audience. Non-Africans listening to Manding jali music have an influence on how this musical culture changes through time. One jali, Prince Cissoko explains to Tom Hale why he has embraced modern technology by creating the first computerized kora which is “the coupling of a kora with a personal computer and a synthesizer to create combinations of all kinds- the kora with a violin, the kora with a piano, and so on.” Hale explains that jalis are very adaptable to new situations as their skills enhance the interpersonal relations in their contemporary society. “Prince explained that in order to engage audiences in Mandinka music, he first had to catch their attention with Western sounds. Then he would shift to Manding tunes that one might hear played for West African audiences. His goal, in a sense, was to penetrate the Western musical tradition with the kora in order to draw new audiences to an interest in Africa” (Hale, 313).

#### *Birimintingo vs. Improvisation*

One of the most obvious shifts in live Manding music to me is the incorporation of the jazz-style solo in place of the birimintingo ornamentation of the days past. It is due to several factors that some jali musicians have begun to incorporate jazz-style soloing in their music. American audiences understand birimintingo differently than how it was originally intended, the appreciation of which requires a deep knowledge of Manding socio-cultural history. The jali comes to realize that longer birimintingo and particular kinds of rhythmic emphases elicit audience applause. Recall how Famoro talked about learning how to appeal to foreigners over the past eight years of his travels abroad (chapter 3). Jalis have learned from audience response to change the birimintingo phrasing styles with more jazz or rock-style

soloing and revolving soloing between band members, such as Famoro and Mamadou displayed in their duet at the Grassroots Festival (chapter 2).

Jazz-style soloing is not only the result of the social response of American audiences. Manding musicians are interested in American jazz (as well as Latin music, hip-hop and other kinds) even in Africa where they listen to foreign music on their radios. The older jali instruments, the Malinké balafon particularly, are not successful in producing jazz-style improvisation in that they are limited to a 21-key heptatonic scale. The jalis who play guitar, however, are more apt to embrace the jazz-style soloing because their instrument caters to the harmonic possibilities. Manding jazz bands, such as Guinea's internationally renowned *Bembeya Jazz Orchestra* have been popular since the 1970s. Many deepen their involvement with jazz when they come to New York. Some jalis have expressed to me their interest in finding creative expression through harmonic progressions, particularly the guitarists Mohammed Kouyate, Mamadi Kouyate Djekorya Mory Kante and Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabate (Fieldnotes, 2006). Most recently, Manding jalis have teamed up with New York musicians to form Afro-Manding Jazz bands such as *Source* and *The Mandingo Ambassadors* (reunited from Guinea).

Still, jalis have incorporated Manding style emphasis on the necessity of community support to validate individual display of skill in jazz-style solos as well. When the musicians in Kakande, Fula Flute, or Source rotate solos, they do so when prompted by the singer. Then the singer, such as Missia or Djoss, often walks over to the soloist, lending an ear to what the musician has to say. They often say "namu!" or hold up a finger to emphasize the point, or shake their head in recognition. When the jali speaks or sings, the same is true. Recall when Famoro spoke to me about jaliya in his apartment, Mousbi stood behind him, backing up his words with, "it's true!"

Jazz-style soloing is not necessarily replacing birrintingo, yet. When jali

music is played in Manding social contexts, musicians versed in jazz-style soloing still refer back to the Manding style of ornamentation. And some jalis in the United States effectively appeal to American audiences who value “roots” ethnic music. For example, Mamadou Diabate tells me that he maintains the Manding way of playing for American audiences. This is evident in the video of his solo performances and on his solo album, *Behmanka*. However, on his album, *Heritage*, while he might adhere to the birimintingo ornamentation, his guitar player, Djekorya Mory Kanté employs jazz-style soloing. Birimintingo and improvised solos are becoming intertwined to some degree, as much as the balafon, kora, and the audience members will allow.

#### *Spraying in American-oriented venues*

Those of us who are experienced in Manding culture have introduced Manding forms of appreciating musicians through spraying in non-African musical venues in new York. As a result, some New Yorkers, such as my mother, have begun to lay bills on the brow of Famoro when he plays a particularly riveting solo. There is a satisfaction that comes from appreciating people on their own cultural terms. Furthermore, some of the Manding customs practiced in American venues work similarly as they do in Manding contexts. It is not uncommon for jalis to dedicate songs to me or praise me in American-oriented venues, which, as it turns out augments my social status within my own culture because people recognize me as having an association to the band. Often times, people approach me at these shows to ask me about the music, the culture and my involvement in it. I develop networks within my own culture as a result.

*A New Paradigm for Jali/Patron Schismogenesis in New York*

Anthropologist Lucy Duran says, “The future of jaliya no doubt lies in the concert hall and recording studio, though without individual patronage, it is bound to alter radically in style.” (Hale 273, Duran 236). This quote was written in 1986. In 2007 it is clear that jalis have continued to find innovative ways of maintaining patronage even in New York.

Americans and Europeans involved with jali musicians have carved out a new niche within Mande cultural terms that combines student/apprenticeship with patronage and sponsorship.<sup>149</sup> In Manding society, one must be born into the jali family lineage in order to play the music. One learns to play from his family and other jalis in the community at a young age. The jali-in-training often becomes an apprentice to a jali from another family. No money is exchanged; rather, the apprentice is expected to carry out certain responsibilities such as maintenance on the balafon, and when he is old enough, carrying the balafon to gigs for his teacher. The teacher may call upon the apprentice as he wishes. An apprentice is never a patron to the jali. Likewise, patrons (or nobles, in Malinké, the *horon* caste) do not learn to play music. These distinct roles become mixed in cross-cultural relationships.

For example, Doug is Bacar’s apprentice. Bacar calls upon Doug to assist him in various ways, usually in the form of providing transportation. As someone who is self-employed and generous, Doug often answers the call. At the same time, Doug may pay for musical lessons unless he is assisting Bacar in a balafon workshop. Then he may benefit from musical instruction as well as receive some money from Bacar for helping the other students.

The members of jali bands such as Kakande benefit from their relationship with jalis by receiving musical instructions in rehearsals and from the opportunity to

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<sup>149</sup> This idea was generated through conversations with Gray Parrot.

play Manding music in New York with Manding musicians. Jalis benefit financially from the gigs the band members arrange and also from the connections and resources that the band members have in this society. For example, bassist Peter Fand allows Kakande to record in his studio for a reduced rate and Raul Rothblatt's Jumbie records is producing and advertising the CD.

To be sure, jalis still request money and favors of their American friends (remember the airport trip), and their friends will fulfill the requests by coming to appreciate Manding values of quality in interpersonal relationship with jalis and other Mande people. We learn to manage these requests in culturally sensitive ways. For example, Famoro calls on my services and requests money from me. I still find these requests a nuisance but I have learned how to manage them appropriately. I have learned how to say "no" or "next time" in a culturally sensitive way, since I am a student with relatively little income; I also assist him in other ways such as arranging gigs or carting balafons back from Guinea for him and then selling them for him. I have also learned how to receive benefits for the help I offer. I expect free balafon lessons. I may also call on his services to play for my personal needs, such as my Christmas Party, or a yoga class I am teaching. Famoro finds these requests impossible to refuse because they are part of his own cultural obligations.

The more involved I become in the promotion of West African music, the more I am praised in musical contexts. I also began to recognize value in making my public image strong in the West African social circles as my work in West African music grows. Manding strangers treat me with respect and extend welcomes to me because they have heard my name from jalis. We inevitably become involved in Manding oriented social roles so long as we want to be involved in Manding music and society. We may be surprised or annoyed by this position at first, but we learn how to find a suitable means to resolving the tensions that mount in ways that suit

everyone's culturally-sensitive needs. Jalis depend on their relationships with non-Africans who are interested in them for musical and cultural connections as we depend on them for filling a vacancy that we did not know existed prior to our meeting. They remind us, in fact they demand of us to be open-hearted and sincere in our social interactions. These lessons have served me well in any social context.

### *Learning Culture through Music*

Music can be used as a means through which to become involved in a foreign culture. We share, through the human mind and body, many overlapping ways of experiencing music, regardless of our cultural differences. It serves as a common frame of reference and a field of coordinated action in which people may find common ground to get along, and also recognize their differences. Rhythm serves to subdue the analytical mind and entice us toward physical participation through feeling. The live musical context provides an excellent foundation on which to further develop cross-cultural learning, and should be incorporated into classroom learning as preparation for deeper cross-cultural studies in the field.

Musical lessons serve as an excellent preparation for learning how to see similar patterns in different ways. Recall how easy it was to learn pattern one of "Soli" by itself (chapter 4). Pattern one was a melody that might conceivably exist in American music. However, that pattern takes on meaning only when placed into context, and when pattern one overlapped with pattern two coupled with the Manding swing in triplets, our understanding of the music was not so clear.

In the same way, when we first engage in social relationships with jalis or other West Africans, we may become dismayed at the constant request for favors and money. We may become frustrated by the disrespect to adhere to time schedules. As



with the composition of their music, we do not have a common context that explains Manding behaviors, and we are often blinded by our own culturally informed ways of understanding these behavioral patterns. We learn through experience how to meet our needs in a culturally sensitive ways. Still, to sustain these behaviors ourselves we must find some value to them.

What we come to realize from the examples in this study is that culture is as dynamic as music, and both change continually with every human interaction that takes place. It has been difficult if not impossible to tie music and culture to any definitive label of “American” or “Manding” throughout this study because these terms shift with every context. Can we consider Missia’s birthday or the Feraba show any more or less Manding because it did not incorporate the jali-style praise-singing and spraying of the Oumou/Missia concert? Likewise, my own involvement as an American in different contexts shifts between Manding-oriented and American-oriented styles as well. Labels stand on a slippery slope and our ideas of what they mean must be explored in every context. Some values and motivations are held on to more than others, and this makes it easier to define, albeit temporarily, a cultural “ethos” within a specified framework.

### **The Art of Anthropology: Lessons from the Field**

The value of balancing or minimizing the analytical mind is starting to gain recognition in academia. It is the subject of Bateson’s chapter on Primitive Art and the theme in Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s *Mind over Machine*. It is the inspiration in Herder’s expressivist anthropology, Marx’s central critique of capitalism, and the supporting factors in Joas’s theory of creativity in action. Dreyfus and Dreyfus consider the loss of analytical mind the optimal place of knowledge, however they describe that the analytical mind becomes less and less necessary as we move to more and more

advanced stages in our learning process.

In my experience of the learning process in Manding culture, the progression from beginner to advanced stages of learning does not correspond to a progression from rational to intuitive mind. Even at the beginning stages of learning to play the balafon, I am continually separating mind from body to analyze, then reintegrating the two again as I learn fluidity in the simplest tasks. Then I jump to the next level and go through the same process of separation and reintegration again. My Manding teachers have proved to me, through example, that it is possible to learn exclusively from feeling in the body. To do so we must control how we use our analytical minds and play by intuition, or by heart, or feeling. In this sense, observation is not an attempt at catching and memorizing the sequence of hand motions but rather the holistic experience of the sound and feel. If the feeling is already in the heart, the physical reproduction requires less analytical mind. The jalis prove that by changing our approach we can reach intuitive thinking before reaching high levels of expertise.

I have tried to use this knowledge in the way I conduct fieldwork and in my anthropological analysis and write-up. I accentuate the point here through example of this thesis and suggest that it should be incorporated into the practice of anthropology, if not the practice of our lives in general. The lesson from the field may be summed up through example of the jalis as the forerunners of Mande society: Take time, live in the moment, think clearly, act clearly, be present in interpersonal relations. If we can do that, we increase our abilities to change the course of events to the benefit of the greater good. At this juncture in the global arena, anthropologists can use this information to take on an important role in providing a more positive and humane trajectory into the future for all societies.

The problem with anthropology today is connected to our present-day reality in America, which privileges individuality and the rational mind over communal and

familial relationships and the “reasons of the heart” (Bateson 1979). Before fieldwork we are trained to specialize in and formulate our proposals for research around particular topics of interest such as; identity, memory, race, nationhood, communications, post-modern theory, post-colonial theory, etc. Then we are sent to the field with the intention of learning about our topics of interest. The problem with this method is that we tend to observe and participate in the culture with a preoccupation to uncover information that suits our needs. By doing so, we live in our analytical mind and reduce our ability to be entirely present in the reality that surrounds us. As a result, we produce ethnographies that ensure acceptance in the academic arena back home, but we often fail to grasp the deeper, more comprehensive knowledge that comes from being present in the culture.

Both participation and observation are essential to understanding another cultural reality but the way in which we go about observing and participating changes the course of our understanding and our analysis. There are many ways in which anthropologists have chosen to go about fieldwork and analysis, and some take innovative approaches to maximizing our ethical standards that differ from mine (*see* Greenwood 1999). I exemplify through this study the necessity in being present in the reality of the experience that surrounds us and temporarily setting aside our preoccupations in what we have learned up to that point in the university. If what we learned prior to fieldwork was truly important, we will recall it and integrate it into our analysis as appropriate.

Participation in the fieldsite can, and I argue, should come from caring about being a part of the cultural reality, which necessitates finding a way to make one’s position appropriate and enjoyable according to the cultural standards one is studying. If you participate with the best of intentions to do what is called for, and use creative action to the best of your ability as appropriate in the field, then you minimize the

possibilities of making an irreversible mistake. In this way, anthropology becomes “a pathway to responsibility and an opening toward one’s own human love” (Chernoff 1979: 9).

I have been most influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson, Barbara Hoffman, Simon Ottenberg, John Miller Chernoff, Paul Berliner, Anthony Seeger, John Blacking, Charles Keil, and Paul Stoller. Their topics appealed to me because of the feeling they put to revealing them. They demonstrate good techniques by first, allowing the relevant issues to emerge from the field participants in context; second, translating those issues into ethnographies that the inexperienced reader can understand; third, by stating how this information may be useful to the greater human good. These scholars have placed firsthand experience, commitment, and love for their fieldwork sites at the forefront of their ethnographies. Often this work establishes the groundwork for an ongoing relationship between the researcher and the people in the field who use the services of the researcher to carry their messages across cultural boundaries (Chernoff 2000; Stoller 2002). It also serves as a vantage point for constructive criticism of the path our own cultural trajectory.

To enter a foreign culture and learn to act appropriately can be a daunting task. Many important components may be unnoticed as one attempts to just survive, particularly in cultures that are very different than our own. Art serves as a prism through which cultural expression streams through more clearly and in a more concentrated form than it does in day to day activities. Artistic expression, however, requires a move toward intuitional action in which we think and act gracefully. When we focus on one artistic activity as foreign students of the culture, it helps us to grasp essential values, or “characteristic species of grace” of that cultural expression more quickly through physical participation. We have more than one way of understanding the expression by incorporating the grace into our bodies. This facilitates our

continued learning in other areas of the culture by increasing our sensitivity to that culture's 'feel.' This is an anthropology of expression.

By taking the position of a student, rather than researcher, we open ourselves up to being corrected in action. It exposes to us our own, deeply engrained cultural proclivities that are hard to recognize. A necessary part of the learning process is not merely the right bodily movements, but the right ways to think about the practice, and to imbue our actions with the right 'feeling.' While learning to think, act, and feel according to a particular aesthetic under the discretion of a teacher, our own, well-engrained cultural modes of thinking, acting and feeling are revealed to us. We undergo a trying process to shed ourselves of our old habits and learn new ones. In doing so we develop a respect for and sensitivity to the foreign culture demonstrated in our expression. Second, the process of learning exposes some of the cultural differences between our culture and the foreign culture that may be applicable to other areas of thinking and acting in that culture. In short, we have learned how to learn in this cultural milieu. By undergoing this learning process we are better equipped to delve into other areas of interest within the foreign culture by putting the heart forward first.

Over the past 800 years, Manding jaliya has maintained particular practices that serve to sustain Manding values of strength and self-respect in individuals in a way that requires the community's participation and serves the greater common good within their society. Now they have encountered American society, which tends to privilege individualism over the community, causing global problems that have extended far beyond American national borders. So far, the jalis show no signs of compromising their ideals or culture; rather it seems as though they have begun to work their community-building nyama on us, beginning with the small circles of musicians and scholars who choose to become involved in their social network.

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