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**Music for a coup: “Armée Guinéenne.”**  
**An overview of Guinea’s recent political turmoil**

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**Abstract**

Since independence in 1958 Guinea has been beset by autocratic and repressive regimes. In 2008 the military junta led by Capt. Moussa “Dadis” Camara promised free and fair elections, yet succeeded only in repressing democratic reforms amidst growing corruption within the military. The campaign to promote Dadis as a Presidential candidate was accompanied by the popular song “Armée Guinéenne,” which praised the army as the defenders of the nation. The events of September 28 2009, however, where unarmed protestors were massacred by Guinea’s defence forces, proved the falsity of this claim. This article examines the interplay between music and politics in Guinea, a relationship which has its origins in the cultural policies of the independence era. As Guinea enters a new phase, with the election of its first civilian government, this article also provides background to the current political situation.

**Introduction**

Guinea has long been a centre of musical excellence. In upper Guinea, the music of the *griots* has been passed down from one generation to another since the founding of the Empire of Mali in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. *Griots* are hereditary musicians, and it is their role to maintain the extensive repertoire of oral narratives which describe the exploits of the region’s famous and brave citizens. Guineans are well-versed in their nation’s history, and a common ancestry from the ancient Empire of Mali is a source of great pride. That the stories and tales associated with these histories are usually sung and performed with musical instruments makes for a particularly rich musical culture, one which Guinean leaders have often appropriated.

In the late 1960s, at the height of Guinea’s Cultural Revolution, the nation’s famous orchestra Bembeya Jazz National recorded the song “Armée Guinéenne” as the A side to their second single on the Syliphone recording label. Based upon a traditional *griot* song called “Douga,” a song reserved for warriors, the orchestra modernised the composition by featuring brass sections and electric guitars in their interpretation. The traditional lyrics were also changed, and they now praised the Guinean Army as defenders of the nation and protectors of the population. The

song was a great success for the group and has since become recognised as one of the classic popular songs of Africa's independence era,<sup>1</sup> appearing on numerous compact disc volumes.<sup>2</sup>

What was once a dance-floor classic, however, has in recent years assumed a darker tone. On December 23 2008 Guineans awoke to the news of the death of their President of 25 years, Col. Lansana Conté. The President's death was not unexpected – ill health had prevented him from making public appearances for many years and it was believed he was much older than his official age of 74. In the hours after his death, as uncertainty grew as to the shape and form of the new government, the public's worst fears were realised when the national broadcaster, Radio Télévision Guinée (RTG), began to play Bembeya Jazz National's version of "Armée Guinéenne" continuously on the radio. When hearing the song played in such a manner parents throughout the capital quickly phoned their children to bring them home: they knew something dire had occurred. Their fears were realised when a military coup was announced.

This article examines the history of the song "Armée Guinéenne" and its journey from folklore to pro-independence symbol to anthem of a military state. It will reveal not only the successes and failures of cultural policy initiatives in Guinea, but also of the important role of music in West African politics. The military junta led by Capt. Moussa "Dadis" Camara used "Armée Guinéenne" as a theme for their political ambitions, and this paper will explain this context in relation to the atrocities perpetrated by the military in 2009 – actions which drew charges of Crimes Against Humanity against the government amidst the distinct possibility of civil war. In 2008 and 2009 I was in Guinea undertaking archival research funded by Major Project Awards through the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme,<sup>3</sup> and this article is based upon my research and personal experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010 the song was featured on an 18 CD volume of music celebrating 50 years of African Independence. See "1960-2010. Africa. 50 years of music," *Sterns / Discograph / Syllart*. 3218642.

<sup>2</sup> A complete discography of Bembeya Jazz National is maintained by the author as an internet resource, Graeme Counsel, (compiler), *Radio Africa - Bembeya Jazz National discography*, <http://www.radioafrica.com.au/Discographies/Bembeya.html> (accessed 12 September 2010).

<sup>3</sup> My archival partners in Guinea were the Bibliothèque Nationale de Guinée and Radiodiffusion Télévision de Guinée. I published an account of the projects as Graeme Counsel, "Digitising and archiving Syliphone recordings in Guinea," *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:1 (2009a): 144-150.

## Historical Background

Democracy has been a long time coming to Guinea. On September 28 1958 Guineans voted overwhelmingly “Non” to an offer from President Charles de Gaulle for autonomy within a West African federation of French states. They instead chose total independence, becoming the first Francophone nation in Africa to do so. Sékou Touré, the Mayor of Conakry and leader of the Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG), was elected as President and the Guinean nation was born on October 2 1958. During the era of President Sékou Touré (1958-1984) the status of art and culture was elevated to the forefront of government policy. In order to rid his nation of the colonialist yoke Touré adopted as a course of action the policy of *authenticité*, a cultural philosophy which advocated a return to the values found in ‘authentic’ African traditions. Under Sékou Touré, cultural practices in Guinea were tightly controlled and artists were directed to “return to the source”<sup>4</sup> for artistic inspiration and to reject the cultural influences of the West. *Authenticité* became the official cultural policy for the Cultural Revolution launched in Guinea in 1968. It was deemed the philosophy appropriate to the new era of independence, and earlier movements, such as *Négritude*, its predecessor, were ridiculed as both passé and pro-West by critics such as Sékou Touré.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, where *Négritude* was concerned with “a re-creation and symbiosis with other cultures,”<sup>6</sup> *authenticité* rejected such overtures. *Authenticité*, as practised in Guinea, strongly encouraged African artists to seek inspiration from indigenous cultural practices alone, for Sékou Touré believed that “each time we adopt a solution authentically African in its nature and its design we will solve our problems easily.”<sup>7</sup>

President Touré commenced his transformation of Guinean culture decisively, by banning all foreign music on the radio and by disbanding all dance orchestras throughout the country. Touré considered these jazz-

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<sup>4</sup> Graeme Counsel, *Mande Music and Cultural Policies in West Africa: Griots and Government Policy Since Independence*, (Germany: VDM, 2009b) 9; See also Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973); Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, (USA: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> “Négritude is a product of history, a product of white people who practised systems of domination, exploitation, oppression, colonialism, and imperialism,” Touré, cited in Lansiné Kaba, “The cultural revolution, artistic creativity, and freedom of expression in Guinea,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14:2 (1976): 209.

<sup>6</sup> Léopold Senghor, cited in Stephen H. Grant, “Léopold Sédar Senghor, former president of Senegal,” *Africa Report*, 28:6 (1983): 64.

<sup>7</sup> Lapido Adamolekun, *Sékou Touré’s Guinea: An experiment in nation building* (USA: Methuen, 1976), 365.

style musical groups to be mere imitators of French culture, for their repertoires featured no songs sung in local Guinean languages nor were any indigenous musical instruments or melodies presented. “Culture is a better means of domination than the gun,”<sup>8</sup> stated Touré, and he replaced the dance orchestras with a network of new bands which were established in all of Guinea’s *préfectures* and towns. During Guinea’s 1<sup>st</sup> republic, over 60 dance orchestras were created, all of whom were fully supported by the state with all musical instruments paid for. Many of these bands formed part of regional artistic troupes which contained dance companies, theatrical groups, and traditional instrumental ensembles. In keeping with the policy of *authenticité* each troupe was instructed to seek their inspiration from the traditional cultures of their region. As the troupes evolved and became skilled, they were sent on tours throughout Africa and the Eastern Bloc where they promoted the concept of *authenticité*. Zaïre, Chad, Mali, and Togo adopted *authenticité* as their national cultural policy, and in order to develop their culture in the post-colonial era many other African nations embraced the basic principles of the movement.

By the early 1960s the PDG dominated Guinean politics to the extent that the nation had evolved into a single-party state. The era of totalitarian rule had commenced, an era which proclaimed the “cultural transformation of the social background”<sup>9</sup> in order to prepare for the creation of the “new man.”<sup>10</sup> The government had expanded its regional artistic troupes through the creation of National orchestras and performance groups. These “national” groups represented the apex of *authenticité*, and were heralded as being “beyond all linguistic, ethnic or racial barriers.”<sup>11</sup> They were epitomised as the “image of the Guinean nation.”<sup>12</sup> Such troupes, led by Les Ballet Africains and Bembeya Jazz National, toured the world and presented the ideals of Guinean life to an admiring and generally uncritical audience. The truth of the matter, however, was quite a different story.

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<sup>8</sup> Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, “Cultural policy in the Revolutionary People’s Republic of Guinea,” *Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies, Volume 51* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Wolibo Dukuré, *La festival culturel national de la République Populaire Revolutionnaire de Guinée* (Guinea: Ministère de la Jeunesse des Sports et Arts Populaire, 1983), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Dukuré, 54.

Though the PDG could boast some 26,000 party cells throughout the country, rumours of coups, fifth columnists, and plots beset the administration from the outset. The government reacted by curtailing civil liberties and democratic processes. The Fula, Guinea's largest ethnic group comprising some 40% of the population,<sup>13</sup> were targeted by Touré, who had earlier fought off several Fula competitors during his run for the Presidency. Challenges to Touré's rule were not tolerated, and attempts to form a second political party in 1965 led to the arrest of Diawadou Barry, the principal Fula leader, who was sentenced to death on treason and conspiracy charges. The Fula were seen as the enemies of the state, and the PDG purged the government's ranks. Among its victims was the first Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity, Teli Diallo, who died in Camp Boiro prison, a victim of the infamous *diète noire*.<sup>14</sup>

By the 1970s the situation for the Fula, and for any of those deemed opponents to the PDG, had become so dire that 25% of Guinea's population, a figure representing some 2,000,000 people, were fleeing the country in order to escape political and ethnic repression.<sup>15</sup> After an attempt on the President's life in 1976, Touré reportedly stated: "We will annihilate them [the Fula] immediately, not by race war, but by radical revolutionary war."<sup>16</sup>

In this anti-Fula context the song "Armée Guinéenne" is an example of the failure of the *authenticité* programme. Through the Syliphone recording label, 728 songs were released on vinyl records, yet a survey of the catalogue reveals a marked disproportion in representations of Guinea's ethnic groups. Though the Fula comprised 40% of the population only 23 songs of 728 were sung in Fulani – just over 3%. Of the Fula orchestras, no long play recording was released by Syliphone until 1980, nearly 15 years after the state-run company began releasing vinyl discs. In the same period dozens of recordings by Malinké groups were released. My research at the Radio Télévision de Guinée (RTG)

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<sup>13</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Guinea : Overview 2007* <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,MRGI,,GIN,456d621e2,4954ce60c,0.html> (accessed September 2 2010).

<sup>14</sup> The "black diet" was a term given to the special treatment of political prisoners. It consisted of a "diet" of no food and no water.

<sup>15</sup> George Rubiik, "Social origins of the 1984 coup d'état in Guinea," *Utafiti*, 9:1 (1987): 93-118; Thomas O'Toole and Ibrahima Bah-Lalya, *Historical Dictionary of Guinea*, 3rd edition (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>16</sup> O'Toole and Bah-Lalya, 83.

sound archives in 2008-9 indicates that this policy of under-representation of Fulani culture was prevalent, and of the more than 3,000 songs which I archived less than 10% were of Fula origin. What becomes readily apparent, even through the scantest of surveys of the recorded music of the Sékou Touré era, is the dominance of Malinké music over all else.

President Touré was Malinké by birth, and from the outset of the *authenticité* cultural policy Malinké musicians – the *griots* – assumed important positions within the government hierarchy. Sidikiba Diabaté, a prominent griot, was appointed by Touré to gather the “traditional heritage”<sup>17</sup> from all corners of the nation in order to supply the National ensembles with a suitably representative repertoire. Diabaté toured widely and recorded a large selection of Guinean music, however this diversity was not fully reflected in the music of the National troupes. Rather, a Malinké aesthetic dominated the troupes, especially in terms of the instrumentation, with griot instruments such as the *kora* and *balafon* placed to the fore. The personnel of the troupes were also mainly comprised of *griot* artists. Guinea’s dance orchestras and national groups, who were purportedly beyond all linguistic, ethnic, or racial barriers, performed under the guise of nationalism yet were dominated by a Malinké cultural paradigm which permeated their performances. The cultural policy of *authenticité* had evolved in Guinea into a mechanism which rather than promoting ethnic diversity actively stymied it. This is particularly relevant to the Fula, who were marginalised both politically and culturally.

The song “Armée Guinéenne” is a case in point. Guinea’s *griots*, like their counterparts in Mali, Senegal, and elsewhere in West Africa, maintain an extensive repertoire of songs, including “Douga,” a composition which predates the colonial era. The song’s title translates as vulture, a bird synonymous with bravery, and “Douga” is performed in honour of the bravest citizens, usually soldiers. In the 1960s, in keeping with the *authenticité* policy, the song “Douga” was adapted and used as a template for a new composition, “Armée Guinéenne.” Many associate the song with Bembeya Jazz National’s version, who are widely acclaimed with its composition. What is perhaps less well known is that the group were not the first to record the song. In 2009, my research in the archives of Radio Télévision Guinée revealed a circa 1964 recording of “Armée Guinéenne” by l’Ensemble National de la Radio Télévision de Guinée. This original version of the song featured on two audio reels –

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<sup>17</sup> Almami Oumar Laho Diallo, Interview by Graeme Counsel, 23 August 2001.



one contained a selection of material performed by the Ensemble, which was undated, while the other reel was a compilation of material titled “Vieux airs chansons Guinéennes avec commentaire par Katy Emmanuel. 1958-1964.” From this second reel (RTG catalogue number 0345/F) it is apparent that the song was well-known by 1964, and was important enough at that time to be anthologised in a national radio broadcast. Its journey towards an anthem of the nation had begun.

### **Translation of “Armée Guinéenne” from Maninka to English**

Aaa, l’Armée Guinéenne

Ah, the Guinean Army

fabara makara ni keya tɛ kɔrɔbɔla.

the defence of the fatherland is fundamental.

Ooo, milisi Guinéenne

Oh, the Guinean Militia

fabara makara ni keya tɛ kɔrɔbɔla.

the defence of the fatherland is fundamental.

Bureau politique national ani gouvernement

The Bureau Politique Nationale, the government,

Lagine jamanadennu bæ ye dubala ayi ve.

all the children of the nation bless you.

L’armée nin tɛ mɔɔ kɛɛ k’ni telen nin.

This army does not fight against honest people.

L’armée nin tɛ mɔɔ kɛɛ jɔnmaya ma.

This army does not fight against weak nations.

Jɔnmaya kɛɛ ban man di

It is difficult to end to a fight

Nyɔgɔnyebalila kɛɛ ban man di.

where opponents do not see each other.

Gbangban, juulu gbangban, enemilu gbangban.

Nail, nail the bad people, nail the enemies.

Espionlu gbangban, n’i ma nyɛ i la hɔrɔya ko, enemilu gbangban.

Nail the spies, if you want really your independence, nail the enemies.

Juulu gbangban, enemilu gbangban.

Nail the bad people, nail the enemies.

Espionlu gbangban, n’i ma nyɛ i la hɔrɔya ko, enemilu gbangban.

Nail the spies, if you want really your independence, nail the

enemies.

Mɔɔ tɛ na annu janfa nin kɔɔ  
Nobody will betray us anymore

An na hɔrɔya nin kɔ, fɛw.  
after our independence, really.

Mɔɔ tɛ na annu janfa nin kɔ  
Nobody will betray us anymore

An na hɔrɔɔya nin kɔ, fɛw.  
after our independence, really.

Aaa, l'Armée Guinéenne  
Ah, the Guinean Army

fabara makara ni keya tɛ kɔrɔbɔla.  
the defence of the fatherland is fundamental.

Ooo, milisi Guinéenne  
Oh, the Guinean Militia

fabara makara ni keya tɛ kɔrɔbɔla.  
the defence of the fatherland is fundamental.<sup>18</sup>

Of interest in the song lyrics is the Maninka term “gbangban.” My initial request for assistance in translating this term drew several interpretations, varying from “to refuse,” “to fight,” and “to hang.” “A Maninka study guide for Guinea” states that “gbangban” is defined as meaning to nail or to fasten.<sup>19</sup> Suzuki<sup>20</sup> notes that the term is an onomatopoeia for the action of hammering a nail into an object, with the author noting that in Guinea’s early years of independence a person accused of espionage was publicly executed, with their bodies suspended from wooden posts by nails hammered into their hands. Dr. Sylla, the Director of Guinea’s National Library, added that the sense of the term in the song “is to nail to the pillories the enemies of the People.”<sup>21</sup> That the song alludes to this practice is perhaps best exemplified by President Sékou Touré himself,

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<sup>18</sup> The song has been anthologised on many collections, including Graeme Counsel (compiler) *Bembeya Jazz National. The Syliphone years. Hits and rare recordings* (Sterns, STCD 3029-30: 2007). It can also be heard at a number of web sites, including “Armée Guinéenne - Bembeya Jazz National 1968” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8crPUW-H5s> (accessed 12 September 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Shargi and Tony Gemignani, *A Maninka study guide for Guinea*, Private publication, no date.

<sup>20</sup> Hiroyuki Suzuki, “Creation d’une musique populaire dans le cadre de la Nation: le cas de la Guinée sous le régime de Sékou Touré,” *Cultures Sonores d’Afrique III* (2004): 70.

<sup>21</sup> Dr Baba Cheick Sylla, personal correspondence, 9 June 2010.

who, in his poem “Révolution et exigence,”<sup>22</sup> wrote –

Let us resolutely destroy  
Any betrayer of the Nation.  
Let us nail to the post  
The murderers of Boiro.<sup>23</sup>

The lyrics to “Armée Guinéenne” portray the army as a protector of the people and encourage vigilance against the enemies of the nation. The song, however, becomes much less heroic when seen in terms of advocating a military state which persecuted its own citizens due to their ethnicity. If, as Claude Riviere asserts, the persecution of the Fula by the Touré régime became a key factor in shaping their consciousness,<sup>24</sup> then “Armée Guinéenne” was a key symbol of their oppression. The song was played at military processions, was broadcast on the national radio (and the Voice of America), and came to enshrine all that the Guinean army represented.

The domination of Guinean politics by Sékou Touré and the PDG came to an abrupt end in 1984, when Touré died in the USA following minor heart surgery. As the PDG met to organise a successor, Col. Lansana Conté, a Susu, overthrew the government in a military coup. His break with the era of the PDG was decisive, and he freed political prisoners from jails while imprisoning and executing senior PDG officials. He was far from Guinea’s saviour, however, and indeed life in Guinea grew harder and corruption more entrenched. President Conté continued Touré’s practice of appointing members from his own ethnic group to government jobs and senior positions in the military, where Susu numbers tripled.<sup>25</sup> Guinea’s cultural policies were all but abandoned, and the dance orchestras and performance troupes were left to fend for

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<sup>22</sup> Ahmed Sékou Touré, *Poèmes militants*, 6th Edition, (Conakry: Bureau de presse de la présidence de la République, 1977). Some of the President’s poems were set to music with the verses sung by choirs. These songs were commercially released in the 1970s by Syliphone. For a discography see Graeme Counsel (compiler), *Radio Africa - Syliphone Discography*, <http://www.radioafrica.com.au/Discographies/Syliphone.html> (accessed 12 September 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Touré: 74. Translated by Dan Reboussin, “Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea (1922-1984),” 28 May 2004, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/cm/africana/sekou.htm> (accessed 2 September 2010). Mamadou Boiro was the Chief of Police in Guinea. He was murdered in 1969 by three senior military officers, who were to face treason charges.

<sup>24</sup> Riviere, cited in Lansiné Kaba, “Rhetoric and reality in Conakry,” *Africa Report*, 23:3 (1978): 43-47.

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Groelsema, “The dialectics of citizenship and ethnicity in Guinea,” *Africa Today*, 45:3/4 (1998): 417.

themselves. Conté was to rule Guinea for the next 25 years.

Guinea's new President was reluctant to hold federal elections, which were delayed until 1993. Amidst allegations of electoral fraud and flagrant irregularities, which included the disenfranchisement of all votes from two préfectures, Conté was declared victor in that year with 51.7% of the vote. For the elections of 1998 the opposition organised themselves into a bloc so as to end Conté's "ethnocentric"<sup>26</sup> regime, however the President was so confident of victory that no provision was made for a second round of voting. Conté attracted 56% of the vote. In 2001 the President held a referendum to extend his term from five years to seven, and he received 98.4% of votes in favour. The most recent elections, those of 2003, were a tragedy for democracy, boycotted by all but one opposing candidate. Conté won 96% of the vote.

The corruption displayed in Guinea's elections was a microcosm of a much larger problem. By 2006 corruption had become so endemic that Transparency International named Guinea as the fourth most corrupt nation in the world.<sup>27</sup> Guinea has more than half of the world's bauxite, is rich in gold, uranium and diamonds, has fertile soils and huge hydroelectric potential, yet in the decade of the 2000s the United Nations Human Development Report routinely placed the nation near the lowest ranking in the world.<sup>28</sup> In 2003 over 20 protestors were killed in riots over the cost of rice. In January 2007 a nationwide strike led to the deaths of over 90 people at a rally, many of whom were shot by the army on the streets of Conakry.<sup>29</sup> Guinea's corruption opened the door for Columbian drug cartels, and in 2008 over a ton of cocaine was being flown into the country every week, en route for Europe. On the street it sold for as little as \$2 a gram, a day's wage in Guinea. The drug trade involved many senior government officials, including all of the anti-drug squad, and the President's son, Ousmane Conté, who used the Presidential Guard to offload cocaine from the planes at Conakry's international airport. To ensure the backing of the military, Conté favoured powerful factions

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<sup>26</sup> Ali B. Dinar, "Guinea: Background brief on presidential elections 1998.12.08," 8 December 1998, [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Newsletters/irinw\\_120898.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Newsletters/irinw_120898.html) (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Transparency International, *CPI Table*, 2006, [http://www.transparency.org/news\\_room/in\\_focus/2007/cpi2007](http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2007/cpi2007) (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Reports*, 2010, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>29</sup> AllAfrica.com, "Guinea: Bloodbath in Conakry!" <http://allafrica.com/stories/200909300740.html>, (accessed September 2 2010).

within them, and all members of the armed forces were virtually above the law. So flagrant was their corruption that it was not uncommon to see ordinary soldiers driving luxury cars such as Mercedes Benz, Jaguar, or Range Rover, vehicles stratospherically out of reach of their official wages. Guinea's soldiers would make extra cash by nefarious means, including hiring their uniforms and guns to those who would then terrorise at will.

During the Conté years the cultural legacies of Sékou Touré were never reignited. State-funded cultural enterprises such as Syli-film and Syli-Art were dismantled, and Syli-phone, after releasing 728 songs, ceased production. The art of the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic was spurned, for Conté sought to break with the past, rather than re-live it through the policy of *authenticité*. Many of the orchestras of the Touré era disbanded due to lack of financial support, and only the National Orchestras, who had been given their own venues by the President Touré, continued to perform. Official concerts were uncommon, though in 1998 Bembeya Jazz National performed to mark the centenary of the arrest of Almamy Samory Touré, the famed resistance leader to French rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and purported grandfather of Sékou Touré. During Conté's reign, "Armée Guinéenne" was no longer a potent symbol of the struggle against imperialism, was no longer officially sanctioned, and fell into obscurity.

By late 2008 Conté's health was deteriorating. Guinea's press were reluctant to publish information on the topic, for fear of imprisonment, or worse, though it was widely known that the President had been ill for years. He had not be seen or heard in public for many months, and on October 2 2008 the President failed to attend the gala 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence celebrations, a very noticeable absence. Rumours began to circulate that his death was imminent. The tension in Conakry grew daily over the uncertainty of who would assume the Presidency following his death, and what the army, corrupt and factionalised, might do.

On the evening of 22 December 2008 President Conté died. His death was not announced until the following morning. Just six hours later "Armée Guinéenne" began playing continuously on the national radio,<sup>30</sup> as reports of a military coup were confirmed. Capt. Moussa "Dadis" Camara, an obscure and junior army officer, had declared himself

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<sup>30</sup> "Music for coups" is not a peculiar phenomenon to Guinea, as witnessed in neighbouring Mali, when Modibo Keita was deposed in 1968. Then, it was the music of Bazoumana Sissoko that was played to herald the change of leadership.

President in a bloodless coup, citing that taking power was necessary to ease Guinea's "deep despair."<sup>31</sup>

Initially, Dadis, as he is colloquially known, was embraced by the Guinean people. He represented a younger generation, and his promises to stamp out corruption, to return the country to civilian rule, and to not stand as a Presidential candidate were warmly received. He promised elections in 2 years, but then bowed to public pressure and declared elections would be held in December 2009. He retired legions of old generals, grilled senior government officials on live television as to their roles in corruption and the drug trade, and was affectionately known as "Obama junior."<sup>32</sup>

Things began to sour, however, as the President began to waver on his key commitment not to stand as a Presidential candidate. After months of refusing to rule out his candidacy, Dadis began a tour of Guinea and claimed that no-one could stop him from nominating as a candidate.<sup>33</sup> The National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD), the ruling military junta, began an advertising blitz preparing the nation for his election. Dadis was shown on television surrounded by cheering supporters, with the song "Armée Guinéenne" always accompanying his image, the campaign, and the national news. Sometimes it would just be the opening bars of the song, other times the complete four minute version. Though he refused to declare himself a candidate, his intentions were obvious to all. After 51 years of *faux* democracy, however, Guineans were ready to challenge the military, and a protest movement against Dadis' rule began.

Following the 2008 coup, Guinea's constitution was suspended and meetings of all political parties were banned. These and a series of other repressive measures did not deter Guinea's opposition parties uniting under the umbrella of the "Forces Vive." As a show of support they announced that a mass rally was to be held at Guinea's largest football

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<sup>31</sup> Alan Cowell, "Coups attempt in Guinea after strongman dies," *New York Times* on the web, 23 December 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/24/world/africa/24guinea.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/24/world/africa/24guinea.html?_r=1) (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Randy James, "Guinea's leader Moussa Dadis Camara," *Time Magazine* on the web, 8 October 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929113,00.html> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Alexis Arieff, "Guinea's 2008 military coup and relations with the United States," *webGuinée*, 2009, [http://www.webguinee.net/bibliotheque/droit\\_politique/crs-2009-report/military-coup-us-guinea-relations.html](http://www.webguinee.net/bibliotheque/droit_politique/crs-2009-report/military-coup-us-guinea-relations.html) (accessed 2 September 2010).

stadium on 28 September 2009. The CNDD had warned that the protest was illegal and air force jets roared over the capital in a display of power. Huge convoys of heavily armed vehicles now escorted the President wherever he went, and the Guinean army, filled with young officers and recruits loyal to Dadis, lived above the law in a manner that their predecessors could only envy.

Guinea's *Septembre 28* stadium is the largest in the country and on the day of the rally was filled to capacity with more than 25,000 people. Many were unable to enter the gates due to the large crowds. The stadium is named after Guinea's most auspicious date, 28 September 1958, the day that Guineans said "Non" to the offer of French autonomy and declared their country a republic. Before the day's end, however, 28 September would never be the same. Shortly after the rally had commenced<sup>34</sup> and opposition figures had addressed the crowd several hundred members of Guinea's military entered the stadium on foot and in vehicles. Using automatic fire, and their knives when they ran out of bullets, the military killed 157 unarmed civilians and injured over 2,000. According to Human Rights Watch, the military focused their aggression on the Fula, with eyewitness testimonies stating that members of the Presidential Guard told them that "we're going to finish all the Peuhl [Fulani]," and "we're going to kill all of you."<sup>35</sup> Many of the military personnel who attacked the rally belonged to the Presidential Guard, and eyewitness reports stated that Lt. Toumba Diakité, the commander of the Presidential Guard, along with several senior army officials, was present, coordinated and took part in the attacks. As news of the killings spread through Conakry, and then around the globe, people began to flee the country. It was clear that the military was out of control. All of the shops in the capital city closed, along with many embassies. In the following days the price of petrol quadrupled, gunfire rang out, and the running water stopped. Rumours circulated that the phones and internet were

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<sup>34</sup> I was not present at the rally itself. My description of the events which occurred are based upon the many published accounts from eye witnesses – accounts which helped inform subsequent international inquiries. For example, see Human Rights Watch, "Stop violent attacks on demonstrators," 29 September 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/29/guinea-stop-violent-attacks-demonstrators> (accessed 2 September 2010); and Amnesty International, "Guinea. Amnesty International Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review," May 2010 [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session8/GN/AI\\_UPR\\_GIN\\_S08\\_2010\\_AmnestyInternational.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session8/GN/AI_UPR_GIN_S08_2010_AmnestyInternational.pdf) (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Guinea: September 28 massacre was premeditated," 27 October 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/27/guinea-september-28-massacre-was-premeditated> (accessed 2 September 2010).

about to be cut. The road to Conakry's airport was said to be too dangerous to travel on, with reports of soldiers robbing foreigners amidst the cancellation of flights. I remember on the evening of 28 September listening to a BBC radio interview with ex-Prime Minister Sidya Touré, who was to address the rally that day. Recovering from a beating by soldiers, he now spoke in a whisper from a hospital toilet, where he was in hiding. In the following days lawlessness took hold of the capital: the Ambassador to Mali was attacked by Guinean soldiers who robbed him of his vehicle,<sup>36</sup> police stations were attacked by the public, the bodyguards of a government minister exchanged fire with soldiers, army Generals were assaulted by their own troops, and lootings and car-jackings by soldiers took place at random. Guinea was headed for anarchy, possibly civil war, or certainly a clash between factions of the military, some of whom were appalled by the events of 28 September. The Guinean government tried to deflect responsibility for the massacre and diminish the brutality, claiming that the soldiers were provoked and that only 57 civilians died – most of them by being trampled.<sup>37</sup> Dadis even attempted to cajole the international media by offering them bribes - "Whatever you want, at whatever time. On my tab, as chief of state."<sup>38</sup> He admitted, however, that the army was ill-disciplined and were beyond his control.<sup>39</sup> The African Union condemned the violence, as did the United Nations, who announced an International Commission of Inquiry.

In the weeks following the stadium massacre the situation in Guinea grew increasingly tense. President Camara continued to deflect responsibility, and no military personnel were arrested. The promotion of Dadis to Presidential candidate continued unabated, however, though it was plain that his career as a politician was finished. As the United Nations inquiry gathered momentum and its report<sup>40</sup> due, the Guinean government grew

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<sup>36</sup> This follows an earlier attack on the Ghanaian ambassador, who was robbed of his car and clothes by soldiers, and was left standing in the street in his underwear. See Magbana, "Sékouba Konaté, No. 2 in Guinean junta, returns to Conakry," *Guinea oye!*, 5 December 2009, <http://guineaoye.wordpress.com/2009/12/05/sekouba-konate-no-2-in-guinean-junta-returns-to-conakry/> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bloody Monday. The September 28 massacre and rapes by security forces in Guinea," 17 December 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87186/section/13> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Randy James.

<sup>39</sup> Saliou Samb, "Uncertainty prevails under increasingly isolated junta," *IPS News*, 8 October 2009, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=48773> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>40</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry mandated to establish the facts and circumstances of the events of 28*



all the more anxious as it became evident that Crimes Against Humanity charges would be laid by the UN Commission. In this climate of fear an assassination attempt was made on the President's life. Upon visiting an army barracks in downtown Conakry, Dadis was shot in the head by his *aide-de-camp* and commander of the Presidential Guard, Lt. Toumba Diakité. It was rumoured that Diakité was going to be named as the perpetrator responsible for the massacre, that he would be the scapegoat, and that Crimes Against Humanity charges would be levelled at him alone. Incredibly, Dadis survived the shooting, and Diakité escaped with a large group of loyal and fully-armed Presidential Guards. Dadis was flown to Morocco, where bullet fragments were removed from his brain. His recovery was far from certain, and his absence left Guinea on the precipice.

Into the vacuum stepped Vice-President Gen. Sékouba Konaté, the Minister of Defence. A comparatively moderate figure, Konaté was not present at the stadium protest and was thus seen to have less culpability for the massacre. He was the first of the military junta to acknowledge the tragedy of the events of 28 September and of the army's role.<sup>41</sup> He called for reconciliation, and for the elections, now months overdue, to be held as soon as possible. Dadis, however, sought to retain the leadership, and made a statement from his hospital bed that he wanted to return to Guinea to rule the country. The army was placed on red alert in his homeland region of N'zérékoré, where rioting had broken out, and there was widespread fear that the country would descend into civil war. On 12 January 2010 Dadis was ready to return and boarded a plane bound for Guinea. Yet in an extraordinary move his aircraft was flown only as far as Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. There, Dadis met with Konaté and Burkinabé President Blaise Compaoré, with the three agreeing that a transition to civilian rule would occur and that there would be no role for Dadis in a future Guinean government. This agreement was known as the "Ouagadougou Accord." Konaté established his credentials by quickly enacting its main objectives, including the creation of the National Transition Council, which was comprised of trade union members, civil leaders, and opposition spokesmen. Konaté was also unwavering in his commitment to the elections, and on 27 June 2010 Presidential elections were held – the first democratic ballot in Guinea

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*September 2009 in Guinea*, 18 December 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b4f49ea2.html> (accessed 2 September 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Newstime Africa, "Sékouba Konaté will now become Guinea's new Army chief," 4 July 2010, <http://www.newstimeafrica.com/archives/12987> (accessed 2 September 2010).

since independence in 1958. Former Prime Minister Cellou Diallo, a Fula, who was severely beaten by soldiers at the 28 September rally, received the majority of the vote with 40%, requiring a run-off second round of elections between himself and Alpha Condé, a veteran opposition leader, who came in second place. The run-off election has been postponed on several occasions, and is due to take place on 19 September 2010.

Throughout Guinea's history its army have often acted as the final arbiter in national politics. In this brutal theatre the military's acts of aggression have been played out to the accompaniment of "Armée Guinéenne." Through praising the Guinean army as the defenders of the nation, and by linking the contemporary regimes with the glories of the past, the song has been used to legitimise the actions of the military. In recent times "Armée Guinéenne" has become indelibly linked with the junta of President Dadis Camara, who appropriated the song and used it as the anthem for his political ambitions. As Guinea enters a new era of civilian rule, one where de-militarisation must occur to ensure stability and where re-structuring of the economy is a matter of urgency, it remains to be seen what role the song will play. The new Guinean leadership will have many pressing issues to address and obstacles to overcome, lest the strains of "Armée Guinéenne" once again saturate the airwaves.

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## MEMBER PROFILE

### Graeme Counsel - AFSAAP Treasurer

Graeme Counsel was born in Perth, Western Australia. After performing in local bands he moved to Victoria and graduated from Monash University in 1997 with a BA (Hons). He pursued his interests in ethnomusicology at the University of Melbourne, where he completed his MMus (2000) and a PhD in Cultural Studies (2007). Graeme's research interests focus on the relationships between African politics and the arts. His publications explore the ways in which cultural policies influence methods and forms of cultural expression, particularly music. He is an avid African record collector and jealously guards his collection of rare vinyl recordings, which, over the years, he has presented on African music programmes on Australian radio stations. Discographies of African music are far from complete, and Graeme's research has helped to recreate catalogues of early African recording labels. He maintains these at his Radio Africa web site (<http://www.radioafrica.com.au>), which also features rare videos of African music and other resources. He has travelled to West Africa on many occasions and received numerous awards and scholarships, including the Ernst Morawetz prize in Music, an Alma Hansen scholarship, and an Australian Postgraduate Award. He has also received two Major Research Project Awards through the British Library – funding which led to his recreation of the complete catalogue of the Syliphone recording label. He has conducted research at the national archives of Guinea, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia, and his archival projects have been exhibited at Guinea's national museum. In 2008 the Guinean government recognised his contribution to culture by awarding him a gold medal, the *Médaille de Palme Académique en Or*, and a *Diplôme d'Honneur*. An account of his latest archival research was published in the *Australasian Review of African Studies* 30:1 (2009): 144-150, and his other recent publications include “Archival and research resources in Conakry, Guinea”, *History in Africa* 36 (2009): 439- 445, and *Mande popular music and cultural policies in West Africa: Griots and government policy since independence* (Germany: VDM, 2009). He has also compiled and annotated four double-volume compact discs of Guinean music. He is currently the Treasurer of AFSAAP, and maintains the association's website.

