



Formulaic Composition and Extended Variation in Mande Music

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Beginning in the late 1980s, many hereditary professional musicians (griots) from Francophone West Africa began moving abroad, first to France, and then to North America. The contact of Mande griots with non-griot musicians in a multitude of collaborative projects has transformed *jeliya* or the hereditary trade of the griot from a verbal art in the Mande sphere into a form of “jam music” in New York clubs and concert halls; even vocalists are judged upon their musical merits alone, allowing *jeliya* to flourish as a vocal art as well. Diasporic *jeliya* thus inspires the Western milieu to respond, act, and reflect in spite of its inability to understand the words of the griot, which are lost or neglected in transit. As a guitarist and close collaborator, I have examined in great detail the extent to which the relocation of Mande musicians also inspires innovation (or recomposition) in the griot trade. I have studied the griot repertoire for guitar as a shared resource, performing with griots at a variety of venues for over four years, though the nature of Mande music remains largely undisclosed from analytical perspectives. My own understanding, which I have gained through “intensity of contact” with griots and their music, has been informed by an acute awareness of how musical modules are used by players and form the basis of composition in performance, which is underscored by extended variation in Mande music.

In this paper, I examine the art of extended variation in the seminal recording of “Mami Wata” by Bembeya Jazz National and “N’Toman” by Les Ambassadeurs of Guinea. Sekou Diabaté’s guitar solo in “Mami Wata” exemplifies the manner through which players compose their parts as jams unfold by reordering grooves of various lengths and dimensions in order to create “new” compositions for study and admiration. These solos comprise a recomposite of patterns and phrases that griots stockpile in their minds and bodies, embodying the repertoire as a metaphor of spoken discourse or a “language” to be learned, expanded, and shared with their associates. In fact, Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté, my mentor and teacher, requested that I teach him parts that I learned from the “Mami Wata” recording, remarking “Where did you learn that? Show me!!!” Solos and “jams” in pieces such as “Mami Wata” and “N’Toman” furthermore are constructed by conjoining conceptual templates that are wed to a “key phrase” and other resources such as recurring melodic phrases, rhythmic hits and accents, and harmonic progressions or “short forms.” Musicians learn stock phrases as formulaic expressions that they use as the building blocks for extemporized compositions, which are longer than most accompaniment patterns or parts. *Jeliya* as a musical practice in New York “jam bands” thus must be considered with extended variation in mind as it is recast as hybrid jam music for the Western milieu in urban environments such as New York City, Paris, and Toronto.

As emic Mande terminology such as *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* and *jeliya* as a verbal art experience a precipitous decline, our understanding becomes predicated upon how well and accurately scholars are able to articulate new concepts in analytical terms. Analysis and performance frequently work hand in hand and must not remain entirely mutually exclusive pursuits or areas of interest in Mande music scholarship.