

THE MUSICIAN IS THE MESSENGER:

ISLAM AND *JALIYA* IN MANDINKA MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex dynamics at play surrounding *jalis*, or professional praisesingers, in the culture of the Mandinka people of West Africa. *Jalis*, almost certainly present among the Mandinka prior to the arrival of Islam in the area, remain one of the strongest reminders of pre-Islamic culture in Mandinka society. However, the art and social roles of the *jali* have undergone numerous transformations in adapting, conforming to, and sometimes challenging Muslim cultural norms. This paper explores some of the means by which the two cultural fountainheads of Islam and West Africa are reconciled by *jalis* and other members of Mandinka society, an elaborate process of cultural negotiation that dates back centuries and continues to the present day.

*Our dances and songs
In honor of our children
Will not at all kill
Our faith in Islam.*

*-Mande song for circumcision ceremony, Upper Guinea
(Charry 2000, 23)*

* * * *

The home of El Hadji Fodé Ibrahima Dramé, a Mandinka “healer” whose specialization is wielding control over four devil-inhabited serpents (as well as two common snakes not possessed by spirits), is a darkened shanty in the Dakar suburb of Pikine, lit eerily by a small television in the corner. I sit on the floor across from Mr. Dramé, taking feverish notes as he explains the origins of Mandinka culture, the mysterious power of “pure Mandinka blood,” and his own powers over the spirit world, which include summoning and controlling the dangerous serpent-spirits, healing sicknesses, and materializing gifts and desired objects for those loyal to him. Dramé smokes a long metallic pipe and leans over me as he speaks. Indeed, his presence is transfixing—his voice, gestures, and perpetually-raised eyebrows imply that he is guarding ancient secrets (Dramé 2007).

Although he is identified by many Senegalese as a “fetisher” or “charlatan,” Dramé, whose family name places him in the same *nyamalo* hereditary class as griots, situates his supernatural capabilities—and indeed his entire worldview—in the context of Islam. According to him, the precepts of griotism were dictated by the Prophet himself. Indeed, Dramé enjoys enormous prestige in the piously Muslim Mandinka community of Pikine, where he is a regular guest at festivals, ceremonies, and on radio programs, in addition to having a thriving healing profession, in spite of the fact that from most

orthodox Muslim perspectives, Dramé's practice harkens dubiously to a pre-Islamic, animist era in West Africa.

Though he is not a *jali* (West African hereditary praisesinger, explained in more detail below) or a griot, Dramé richly embodies many of the same tensions one might observe between traditional West African beliefs and the more recently emergent Islam in the art and social role of praisesingers in Mandinka culture. He also presents a curious puzzle for a Western researcher—these “tensions” between Dramé's religious beliefs and his heterodox sorcery are identified largely by me, an outsider to both Islam and Mandinka culture. For Dramé himself and several other Mandinka Muslims I spoke with, the coexistence of pre-Islamic beliefs and Islam causes no dissonance. Is it therefore justifiable to introduce the impression of tension or contradiction into the discussion of a cultural phenomenon that is not self-identified as problematic?

Similarly, *jalis* are a powerful reminder of a pre-Islamic era in the Mande cultural zone, simultaneously embodying the persistence of complex, pre-Islamic traditions as well as the adaptations these traditions have undergone in adjusting to Islam (and indeed, to modernity). The extent to which *jaliya* (the art and traditions of the *jali*) can be categorized as “Islamic” or “non-Islamic” is mostly a matter of perspective and interpretation, especially considering the varied accounts of *jaliya*'s origins extant in Mande oral traditions and scholarly literature. Therefore, rather than attempting to define *jaliya* as belonging exclusively to one particular strain of the interwoven cultural fibers that constitute West African (and specifically, Mandinka) civilization, this paper examines *jaliya* as itself an expression of the syncretism that characterizes Mandinka society at large. Deciding whether *jaliya* is or is not “Islamic” is not an undertaking I am

qualified for, and frankly, such an endeavor seems intellectually uninteresting to me. If anything, *jaliya* is an example of how seemingly paradoxical elements can stably co-exist in a unified culture. This paper will thus examine some of the ways *jaliya* and Islam interact, clash, and commingle in Mandinka culture.

BACKGROUND

The origins of Mande civilization are oft-discussed, both in scholarly literature and within the oeuvres of Mande oral traditions; however, a diverse range of narratives circulate as to how and why the Mande Empire rose as a West African political and cultural superpower in the 12th century. Immediately, one is struck by the discordant methodologies of oral history and written histories—oral accounts are far more elaborate and detailed, tending to make more audacious claims about the empire. Written histories, on the other hand (conducted largely by Western academics) are more conservative in their assertions.

Historians seem to agree that the Mali Empire, the cultural wellspring of the Mandinka and other Mande groups, rose out of the earlier Ghana Empire, a mighty kingdom which eventually fell successively to the Susu, and later to the Mali Empires. A 14th-century historical account from a North African scholar named Ibn Khaldun summarizes the reports made by Muslim merchants in West Africa:

[...] Merchants penetrated the western part of the land of the *Sudan* and found among them no king greater than the king of Ghana [...] Then the authority of the rulers of Ghana dwindled away and they were overcome by the Susu, a neighboring people of the Sudan, who subjugated and absorbed them.

Later the people of Mali outnumbered the peoples of the Sudan in their neighbourhood and dominated the whole region. They vanquished the Susu and occupied all of their possessions, both their ancient kingdom and that of Ghana as far as the Ocean on the west. (Charry 2000, 40)

Later Arab and African accounts tell of another Mali emperor, Mansa Musa, whose Hajj pilgrimage across the Sahara in 1324 was so extravagant that gold prices were devalued in Egypt as a result of his abundant spending. This period seems to mark a golden age in the Mali Empire (Charry 2000, 43). Before Musa, however, there came another ruler whose legend looms much larger over the Mande oral tradition.

The two narratives, oral and written, converge on one figure: the legendary king Sunjatta Keïta, subject of the foremost epic narrative in the Mande oral literature. The multitude of epic tales of Sunjatta's life and deeds tell of a young man who rose mystically from severe physical disability to rule and unify the vast Mali Empire. More relevantly, these epics speak of Sunjatta's *jali*, named Balla Fassa Kouyate, who is one of the earliest known griots and the founder of the Kouyate family of griots, which continues to this day. Led by one of Sunjatta's war chiefs, Tiramakhan Traoré, the Mandinka people migrated west, eventually settling in the Kabu region of present-day Senegal, Gambia, and northern Guinea and Guinea-Bissau (Schaffer-Cooper 1987, 3).

Sunjatta's reign seems to have formalized the social structure of Mandinka society which persists to this day. Mandinka society is traditionally organized based on a caste-like civil hierarchy. Part of the lowest class in the social order, griots, or *jali*, are an endogamous caste whose roles are numerous. Though at present they are most visible as professional musicians, the duties of the *jali* are indeed far more wide-ranging. In

addition to providing musical entertainment, they are keepers of history and genealogy, counselors to powerful patrons, spokespeople, educators, and diplomats. Both with music and words, they are responsible for heralding wealthy nobles, singing of their deeds and those of their ancestors, and announcing the decrees of powerful individuals to the general public. In return for their services, such as conducting negotiations between the households of wealthy patrons or singing praises for an individual or family, others are obliged to offer a “reward” to the *jali*, most often in the form of money (Charry 2000, 91).

The musical arts of the *jali* range from unaccompanied singing to virtuosic performance on a variety of instruments. Perhaps the signature instrument of Senegambian *jalis* is the *kora*: a 21-stringed harp made from a large calabash gourd, driven through with a long wooden post and strung in two parallel rows of strings. The open face of the calabash is covered with an animal skin and the *kora* player plucks the strings with the thumb and forefinger of each hand.



Jali Alphousseyni Kouyate plays the *kora* at a naming ceremony, accompanied by two young *jalis* tapping the calabash with sticks (Photo by the author, 8/7/2007)

The social obligations described above place the *jali* in a somewhat ambiguous social position. On one hand, they are members of the lowest caste on the social ladder, relying on the generosity of those higher on the pecking order to make a living. They are regarded by some as undesirable—marriage and even to some extent physical contact between *jalis* and other members of society is discouraged or forbidden (Hale 1998, 193). On the other hand, their roles in the community make them indispensable and powerful figures, often the most trusted associates and advisors to nobles and rulers. Additionally, the *jali* (as well as the similarly low-caste blacksmiths) are traditionally believed to possess particular power called *nyama*—both over humans and the spirit world—that stems, in the case of the *jali*, from the power of their words (Hale 1998, 114). So refined is the art of their words that *jalis* have been known to single-handedly spur armies to victory in battle (Hale 1998, 41).

With such a litany of social roles and responsibilities, it is apparent why the institution of the *jali* has been one of the most crucial, enduring facets of traditional Mandinka culture. Beginning as early as the 7th century, however, another social force was manifesting itself throughout West Africa: Islam, which developed to become a deeply entrenched way of life for the Mandinka.

Though the religion had established a strong foothold in the Mandinka communities of lower Senegambia much earlier, Islam was “an evolutionary force prior to the *jihads* of the mid-nineteenth century,” by which time the area was thoroughly Islamicized (Schaffer-Cooper 1987, 69). Mandinka in the Casamance seem to have been converted to Islam “almost entirely” by 1850, and the religion remains overwhelmingly

prevalent to the present day (Schaffer-Cooper 1987, 5). Reflecting this broader trend in Mandinka society, the vast majority of Mandinka *jalis* are Muslims.

Even casual observers might note some obvious divergences between traditional Mandinka cultural and social order and the views of Islam. For example, social equality is one of the tenets of Muslim society—castes and class hierarchy are unacceptable (Traore 2007). As an endogamous social class of singers and musicians, the institution of the *jali* is therefore somewhat heterodox. Additionally, throughout the Muslim world, music has been regarded with ambivalence, and the mixing of men and women in a musical context is forbidden (Traore 2007). Furthermore, the songs of *jali* often celebrate pre-Islamic heroes, including some figures who actually fought against the conquest of Islam in West Africa. The supernatural connotations of *nyama*—the mystical power of a *jali*'s speech and music—are perhaps most aberrant.

Unfortunately, most scholarly literature has been brief in discussing the relationship between Islam and praisesinging in West Africa. In an effort to better understand these apparent complexities, this paper examines the interaction between Islam and *jaliya*—specifically, the musical arts of the *jali*—based on fieldwork conducted in the Mandinka communities of Dakar and the Casamance in 2007.

METHODOLOGY

Mande peoples (ethnic groups with ties to the Mande/Mali Empire) are spread throughout West Africa. For the purposes of this study, I conducted fieldwork among the Mandinka community of Pikine (a suburb of Dakar) in November and December 2007. Most of the individuals I interviewed have origins in the Casamance region of southern Senegal—once part of the ancient Kabu Empire, a secondary offshoot of the Mali

Empire. Prior fieldwork was also conducted in the Casamance, specifically in the village of Bounkiling, in August 2007.

Ideally, fieldwork for this project would have included more recent time spent in the Casamance. However, due to the academic program's interdiction on traveling in the politically volatile region, as well as the plentiful resources available in Dakar and Pikine—both in the form of knowledgeable informants and archival materials—I elected to conduct research based in Dakar. I will also draw on interviews and observations collected during my earlier stay in the Casamance.

Field methods employed for this research consisted primarily of interviews and consultation of previous scholarship. I conducted a series of interviews of various members of the Mandinka community, from the esoteric healer introduced above to leaders in a Mandinka cultural association in Pikine. My key informant was a 30 year-old *jali* named Alphousseyni Kouyate, a professional *kora* player and part of the prestigious Kouyate lineage of *jalis*, who trace their ancestry all the way back to Balla Fassa Kouyate, and who are said to be the purest and most esteemed *jalis*. In the Casamance, I lived for over two weeks with Alphousseyni's extended family, which includes many other professional *kora* players, and in Pikine, he was the liaison for most of the contacts I made. As an active and knowledgeable practitioner of both traditional and modern forms of *jaliya* and a prominent member of the Mandinka community in Pikine (he is currently the president of the Mandinka cultural association of Pikine), he was an ideal intermediary for my research.

In addition to interviews, I consulted many works of scholarly literature on Mande music and Mandinka society. In terms of music, I made dozens of field

recordings of various pieces, sung and accompanied by the *kora*. These recordings constitute a large portion of the musical background for this project. During the research period, I was also studying *kora* performance under the tutelage of Alphousseyni Kouyate. Both the recordings and *kora* lessons formed a crucial window into the nature of *jaliya*, and provided opportunities for enhanced discussion of some of the issues examined by this paper.

This project was richly informed by each facet of its methodology. Nevertheless, several challenges arose. At the most basic level, I do not at present speak Mandinka, so all interviews were conducted in French, English, or through an interpreter. I think it safe to assume that some intimacy with the subject was certainly lost by conducting my research in non-native languages. At a more subtle level, the questions provoked by this investigation are somewhat piquant, and as an outsider, I suspect that my credibility as an interpreter was somewhat debatable for several individuals I interviewed. Although each interviewee was proudly forthcoming with information and insights, *jaliya* remains an esoteric component of Mandinka culture, guarded by familial lineages, and it is unlikely that a short-term Western researcher such as myself would be trusted with all of the “secrets.”

Additionally, the dangers of imposing “tensions” (as expressed previously) on a cultural experience that seems not to be regarded as problematic by insiders weigh heavy on this project. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is justifiable and valuable for outside observers to analyze cultural phenomena from the vantage point of research, as long as conclusions are supported by earnest efforts at understanding. Thus, I assert that my study of the complex and syncretic interplay between Islam and *jaliya* is beneficial to

wider understanding, even if cultural insiders do not identify this topic as of primary concern—facets of culture taken for granted by insiders are often worth close examination for the comprehension of outsiders.

RESULTS/FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

Based on my findings, I would argue that modern-day *jalis* reconcile the potential discord between *jaliya* and Muslim society by appealing to two main arguments. First, the historical narrative of origin for *jalis* has been inexorably intertwined with that of Islam itself, to the point that many *jalis*—including those I interviewed—assert that the Prophet Muhammed himself issued the directives for the institution of griotism. Secondly, *jalis* and other members of Mandinka society make compelling arguments for the constructive role *jalis* play in Muslim society, smoothing out potential discrepancies by emphasizing the function of *jaliya* in preserving history and spreading information, particularly concerning Islam.

Before fleshing out these arguments, however, it should be reiterated that based on my research, I would surmise that “explaining away” the possible variances between *jaliya* (as a remnant of pre-Islamic African culture) and Islam is not a pressing concern for most members of Mandinka society. Though it was apparent during interviews that the *jaliya*-Islam interface has previously been a cultural discourse (i.e. nobody seemed surprised by my questions), I was left with the impression that Mandinka culture can comfortably support these two possibly competing elements. As discussed by numerous Mande scholars, identity in Mande societies is dynamic and nuanced, and perceptions of identity commonly sustain self-contradictory concepts (see Conrad and Frank 1995 for a detailed discussion of this topic).

Perhaps the most striking example of the fusion of the dual historical narratives of Islam and *jaliya* involves the story of Surukata. Related to me by a number of informants and also widely recorded by other scholars, Surukata's tale provides a precious link between West African griots and no less an authority than the Prophet Muhammed himself. Surukata is said to have been the griot of the Prophet, an individual who communicated the Prophet's message and tales of his deeds to the public. Mandinka *jalis* trace their lineage back to him—both as the founder of the institution of griotism and, to some extent, even as a blood ancestor.

I collected several versions of the Surukata story, each with minor variations, though the basic arc of the narrative remained the same. In essence, Surukata was, at the outset, an infidel, an enemy of the Prophet. He even went so far as to attempt to assassinate the Prophet (Diabate 2007 and Dramé 2007), but the Prophet was protected by a sacred force and Surukata was foiled. After failing to kill Muhammed, Surukata converted to Islam and began singing the praises of the Prophet to the public, which seems to have accelerated the Islamization of the Arabic peninsula. In return, Muhammed and his other companions rewarded Surukata with gifts collected on evangelical tours throughout the land.

Jalimuso (female jali singer) Amy Sissikho describes the importance of Surukata's role in seeking public acceptance of the Prophet's message:

The Prophet Muhammed could not talk about himself, so the Prophet had a companion, his name is Surukata. Surukata is said to be the forefather of the *jalis*.

One day they were on a trip. Over the course of the journey, the Prophet could not talk about himself, so in every village, it was not the Prophet who spoke, it was Surukata, the griot. The only speaker in the group was Surukata. As the group was poor, the people who accepted the Prophet Muhammed gave gifts, thanks to Surukata. When they went home, they shared all the gifts, everybody had their part, but the greatest part came to Surukata because he was the spokesman. Among the disciples of the Prophet there were some people who did not accept this [...]

One day, the Prophet called Surukata, he said, ‘Please, tomorrow we are going to this neighborhood to convince people about the message of God. But please, this time, don’t speak, and we are going to see what happens.’ They went from village to village, but nobody knew that he was the Prophet, nobody gave anything. Everybody was complaining. The Prophet said: ‘Today we have nothing because Surukata did not speak!’
(Sissokho 2007)

Thus, Surukata sets an early precedent for the practice of *jaliya*. He was consistently by the side of the Prophet to announce “Behold, here is the one sent by God!” (Diabate 2007), an asset that was crucial to the early spread of Islam throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

Scholars identify this origin narrative as a relatively recent development in the oral tradition, however, pointing to several known tales of the foundation of griotism which seem to predate Islamic influence, as well as the increased embellishment of the Surukata theory among *jalis* even over the course of the twentieth century (Hale 1998, 66

and Conrad 1985, 48). Other, earlier origin narratives contain many of the same themes and archetypes of the Surukata story—some kind of violent transgression, followed by extreme devotion and praisesinging (Hale 1998, 66).

Surukata seems to have been a historical figure, named Suraqa ibn Malik ibn Ju'shum, who is spoken of in several early Arab texts. In these versions, Suruqa attempts to capture the Prophet but is magically prevented from doing so, after which he became a loyal devotee of Muhammad (Conrad 1985, 44). In any case, however, neither Arab texts nor the Mandinka oral traditions have much to say about how Surukata's progeny and art might have migrated across the Sahara to West Africa.

Another oral narrative does provide a more explicit link between West Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The great king Sunjatta Keïta is said to be descended from another companion of the Prophet, named Bilali. Alphousseyni Kouyate recounts:

People say: Sunjatta Keïta descended from one of the companions of the Prophet, Bilali, who was one of the famous companions. Some people say Bilali was a slave, but it can't be: you can't be a companion of the Prophet Muhammed and be a slave because Islam was against slavery. So it's false, he was just a companion like Abu Bakr, Usthman, Ali, and Omar. He was a muezzin, the person who sings to call people for prayers. This was the role of Bilali. We originate from this person. (Kouyate 2007)

Due to the fact that Sunjatta is considered a descendant of Bilali, "The people of Mande, they might come from Arabic peoples, they moved to the Mali Empire," and indeed, Bilali is said to have been "of black skin" (Kouyate 2007). According to oral tradition,

consciousness of his Arabian descent accelerates the readiness with which Sunjatta himself accepted the emergent Islam in his kingdom.

Once again, Arabic texts corroborate the existence of Bilali as a historical character. Bilal ibn Rabah was indeed a “freed black slave who became a companion of the Prophet and the first *mu’adhdhin* (caller to prayers)” (Conrad 1985, 37). Genealogies linking Sunjatta Keïta with Bilali’s bloodline exist in the Mande oral tradition, but they vary widely (Conrad 1985, 37).

Alongside these origin narratives establishing links between Arabia and West Africa exist many stories whose inspiration appears to be more indigenous. For example, another origin narrative, that of the *kora*, involves animistic spirits and human sacrifice. In this tale, a *jali* in present-day Gambia, Jali Wali Sissiho seeks out a mysterious lake in which dwells a spirit who holds a magnificent musical instrument. He communicated with the spirit:

He said to the spirit: ‘Really, I want to have an instrument which a griot has never had before.’ The spirit agreed. He said, ‘I’m going to give you the instrument with strings, but if I give you this instrument you are going to make a sacrifice.’ He told him, ‘The sacrifice should be your own sister with the same blood.’ And now, the *jali* had a problem. He said, ‘I’m going to explain the problem to my sister.’ (Kouyate 2007)

Eventually, the *jali’s* sister assents to being sacrificed, knowing that her legacy will live on in song form for generations to come, and the lake-spirit bestows upon Sissiho the *kora* (Kouyate 2007).

In these narratives, we can see a kind of cultural negotiation at work. The legends of Surukata and Bilali serve, among other things, to establish a prestigious link with the very roots of Islam. It seems that for the Mandinka, these narratives have come to be privileged over those which place the founding of *jaliya* in West Africa. David Conrad reflects:

It has long been acknowledged that very early on, Islam became deeply ingrained in significant portions of Manding culture, and [...] the high value placed on Muslim antecedents has given rise to such extensive manipulation of traditional genealogies that at some point in the chain of oral transmission, pre-Islamic forbears began to lose status in favour of relative latecomers from the Middle East. (Conrad 1985, 35).

Claims of descent from archetypically Islamic sources thus lends *jaliya* and other facets of traditional Mandinka culture greater credibility in a Muslim cultural milieu. The institution of *jaliya* is legitimized by the Prophet himself, and thus the *jali* becomes a key player in an Islamic cultural framework, just as he had been before in a pre-Islamic context. These claims have not been (and perhaps cannot be) historically validated, but the significance of their existence and still-flourishing popularity is perhaps more essential than their historical veracity. At the same time, narratives involving typically pre-Islamic elements (such as the *kora* origin tale) persist alongside the legends which conform to Islam, perhaps an indication of the ambiguous perception of *jaliya*. It is important to note that these two histories—the narrative of Islam and the chronicles and genealogies of West Africa—inspire the bulk of the musical repertoire of *jalis* to this day.

Historical narratives are not the only legitimizing force employed by *jalis* in the present-day, Islamic context. *Jalis* take responsibility for a variety of activities related to religion in both the daily and ritual lives of Mandinka Muslims. For example, *jalis* often write or perform songs dedicated to God, the Prophet, or one of many West African Sufi saints or marabouts, whose stature is huge in Senegalese religious culture. Alphousseyni Kouyate has written at least one such song about Cheikh Amadou Bamba, a much-revered early 20th-century holy man and founder of the Mouride Sufi brotherhood. As Kouyate describes it, the lyrical content of such a song conforms to the rhetoric of patronage-based praisesinging:

What I sing is: ‘Cheikh Amadou Bamba, marabout, please pray for people because as a great man, God is going to accept your prayers.’ And through this I can add the names of his father and even the names of his sons. (Kouyate 2007)

Eric Charry observes, “The vast majority of *jelis* [*jalis*] are well educated in Islam, and many are devout Muslims. Quotations from the Koran are common in their narrations and singing, and pieces dedicated to religious leaders [...] frequently attract such quotations” (Charry 2000, 23).

Kouyate also argues that griots play a complementary role to marabouts, helping to spread their message and preserve their quiet dignity. He explains, “Of course, a good marabout should have a griot, and a good king should have a griot, because as a king or as a marabout, most of the time [it is not recommended] to voice for yourself. You should have somebody next to you who’s going to transmit your message to people” (Kouyate 2007).

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Hale argues that the collaborative interface between Islamic leaders and griots in West Africa may be a relatively recent and still-developing phenomenon. He marks this as a historical shift in the history of *jaliya*:

Whereas griots competed centuries ago with religious leaders for the attention of rulers and those of the upper classes, today they have developed a much more symbiotic relationship with these other men of the word. This trend began generations ago [...] but it is taking on new dimensions in some countries. (Hale 1998, 317-8)

Hale lists Senegal as the foremost example of such a country.

The songs of *jalis* are often designed to educate audiences about Islam. Sadio Diabate asserts that in addition to solving a huge range of problems in society, “Griots are there to show Islam!” (Diabate 2007). Indeed, *jaliya* appears to be an ideal tool for promoting the spread of the Islamic faith and information about God and the Prophet. “*Jali*, when you give the definition of the word, it is a historian [...] In terms of Islam, if Islam is spread it is thanks to historians who know what the Prophet did and even the relationship between the Prophet and the Qur’an,” describes Kouyate (2007).

In addition to singing songs with religious content, Mandinka *jalis* perform at events with religious associations. I have witnessed Alphousseyni Kouyate perform at several naming ceremonies and weddings, two highly Islam-referential rituals. The performance schedule of *jalis* is also impacted by religion. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, public celebrations are discouraged, and musicians—including *jalis*—do not play. From mid-September to mid-October of this year, for example, Alphousseyni’s kora stayed mostly in its case at his home. In contrast, the end of

Ramadan and Tabaski, another Muslim holy day celebrated in West Africa, give rise to merriment and music making (Charry 2000, 22).

What do these many religious associations tell us about the status of *jaliya* in Mandinka Muslim society? Particularly, how are some of the divergences between the traditions of Islam and *jaliya* explained or justified? In examining these questions, *jaliya* is shown to be a highly adaptable and durable cultural force, capable of carrying crucial cultural meaning even as its host culture undergoes radical transformations.

One of the most obvious points of departure between Islam and the institution of the *jali* is the notion of caste or class. *Jalis*, part of the *nyamalo* hereditary class of artisans, are traditionally an endogamous caste, whose forced separation from other members of society helped protect others from being sullied by the perceived impurity of the *jali*, and simultaneously protected the mystique of *jaliya* since the art form could only be practiced by a born *jali*. Islam, on the other hand, is firmly grounded on social equality and does not support the notion of a hierarchical class system.

Moussa Traore asserts that Islam has rendered the former caste system obsolete, partially attributing the regression of the caste system—and of taboos associated with griots—to the spread of Islam (Traore 2007). On the other hand, many ethnographers (Hale, Charry, Schaffer) see the *jali* social class as quite persistent to this day. Even if some of the negative social connotations of *jali* status have dissipated, I am inclined to agree, especially since *jalis* I interviewed continue to assert *jaliya* as their birthright. Based on my interviews, I would argue that on the issue of caste, a somewhat uneasy balance seems to have been reached, wherein society at large accepts *jalis* as legitimate

members, while still allowing *jali* individuals to claim exclusive ownership over *jaliya*, the art and lifeways of griotism.

The ambiguous status of music itself throughout the Muslim world (al Faruqi 1980, 58) is also a potential point of departure between *jaliya* and Islam. Music is sometimes said to be prohibited by Islam, and current restrictions on musical performance in countries like Iran provide examples of interpretations of Islam that are somewhat hostile towards music.

This is clearly not the case in Mandinka society, nor Senegalese society at large, in which Sufi brotherhoods often gather for chanting and drumming ceremonies dedicated to the remembrance of God. Indeed, *jalis* themselves eagerly dismiss claims that Islam and music are at odds. Alphousseyni Kouyate argues:

“There are people who say, ‘[Jaliya] is questionable because Islam is against music.’ But Islam is not against all kinds of music! You may take some words from the Qur’an in order to adapt it to your *kora* and sing it to tell people: ‘Please, Islam says: ‘Practice that.’” So, the musician is the messenger!” (Kouyate 2007)

Moussa Traore agrees, explaining that Islam only objects to music when it prompts mixed-gender audiences to intermingle in inappropriate ways. Islam, he says, objects to unmarried men and women dancing together, for example (Traore 2007). *Jaliya* in general, he says, presents no problem.

Indeed, Kouyate argues that the *kora* itself can be an illustrative symbol of man’s relationship with God, drawing parallels between the *kora*’s status as the “most perfect instrument” with Muslim cosmogony, in which “we [humans] are the most perfect among

God's creatures [...] Some people say that if you look at the *kora*, the structure is even like a human being" with the long neck representing the head and torso and the calabash signifying the waist, hips, and buttocks (Kouyate 2007).

These points of tension illustrate an ongoing cultural negotiation at work in Mandinka society, involving a durable vestige of pre-Islamic culture, *jalis*, and the more recently emergent Muslim faith. We see in the way this discourse is navigated in the present day, as well as the roles *jalis* play in Muslim life (which seem to be on the rise), the fusion of two cultural traditions, often with convoluted results. Whereas Islam's rejection of class hierarchy seems to have contributed to the regression of caste as a determinant in Mandinka society, the vague status of music in the eyes of Islam seems not to have discouraged *jalis* from practicing their craft.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the historical narratives of origin cited by many *jali*, as well as their modern-day functionality in Muslim society suggest a kind of dual identity, simultaneously built on Muslim and traditional African foundations. As Muslims, *jalis* appeal to oral narratives such as the Surukata myth, which affiliate their craft with the Prophet Muhammed in order to establish prestigious links between themselves and the founder of Islam. Likewise, *jalis* affirm their role in an Islamic cultural context, aligning themselves with marabouts and asserting their unique ability to transmit information about Islam to the public. Thus, the continued existence of *jaliya* in a cultural context that might appear not to support such an institution is justified.

These findings imply that both traditional West African culture and Islam are highly capable of accommodating variance, innovation and diversity. My hope is that

these findings complicate the notion, still unfortunately highly prevalent in the West, of Islam as a monolithic, intolerant religion which jettisons alien elements unquestioningly. Additionally, the *jali* can no longer be regarded as a part of the historical, pre-Islamic past, vestiges of a nearly-forgotten era. They are active participants in a dynamic cultural negotiation that has been going on for centuries and continues to the present day.

APPENDIX

Please see attached CD for musical examples. Titles are as follows:

1. Alphousseyni Kouyate: “Sutukun” (recorded August 18, 2007)
2. Alphousseyni Kouyate: “Mariama” (recorded August 28, 2007)
3. Alphousseyni Kouyate: “Sibinobaraki” (recorded August 28, 2007)

All recordings made by the author and used with permission of the artist.

GLOSSARY

- Griot: General, French-language term for a West African praisesinger. In general, *jali* or other local terms are preferred, but “griot” remains in heavy usage
- Jali: West African “bards” whose responsibilities include guarding history and genealogy, advising nobles and assisting with diplomatic relations amongst nobles and kings, acting as spokespeople, and performing music, both for entertainment and in the form of praise songs
- Jalimuso: Female praisesinger in the *jaliya* tradition
- Jaliya: The art, lifeways, and cultural productions of the *jali*
- Kora: Favored instrument of the *jali*, considered the most complex African harp-luth. Fashioned out of a calabash gourd and strung with at least 21 strings
- Mande: Broad term delineating a West African cultural-linguistic group with origins in the Mali Empire

- Mandinka: Ethnic group found in the lower Senegambia and northern Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, part of the broader Mande cultural family
- Marabout: West African Islamic leader, these religious figures wield great influence over their followers and are sometimes believed to possess quasi-magical powers
- Nyama: Mysterious power thought to be possessed and controlled by *jalis*, especially through their words
- Nyamalo: Hereditary social class of the *jali*

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