

**The music archives of Guinea. Nationalism and its representation
under Sékou Touré.**

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In 2008, 2009, and 2012-2013 I received major project funding through the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme to digitise and preserve the audio collection held at the Radio Télévision Guinée (RTG) offices in Boulbinet, Conakry. Due to the size of the collection, the 2008 project did not have sufficient time to complete the designated tasks. The 2009 project was cut short due to the deteriorating security situation following the "stadium massacre"¹ of September 28, with the project eventually concluding in late January 2013. A total 9,410 songs covering the period from 1960 to 2000 were digitised, preserved and archived.² The majority of the songs were recorded between 1967 and 1980, during the era of Guinea's 1st Republic led by President Sékou Touré.

The audio collection held at the RTG documents a remarkable history. Following independence from France in 1958 the Guinean government became actively engaged in cultural activities at the local, regional and national levels. In this early post-independence period Guinean orchestras still performed only foreign music, and President Touré criticised them for not playing the music of their own country. He issued decrees which banned all French music from Guinea's national radio transmissions and which disbanded all of the orchestras who were performing in Conakry's hotel and nightclub venues. Rather than playing and promoting foreign music and culture, the Guinean government encouraged the nation's musicians to embrace local musical and cultural traditions. Direct support was given to musicians when the government created orchestras (and theatrical troupes, ballet troupes, and traditional musical ensembles) in each of Guinea's 35 regions. Select musicians were appointed the task of forming the orchestras and selecting the personnel, and the new musicians of these state-sponsored orchestras were regarded as civil servants and paid a monthly wage. They also received training in musical performance, new musical instruments were purchased for them, and venues were constructed in each capital of the 35 regions for their public performances. In addition to the regional troupes and orchestras, national orchestras and ensembles were also created by the government, and these groups featured the nation's most talented performers.

The Guinean government's commitment to advancing and promoting culture was thus established from a very early period after independence. In the early 1960s the government formalised its methodology by embracing the cultural philosophy of *authenticité* as the basis of its official Cultural Policy. *Authenticité* has been defined as "a concept, an attitude, a behaviour which unearths the positive values of the past for the edification of a modern society".³ In accord, Sékou Touré and his government sought to restore authentic Guinean cultural values as the foundation from which the performances of

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/horror-of-guinea-stadium-massacre-that-killed-157-1795165.html>. Accessed November 25 2013.

² The collection is accessible at the British Library's Reading Room through the Sound and Moving Image Catalogue (<http://cadensa.bl.uk/cgi-bin/webcat>, accessed November 25 2013) and also at the offices of the Bibliothèque Nationale de Guinée in Sandervalia, Conakry.

³ Dukuré 1983: 26, translation by Counsel.

its troupes, ensembles and orchestras would be built upon. The centrepiece of this philosophy of cultural action were the national ensembles and orchestras, who the government described as “beyond all linguistic, ethnic or racial barriers, [and who] constitute in their unity the image of the Guinean nation.”⁴ Guinea’s national (and regional) musical troupes and orchestras toured extensively throughout Africa and also embarked on tours to Eastern Europe, Paris and New York. Les Ballets Africains are arguably the most well-known of these groups. But how representative were Guinea’s national troupes and orchestras? Did they “constitute the image of the Guinean nation” or mirror some other cultural paradigm?

President Sékou Touré ruled Guinea for a generation, from 1958 to 1984. For most of that period Guinea was a one party whose oppressive rule pervaded virtually all day to day activities. Privately owned media enterprises, newspapers and radio stations, for example, were banned. Private recording studios were also prohibited, and unless a musician was “part of the system”⁵ it was impossible for them to form a musical group. In effect, private groups were banned, and the music industry, as with all other industries, was under state control. The only recording studios were operated by Radio Télévision Guinée, thus the entire recording output of the Guinean nation under Sékou Touré (and a good deal of music recorded after his death) was held in the sound collection at the RTG. A survey and statistical analysis of the RTG’s recordings would be revealing.

The major language groups of Guinea are the Fulbé, the Malinké, and the Susu. The demographic statistics for the nation present some variance: Fulbé 40%, Malinké 26%, and Susu 11%;⁶ Fulbé 40%, Malinké 30%, Susu 20%;⁷ and Fulbé 38%, Malinké 26% and Susu 12%⁸; however all of the demographics agree that the Fulbé population is the majority ethnic group and the Malinké are the second largest. I thus commenced my analysis of the audio collection held at the RTG by determining the language sung or spoken in each of the 9,410 songs. The results revealed that 52% of the material was performed in Maninka (the language of the Malinké), 10% in Sosoxui (the language of the Susu), and 9% in Fulfuldé (the language of the Fulbé). These figures were in stark contrast to the demographic figures, and indicated a disproportionate balance towards Malinké and Susu songs at the expense of Fulbé recordings. A further analysis of Guinea’s audio archives was conducted, and on this occasion I focussed on the material released by the Syliphone recording label, a wholly state-owned enterprise which represented Guinea’s only commercial recording label operating Sékou Touré’s presidency.⁹ Here the results were in even greater contrast: 72% of the songs were sung in Malinké, 13% in Susu, and only 3% in Fulbé. Thus of the 750 songs recorded on Syliphone vinyl discs and released by the Guinean government to the African and global market only 23 were sung in Fulfuldé. This is a clear example of ethnocentrism, for Guinea’s musical catalogue openly promoted Malinké culture to the near exclusivity of other ethnic groups, especially the Fulbé. But why this prejudice, particularly when Sékou Touré was a self-proclaimed anti-racist: “We are revolutionary and absolutely anti-racist and we are not the Malinké, the Susu the does not exist, and the [Fulbé] does not exist. We are

⁴ Dukuré 1983: 26, translation by Counsel.

⁵ Interview with Almamy Oumar Laho Diallo, August 21 2001.

⁶ <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/guinea.htm>. Accessed November 25 2013.

⁷ <http://siakhenn.tripod.com/ethnic.html>. Accessed November 25 2013.

⁸ Sparks 2012: 617.

⁹ For further reading see Counsel 2009.

only Africans who are born in Guinea, on the ground in the Republic of Guinea”.¹⁰ Why, then, was Fulbé culture so repressed and under-represented?

In 1946 France amended its constitution to permit representatives from its African colonies to sit in the National Assembly. The requirement of elections for these National Assembly seats mobilised African political parties. In the post-war period in Guinea four organisations emerged who represented each of the nation’s four regions (the upper, middle, lower and forest regions). These ethnically based associations gave way in the early 1950s to two main political parties: the Bloc Africain de Guinée (BAG), led by Diawadou Barry, a Fulbé; and the Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG), led by Sékou Touré, a Malinké. The BAG’s constituency were based in middle Guinea in the region known as the Fouta Djallon, which is a centre for large Fulbé populations. The PDG had broader backing through its trade union base and its platform of embracing nationalism over ethnicity. Sékou Touré’s lineage from Almami Samori Touré, Guinea’s legendary anti-colonial resistance leader, also lent considerable weight to the PDG’s campaign, for it embedded the party in the historical resistance against colonial rule.

Following an overwhelming vote for full independence from France, the PDG quickly asserted itself to become Guinea’s sole political party. By the early 1960s, however, Guinea’s economy was in recession due to trade embargoes and poor management, and disenchantment with the party had grown. Support for Sékou Touré began to wane, and to consolidate his ethnic base he introduced the so-called “Malinkaization” of the PDG, whereby over half of the Politburo positions were given to Malinké representatives. The “Malinkaization” policy also extended to the public service, where a disparately high percentage of Malinké were employed in the administration (with the Fulbé holding just 11% of government positions¹¹) and the military was also purged. As the 1960s progressed numerous plots and coups were uncovered by the PDG. In 1968 the government launched a Cultural Revolution in order to re-define and re-assert its ideology. Guinea grew increasingly isolated, and the 1970 failed Portuguese-led invasion gave credence to the government’s 5th column and anti-imperialist rhetoric. The invasion was followed by a series of alleged plots culminating with the “permanent plot” and the “Fulbé plot”¹² of 1976. Of the latter, Sékou Touré did not refrain in his use of polemic rhetoric, labelling the Fulbé as treasonous and “the enemies of Socialism”.¹³ In order to purge the “plot” many Fulbé were imprisoned and executed, often without trial, with the victims including Diallo Telli, the first Secretary General of the OAU and Guinea’s Minister of Justice. Close to 25% of the population fled Guinea to escape persecution, many of whom were from the Fulbé ethnic group. Sékou Touré targeted the Fulbé, and laboured to portray them as inherently anti-Guinean, as selfish capitalists, and as arrogant intellectuals who were unwilling to integrate into a pluralistic society:

Indeed, take the list of those who have fled from Guinea. All the doctors, teachers or students, who after their studies in Europe refused to return. Are they 95% Fulbé! Yes or no?¹⁴

¹⁰ Touré 1976(a), translation by Counsel.

¹¹ Groelsema 1998: 416.

¹² More commonly known as the “Fula plot”. “Fula” is a diminutive of “Fulbé”.

¹³ Binns 1996: 5.

¹⁴ Touré 1976(a), translation by Counsel.

We say that all regions of Middle Guinea must now live in the atmosphere of the People's Democratic Revolution. In addition to the strength of our arguments, which are shared with the honest intellectual activists of Middle Guinea, we will use brute force against those who have eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. They know we have never been afraid of them. We have respected them, but as they do not like respect, we present them what they like: brute force!¹⁵

Furthermore, that the Fulbé's personality had its roots in the early days of the struggle against colonialism:

The stranger was the Susu, the Malinké, the Forestière, the comrades of other regions of Guinea, while [the Fulbé] were doing good housekeeping with the colonizer so as to team up with the white settlers and be a prostitute for them...¹⁶

And that the Fulbé denied their African heritage:

They have no fatherland, these racist Fulbé madmen... They are still and will always be in search of their homeland...¹⁷

And that the Fulbé commit wanton treason in order to bring down the Republic:

Instead of being ashamed, they still want to destroy our independence... It is a declaration of war! They want a race war? Well, we are ready, we are in agreement and we will destroy them immediately, not a racial war, but by a radical revolutionary war.¹⁸

The Fulbé, who believe their ancestry comes from North Africa and Egypt,¹⁹ have been described as the "largest migratory ethnic group in the world".²⁰ Sékou Touré's mention of the Fulbé as having no homeland refers to their habitation of the Fouta Djallon region from the 18th century, an occupancy that was enforced by the jihad of Umar Tal in the 19th century. The Fulbé have large populations in over 25 African nations, with the highest population by percentage in Guinea and concentrated in the Fouta Djallon. Under the leadership of Sékou Touré, 2,000,000 people are estimated to have fled into exile,²¹ with many of them from the Fulbé ethnic group. The "anti-Fulbé" rhetoric of the President contributed to the exodus, and in cultural representations of Guinean "unity" and nationhood the Fulbé were all but excluded. The "image of the Guinean nation", as portrayed by Guinea's national ballets, troupes, ensembles and orchestras, was one that was focused through the prism of a Malinké aesthetic. It was an image that was presented in the guise of nationalism, as evidenced through the use of cultural symbols, songs, language and history.

Syliphone SLP 10, for example, is a LP recording released by the Guinean government in 1968. The LP features a performance by Bembeya Jazz National who present their landmark recording of "Regard sur le passé", a phrase that was the catch-cry of *authenticité*. The cover features a photograph of Almami Samori Touré and the LP presents a history of Guinea's struggle for independence encapsulated through his life story. Sékou Touré is

¹⁵ Touré 1976(b), translation by Counsel.

¹⁶ Touré 1976(b), translation by Counsel.

¹⁷ Touré 1976(b), translation by Counsel.

¹⁸ Touré 1976(b), translation by Counsel.

¹⁹ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Fulani>. Accessed November 25 2013, and Groelsema 1998: 415.

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fula_people. Accessed November 25 2013.

²¹ Groelsema 1998: 417.

named as Almami Samori Touré's grandson, thus not only were the Guinean leader's anti-imperialist credentials contextualised, but that the search for authenticity was located and centred within a Malinké historical and cultural paradigm. Similarly, Syliphone SLP 16 features a photograph of the musicians of the Ensemble Instrumental de la Radiodiffusion Nationale, but only Malinké musical instruments are apparent in the ensemble. The South African singer, Miriam Makeba, who lived in Guinea from 1968 to 1986 and who recorded extensively for Syliphone, is depicted on the back cover to her recording on Syliphone SYL 551 singing to the accompaniment of a kora, the pre-eminent and iconic musical instrument of Malinké culture. The performances of Les Ballets Africains, the most acclaimed and widely travelled of all Guinean groups, feature narratives and music that is largely drawn from Malinké culture. These examples are supported by the analysis of recorded material held at the RTG audio archives, whereby Fulbé culture was marginalised and diminished.²² Rather than celebrate the diversity of Guinean culture, the under-representation of Fulbé symbols, songs, language and history in performances and recordings by Guinea's national troupes and orchestras reflects a subordination of ethnic groups who challenged the ruling party's authority.

Fulbé music is perhaps best known to international audiences through performers such as the Malian singer Oumou Sangaré and the Senegalese singer Baaba Maal. Guinea, too, had its super-star, in the form of the late Farba Tela (real name Oumar Seck), who was an influence on Ali Farka Touré. Rare bootleg cassettes are the only evidence of any commercial releases by Farba Tela, though the RTG recorded several sessions. Unfortunately Syliphone never released a single recording of his music. A Youtube video²³ is the only known footage of the most famous of Guinea's Fulbé singers.

After Sékou Touré's death in 1984 a military coup installed Lansané Conté as President. An ethnic Susu, Conté abandoned Sékou Touré's policy of *authenticité* and funding for the arts was severely reduced. Conté ruled until his death in 2008, when a military coup installed Moussa "Dadis" Camara, a Guerzé from Guinea's forest region. Popular discontent with Dadis' governance grew, culminating in an anti-government demonstration held at the national football stadium on September 28 2009. Between 25,000 – 40,000 attended the rally, only to be attacked by fully armed squads of the Guinean army and Presidential Guard. 187 civilians were killed and approximately 2,000 injured, with eye witness accounts supporting the targeting of Fulbé demonstrators by the armed forces.²⁴

Following an assassination attempt on President Camara in late 2009, Guinea's first democratic Presidential elections were called for 2010. These resulted in a 52.5% win for Alpha Condé, an ethnic Malinké, against 47.5% for Cellou Diallo, an ethnic Fulbé. Condé, who has been referred to as "West Africa's Mandela", promised to unite the Malinké and the Fulbé, yet "ethnic unrest" ensued. A state of emergency was declared amidst reports of soldiers targeting Fulbé neighbourhoods and citizens, and of Malinké and Fulbé gangs

²² Indeed, it was only very late in my 3rd project to digitise and preserve the RTG archive that I was shown "the annexe". This was a large non-climate controlled room which contained many audio reels of Fulbé music, and which had been kept secret from me by particular authorities.

²³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrwXsGYT3QY>. Accessed November 25 2012.

²⁴ In my article "Music for a coup - 'Armée Guinéenne'. An overview of Guinea's recent political turmoil" I explain the events leading to September 28 2009 within the context of state-sponsored music and the song "Armée Guinéenne". See Counsel 2010.

attacking each other in the streets.

In September 2013 the much overdue and often cancelled parliamentary elections were held, though were marred by ethnic violence that left over 100 people dead. “Serious flaws”²⁵ in the vote were reported by observers, and the opposition, led by Cellou Diallo, has refused to recognise the results. As Guinea struggles to re-build its economy and enter its first period of democratic rule since independence in 1958, ethnic riots have beset Conakry and have spread to rural towns in all regions. Such violence has its nascence in the policies of the PDG as led by Sékou Touré, and in the cultural policies which portrayed the Guinean nation to the world.

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²⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/10/guinea-election-results-favour-ruling-party-2013101822593948526.html>. Accessed November 25 2013.