

**The Search for Authenticité in a Global Age:
Artists and Arts Policy in Francophone West Africa
Graeme Counsel
University of Melbourne**

**African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific Annual Conference
Australian National University, February 2008**

Authenticité was a cultural movement which gained wide currency in Africa during the post-independence period of the 1960s and 1970s. It rejected what it regarded as European and foreign influences on contemporary African societies and instead promoted a “return to the past”, to the values and customs found in pre-colonial “authentic” African cultures. In this regard *authenticité* bore the hallmarks of *négritude*, that other major African cultural movement of the 20th century, which pre-dated *authenticité* by a generation. By the 1960s, however, and the arrival of independence, *négritude* had lost much of its impetus. Its critics argued that it presented an idealised view of pre-colonial Africa that was inherently racist, and that it failed to adequately address contemporary political and social issues (Sindima: 1995, pp. 76-80). *Authenticité* was presented as both a response to and negation of *négritude*, and its proponents, such as the presidents Sékou Touré, Mobuto Sese Seko, Modibo Keita, and Julius Nyerere, introduced radical cultural policy platforms which promoted the movement's aims. *Authenticité* became the accepted doctrine of Guinea, Zaire, Mali, Gabon, Togo and the Central African Republic. This paper will focus on the nations of Guinea and Mali, for it was here that *authenticité* had its greatest effect on public policy, particularly with regards to cultural policy.

Unlike British colonial policy, which was applied with a recognition of and deference to cultural differences, for example by providing educational instruction in local languages, French colonial policy made few allowances for local customs and practices (Migge and Léglise, 2007). It was a policy applied rigidly, for managing language and culture was one of the most effective and least costly means of maintaining rule and of extending and perpetuating domination well beyond the colonial era (Mohiddin 1977: 59-60).

In 1958 Guinea was the first of France's West African colonies to become independent. Sékou Touré was elected President, and he presided over a nation whose education and health system had been severely neglected. President Touré sought to rebuild his nation, and a prime objective in the early years of his presidency was the restoration and reassertion of Guinean culture. Cultural policy became a major policy platform, and policies were developed which were intended to engender a new sense of national identity and which would help forge the concept of nationhood. Guinea adopted *authenticité* as its official cultural policy. The president believed that “each time we adopt a solution authentically African in its nature and its design, we will solve our problems easily” (cited in Adamolekun 1976: 365), and his political party, the PDG, pursued *authenticité* via a revival of the popular art forms (Rivière 1977: 91). *Authenticité* was used as a policy for the cultural decolonization of Guinea, led by a President who claimed that

“culture is a better means of domination than the gun” (Touré, cited in Oyler 2001, p. 585).

In early 1959 President Touré set about enacting Guinea’s cultural policy. One of his first acts was to establish a national orchestra, stating that “our music should rise up from a world which once degraded it through the practice of colonial domination and assert the full rights of the people” (Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, 1979, p. 83). Sékou Touré banned all foreign music from the radio and disbanded all dance orchestras in the country (Counsel 2004). New orchestras and arts troupes were created in each of Guinea’s 34 administrative regions. The musicians of these regional orchestras were trained by the national orchestras and were instructed by the government to create new songs and musical styles befitting their local regions and relevant to the new political and social era. Musicians were actively encouraged by the government to “exploit the national folklore through a mastery of African instruments intended for the rehabilitation of African culture; to take part in the foundation of a mass civilization; and to promote and affirm the African artistic personality” (Dukuré 1983, p. 54). This mass approach to culture saw more than 40 regional and national arts troupes recruit new members from virtually every village in Guinea. According to the government, these troupes were “beyond all linguistic, ethnic or racial barriers, [and] constitute in their unity the image of the Guinean nation” (Dukuré 1983, p. 26). Sékou Touré established annual arts competitions, a national recording label called Syliphone which released over 700 songs, and Guinean musical groups toured Africa and the world. Artists were encouraged to look at the past for inspiration, to utilise traditional instruments and melodies alongside of modern instruments, and to incorporate and rehabilitate historical figures in their song themes.

Authenticité, Guinean style, had caught Africa’s imagination: “[all of] these successes were possible thanks to the application of the mass policy which liberated the creative capacities of the People and supported the return to African sources, the revalorization of traditional musical instruments, the rehabilitation of [Guinean] songs, and the setting-up of instrumental ensembles and modern orchestras which drew their repertoire from the content of popular culture” (Dukuré 1983, pp. 13-14). Guinea’s musicians and artists pioneered the *authenticité* movement, which spread to neighbouring Mali. In seeking to address appropriate strategies for his own country Keita looked to the successful policies that Touré had introduced. Regional and national orchestras and troupes were formed, and arts festivals organised.

The Malian government, like Guinea’s, exercised a rigid control over the arts. The role of the Arts Ministry in Mali is witnessed through a quote from the former Assistant to the High Commissioner: “Art which does not serve the people must be rejected. Art must serve the cause of the people, to help it to become aware, to emerge from its social, economic and political constraints. There is no neutral art. Art for art's sake does not exist” (Bengoro Coulibaly, cited in Touré 1966, p. 66, translation by Counsel). Government propaganda portrayed Mali’s musicians as “militant young Africans”, who had “sworn to serve their country by contributing with all their genius to the protection and revalorization of Malian musical art” and who had “suffered from the constriction inflicted on [them] by the dark night of colonialism” (Malian Ministry of Information, c.1971).

The *authenticité* movement in Guinea and Mali, as elsewhere, sought to instil a sense of national identity through the reinvigoration of traditional cultures. This poses a question, however, for which traditional cultures were to be the basis for the *authenticité*

movement? Moreover, if artists were to look at the past for inspiration, which past or pasts were to be appropriated? In Guinea, the government initially encouraged, broadcast and recorded groups from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds, in keeping with the basic socialist philosophy of mass representation. As the 1960s progressed, however, Sékou Touré's leadership was challenged by coups and internal dissent, and there was a marked shift in the ideological basis of *authenticité*. As Sékou Touré grew increasingly despotic and his government overtly totalitarian, rather than a mass approach to culture there was a narrowing of focus so that one culture, one history, and one voice came to represent Guinea. This voice was filtered through the *griots*.

Griots are the professional musicians of the Mandé culture and they inhabit large areas of West Africa. Griots trace their roots to the founding of the empire of Mali in the 13th century CE, and from that era to the present day they have fulfilled a pivotal role in their societies. Griots act as genealogists, and as the master of ceremonies at births, deaths, and weddings (Hale 1998). As oral historians, griots retain an extensive repertoire of epic narratives, which are songs which detail the exploits of famous individuals and tell of significant historical events. Oral methods of retention, such as story-telling and songs, have been the primary method by which West African histories have been passed down through generations, from griot to griot. The griot's knowledge of history is recognized by their widely-held description as "living libraries". Prior to the colonial era griots held positions in the royal courts, where they performed as court musicians, translators, and emissaries. Under colonialism their role was marginalised, as traditional rulers were deposed and replaced with colonial appointees.

In the search for an authentic voice to represent their nations, the leaders of both Guinea and Mali turned to the griots. In Guinea the vast majority of the personnel of the national orchestras, national ballet, and national traditional ensembles were griots. As both President Touré and Keita were from the same ethnic group as the griots, the Mandé, this is perhaps not surprising, however when one considers that the stated intention of their nation's cultural policies was to present multi-ethnic groups who "constitute in their unity the image of the nation" then a significant inconsistency is apparent. *Authenticité* had become compromised, for where the intention was to create a new national identity based upon the artistic troupes who reflected diverse ethnicities, in actuality the artistic troupes were being used to present to the population a Mandé aesthetic in the guise of nationalism. The great bulk of the personnel of the orchestras, for example, were griots, who modernised their songs and epic narratives to create new styles of music.

The griots' unique role as historians and the former voice of kings offered opportunities for exploitation by Sékou Touré and the PDG. The President had campaigned on his purported lineage to Almami Samory Touré, a Guinean national hero who fought the French in the 19th century, claiming that he was his grandson. The lineage has been a matter of dispute (Morgenthau 1964: 83), though this did not prevent the griot-dominated orchestras from proclaiming him a true heir. In song Guinean orchestras also sang praises to the President: "Sékou Touré you have the confidence of all the people... thank you for what you did and continue to do for us" (Keletigui et ses Tambourinis, "Mandjou", c. 1972) and praised his political party, the PDG. Guinea's orchestras also advocated government campaigns and policies (Horoya Band National, 'Alphabetisation', 1971). Many of these musicians depended on a government wage for their livelihood, as members of the national

orchestras were employed as civil servants. In the advancement of *authenticité* griots had become, in effect, the voice of the state. This situation was also witnessed in Mali, where via references in songs griots compared President Keita's lineage to Soundiata Keita, the legendary founder of the Malian empire. Thus, the leaders of the modern republics of Guinea and Mali were presented as heirs to heroic and noble figures, and the artistry of the griots presented as that which personified the indigenous arts.

Though Guinea boasted a regional orchestra in each of its 34 regions, a review of the catalogue of recordings by the state-controlled Syliphone label reveals a heavy bias towards Mandé groups. The Fulbé are Guinea's largest ethnic group, yet only one long play record from a total of 78 LPs was released by a Fulbé band (Télé Jazz de Télé-mélé, *La fête au Foutah*, 1980). Considered as opponents to the PDG, such was the persecution of the Fulbé and that over 1,000,000 people fled the country in order to escape both political and ethnic repression. The griots sang nothing of this, nor of the mass arrests and torture, the collapse of the economy, or the lack of democracy. *Authenticité* had become a vehicle with which to culturally and ethnically cleanse the nation, yet this was lost on the President who maintained his pro-multicultural values: "the best form of struggle against ethnic exclusiveness should not consist of a pure and simple denial of ethnic groups or even of some kind of repression. [It] should consist of a consciousness about the conditions for the survival and full growth of each ethnic group through a greater development, strengthening and full growth of the whole national community" (Sékou Touré, cited in Adamolekun 1976, p. 33). Yet this was hypocrisy, for while upholding a struggle against ethnic exclusiveness Touré's policies were actively promoting it. Syliphone, the national recording label, under-represented Fulbé culture while presenting "national" and "authentic" notions of Guinean culture that were viewed through a Mandé cultural prism.

Authenticité became embedded in government policy in Guinea with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in May 1968. A few months later Mali also launched a cultural revolution. In Mali, art and culture was now under the strict control of the government. President Keita announced that his government's role was to "uphold culture, for culture is the alpha and omega of all policy... We openly affirm that we are party men and we will resolutely take part in every domain of life, even art. We reject art in itself – [we reject] art for art's sake" (Keita, cited in Cutter 1968, p. 75). The Malian cultural revolution, however, did not reach its full potential, for in November 1968 a military coup ousted Modibo Keita, with Colonel Moussa Traoré installed as President. Traoré dissolved all of the national arts troupes and suspended the arts festivals. Griots, however, continued to be favoured by his regime, for many had established patronage ties to high-ranking members of the military. There are many recorded examples from the 1970s of praise songs to the military (e.g. Rail Band du Mali, "Armée Malienne", 1976) with the griot singers comparing generals and party leaders to illustrious warriors of the past. In doing so the griots insinuated that "the relationship between politics past and present had remained unabated by colonial influence" (Schulz, 2007, p. 194), and here *authenticité* had again been appropriated by the dominant political powers.

In the 1970s the orchestral music of Guinea and Mali reached its zenith. Orchestras from both nations toured widely, taking the message of *authenticité* to Africa and beyond. Many of the orchestras featured griots as singers, song writers, or lead instrumentalists, and their commercial recordings found success on the international market. The 1970s also saw

the increasing militarisation of the governments of Mali and Guinea, as the regimes grew increasingly isolated and autocratic. Guinea's notorious Camp Boiro prison housed numerous political prisoners, as the nation closed its borders, banned all private trade, and slid into economic malaise. In Mali, demonstrations for democracy saw soldiers fire into crowds, killing over 100 people. Yet, in both nations the state sponsored orchestras continued their pro-government stance through songs which painted a far rosier picture of daily life.

By the 1980s West African music had become popular with an international audience, thanks largely to the tours and recordings of the orchestras. President Touré died in 1984. His successor, Lansana Conté, did his best to bury Touré's cultural legacy. All funding to the arts ceased, the orchestras disbanded, venues closed, and Syliphone stopped making records. The recording industry in Guinea suffered such a blow that it never fully recovered, and many of its orchestras disbanded through lack of government sponsorship. Public taste had also shifted, as audiences had grown tired of listening to musicians whom they considered tainted by the former regime.

In Mali, too, the era of the orchestras was waning, and prominent griots were criticised for their alignment with politicians and the military (Diawara 1997, 46). Having dominated the national culture for a generation, in the late 1980s the griots' supremacy was being challenged by musicians who bore no allegiances to royal lineages, rich patrons, or politicians. These musicians performed a style of music known as *wassoulou*. Ethnically distinct from the griots, their new style of music "rejected the wooden language of the griots and their eternal praise for a corrupted elite. The texts of the wassoulou music are closer to the people... to the earth, and the shanty town" (anon. 'Kamale ngonni', n.d.). Among Malians, wassoulou singers are regarded as being politically neutral, and the singers clearly demarcate their differences with the griots. When Nahawa Doumbia, a famous wassoulou singer, was asked "Can one regard you as a modern griot", she responded: "No, I am not a griot. The griots have through their songs and their music a function: they must sing the praises of the leaders. Me I sing what I want, I am not an instrument of social policy (Doumbia, cited in Cadasse 2000, translation by Counsel). This attitude was reinforced by other musicians in Mali, whose songs included lyrics such as "I need freedom of speech. I'll say what I like, I'll praise or slander whom I please" (Super Biton National de Ségou, 'Yere jabo', 1977, annotations). Stylistically, wassoulou music incorporated the concepts of *authenticité*. It used traditional musical instruments alongside of modern electric instruments, such as the guitar or synthesiser, to create new musical styles. Its lyrical content, too, borrowed from tradition to assert the positive values of the past and use these for the edification of their communities and culture.

In 1991 Mali's President Moussa Traoré was ousted in a coup, and in 1992 Alpha Konaré was elected as President. A former Education minister and Minister of Youth, Sports, Arts, and Culture, Konaré was a published author on cultural policy, and he focused on re-establishing an appropriate policy for Mali. He rejuvenated the arts festivals and regional arts troupes, and allocated greater funds to the performing arts. President Konaré recognised President Modibo Keita's role as a positive and pioneering force in the revitalisation of Malian culture, and in Guinea, Sékou Touré and his legacy were also being rehabilitated. In 2003 President Conté held a *soirée* for the former President's wife, and musicians from the Touré era performed homages to Guinea's independence leader.

Guinea's government has also backed arts programs such as the “Guinea Heritage, Culture and Tourism Festivals”, and a few of the original orchestras have re-grouped and now tour the world.

Since the 1990s West African music has become one of the most popular styles of African music among international audiences. The music industry is big business in West Africa, and the pressures of globalisation on the industry have impacted in a number of ways. Not all governments have been as proactive as Mali's and Guinea's. In Senegal, musicians' experiments with rap and traditional music have been warmly received by audiences and critics, yet have been criticised by the government. The pervasive influence of rap and other American musical styles on the youth was viewed as a negative influence, with the government responding by ordering that 40% of all music on the radio be of French origin (Snipe 1998: 104). This policy harked back to the Senghor era, when French cultural influence was upheld and encouraged, a position which was in stark contrast to that of Guinea and Mali. In The Gambia one hears very little local music on the radio stations. For that matter, one hears very little African music at all. Rather, the airwaves are saturated with songs from the USA, which feature heavily-accented American announcers between the songs. The Gambia's response to the forces of globalisation indicate a lack of direction and a weakening of cultural policy, which has struggled to be implemented.

Throughout the region however, globalisation has impacted most heavily on the griots. The very word "griot" has been appropriated by the international media, with the term being incorrectly applied to all manner of traditional West African singers. Its pervasiveness underscores the effectiveness of the *authenticité* campaign led by Sékou Touré, which presented orchestras of griots as emblems of his nation's music, and promoted griot instruments, such as the 21 string kora, as icons of national tradition. The term “griot” has become intertwined with a romanticised concept of “story teller”, especially among the African diaspora. Examples are numerous. Among artworks, for example, we find a painting called “The Griot”, which is described as a “weaving of tales” of “ancestors and ghosts” (<http://www.internetartfair.com/chambliss/griot.html>). In literature, we find the text “Griot”, which is an anthology of British multicultural prose with no direct connection to the West African griots and their artistry (<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk>). The American politician Newt Gingrich has been described as a griot (Hale 1998: 323), as have playwrights, actors, and dancers. These examples show that contemporary concepts of what constitutes a griot are unravelling, and within this amorphous context the rising generation of griots in West Africa seek to define themselves. Their efforts and endeavours emerge under a media gaze that has never been more intense, and if their tradition is to survive, the challenges which they face need to be addressed by cultural policies which would provide them with opportunities and purpose.

Though the era when *authenticité* was the official policy has passed, West Africa's artists still benefit from it. Musical styles which emanate from the local traditions remain very popular. Though West African musicians operate in a global economy, the success of artists such as the wassoulou musicians reaffirms that their nation's cultural traditions offer a wealth of material. It also reaffirms that *authenticité* achieved its purpose to “rehabilitate” the arts and culture after a lengthy period of colonial rule. The successes of contemporary artists, such as Rokia Traoré and Neba Solo, who bring to new global audiences West Africa's ancient musical traditions, underscores the achievements and influence of the

authenticité movement.

References cited

Ladipo Adamolekun, *Sékou Touré's Guinea* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1976).

Anon., 'Kamale ngoni', *Indigo biography* (2003) <http://www.label-bleu.com/artist.php?lng=e&artist_id=22> [accessed July 4 2007].

David Cadasse, 'Rencontre avec une chanteuse intègre: la Malienne Nahawa Doumbia', *Afrik.com* (2000) <<http://www.afrik.com/article245.html>> [accessed July 4 2007].

Graeme Counsel, 'Popular music and politics in Sékou Touré's Guinea', *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 26.1 (2004), pp. 26-42.

Charles H. Cutter, 'The politics of music in Mali', *African Arts*, 1.3 (1968), pp. 38-39, 74-77.

Manthia Diawara, 'Mande oral popular culture revisited by the electronic media', in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, Karin Barber, ed. (USA: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Wolibo Dukuré, *La festival culturel national de la République Populaire Revolutionnaire de Guinée* (Guinea: Ministère de la Jeunesse des Sports et Arts Populaire, 1983).

Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

Horoya Band National, 'Alphabetisation', *Trio federal du pointe* (Syliphone, SLP 25, 1971).

Keletigui et ses Tambourinis, 'Mandjou', *Guinée an X. Orchestres Nationaux. Grand tierce musical* (Syliphone, SLP 8, c.1972).

Malian Ministry of Information, annotations to *Orchestre Régional de Ségou* (Bärenreiter-Musicaphon, BM 30 L 2601, c. 1971).

Bettina Migge and Isabelle Léglise, 'Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities', in *Language and Communication: Diversity and Change*, Marlis Hellinger and Anne Pauwels (eds.), (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007).

Ahmed Mohiddin, *African socialism in two countries* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

Ruth Schachter Morgenthau, *Political parties in French-speaking west Africa* (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1964).

Dianne White Oyler, 'A Cultural Revolution in Africa: Literacy in the Republic of Guinea since Independence', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34. 3 (2001), pp. 585-600.

Rail Band du Mali, *Melodias* (Kouma, KLP 1043, 1976).

Claude Rivière, *Guinea. The Mobilization of a People*, trans. by Virginia Thompson & Richard Adloff (London: Cornell University Press, 1977).

Dorothea Schulz, 'From a glorious past to the lands of origin: Media consumption and changing narratives of cultural belongings in Mali', in *Reclaiming heritage: Alternative imaginaries of memory in West Africa*, Ferdinand de Jong and Michael Rowlands (eds.), (USA: Left Coast Press, 2007).

Harvey J. Sindima, *Africa's agenda: The legacy of liberalism and colonialism in the crisis of African values* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995).

Le Super Biton National de Ségou (Mali Kunkan, KO 770413, 1977).

Télé Jazz de Téléélé, *La fête au Foutah* (Syliphone, SLP 74, 1980).

Younoussa Touré, *La biennale artistique et culturelle du Mali (1962-1998): Socio-anthropologie d'une action de politique culturelle Africaine* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1996).