

From Timbuktu to the Mississippi Delta

By Pascal Bokar Thiam, Ed.D.

Included in this preview:

- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Excerpt of Chapter 1

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Sneak Preview

FROM TIMBUKTU TO THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA



How West African Standards of Aesthetics Have Shaped the Music of the Delta Blues

By Dr. Pascal Bokar Thiam
University of San Francisco

Foreword by
NEA Jazz Master, Composer & Pianist
Randy Weston



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Foreword

The Music is so varied that we still have no real idea what African music is.

I do know this, though: When an African touches an instrument, whether that African is an extension like Louis Armstrong or a master healer from Morocco or Mississippi, that instrument becomes an African instrument.

When a person is touched by African music, from his skin to his soul, that person has become Africanized. Perhaps this is the true meaning of universal: something foreign that reminds you of your deepest self.

Dr. Thiam has made a major contribution and this book should be in every school and home.

Peace and Blessings,

Randy Weston
Composer & Pianist
NEA Jazz Master

Reviews

In this beautifully crafted and timely book about music, Dr. Pascal Bokar Thiam guides us straight to the serious questions of the origin of Jazz and Blues throughout a long journey across West Africa. This book persuasively describes the contributions of West Africans in both classical and modern music, and provides valuable information about the antecedents, the culture, the personalities, the misfortune and triumphs of both West African and black American music alike. This book is a must read for those who care not only about music, but are also interested in social justice, colonization and slavery.

Magueye Seck, Ph.D.

Professor of Sociology
Curry College, Massachusetts

Much of currently available scholarship continues to spin the wise old tale of blues and jazz that goes something along the lines of "... up the river from New Orleans ...", which is indeed a romantic and Americanized notion. But the true roots of the blues go back thousands of years before that. Pascal Bokar Thiam, himself a working musician in addition to his scholarly pursuits, journeys us back to root sources, visiting ancient string, voice and cultural traditions of Africa that shed revealing light on the birth of the blues. The photos in this book alone are worth the exploration. *From Timbuktu to the Mississippi Delta* is an invaluable addition to studies of the true roots of what the sage Art Ensemble of Chicago always referred to as "Great Black Music, ancient to the future."

Willard Jenkins

Arranger *African Rhythms*,
the autobiography of NEA Jazz Master Randy Weston
www.openskyjazz.com

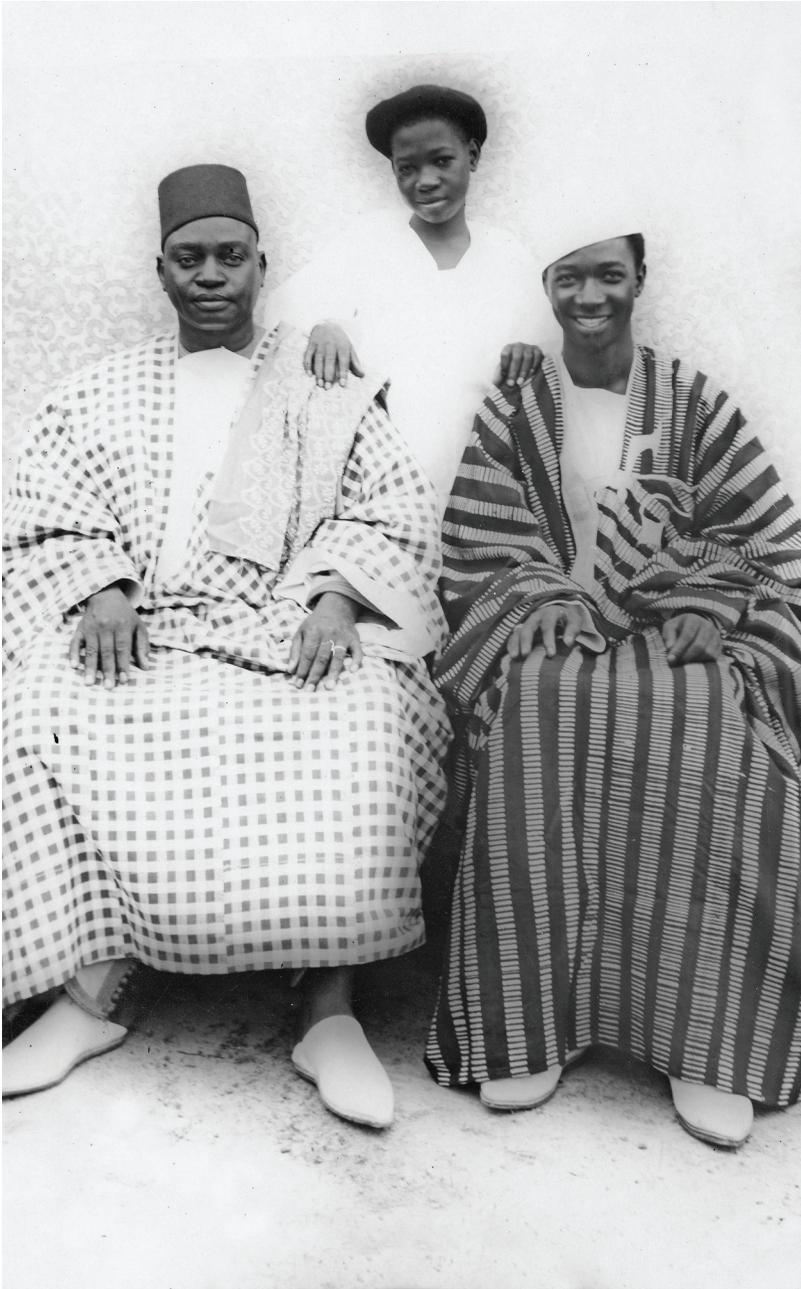
From Timbuktu to the Mississippi Delta makes the most compelling argument for the African roots of blues and jazz. Dr. Pascal Bokar Thiam not only documents the trans-Atlantic crossings of West African musical practices, but he demonstrates that an entire aesthetic philosophy survived the Middle Passage. This book ought to be mandatory reading for anyone remotely interested in modern music and its ancient lineage.

Robin D. G. Kelley, PhD

Author of *The Lonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (2009)
Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity,
University of Southern California, Los Angeles



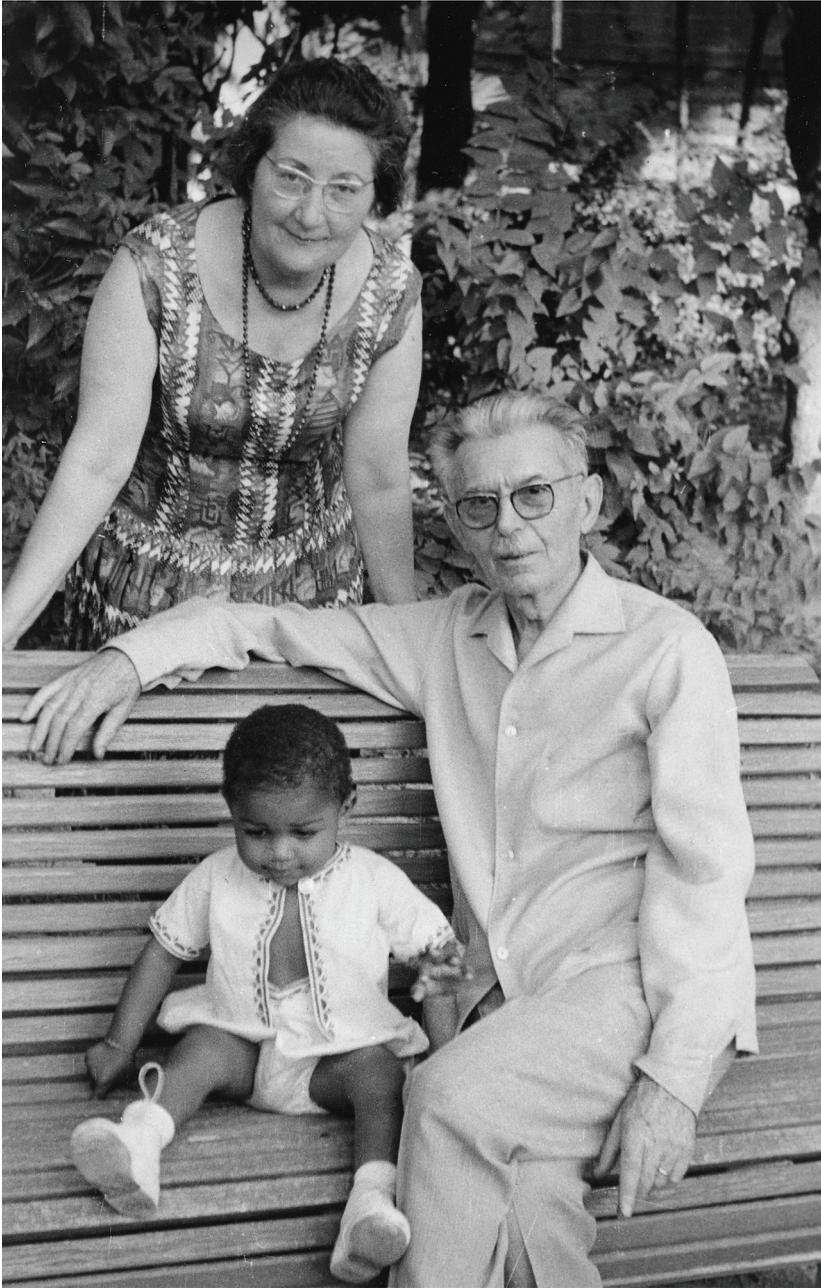
*From left to right: Dr. Pascal Bokar Thiam, Toumani Diabate,
and Dr. Yassine Badian-Kouyate*



Grandfather Mamadou Lamine Thiam, Administrator during colonial times in Senegal, Patriarch of the Thiam Clan with uncles Doudou and Badou Thiam



Grandmother Yaye Founé Moussou Sakiliba, Matriarch of the Thiam Clan



Grandparents, Martial Boeuf and wife Marie-Jeanne, French Customs Officer and educator with the professor



Pascal and Dad on the Niger River



Abdou and Noelle Thiam, proud parents of the professor



Yaye with Pascal and sister Sarah

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<hr/>	
CHAPTER 1. CULTURE OF WEST AFRICA	7
<hr/>	
A. Historical Perspective	
B. Niger River: West African Cultural Highway of Central Significance	
CHAPTER 2. MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICAN EMPIRES	23
<hr/>	
A. Empire of Ghana	
B. The Empire of Mali	
C. The Empire of Songhai	
D. Civilizational Dimension and Cultural Significance	
CHAPTER 3. TRADE ROUTES TO EUROPE, THE ARABIC PENINSULA AND ASIA	45
<hr/>	
A. Trade Routes	
B. The Empire of Ghana Trade Routes and the Niger River	
C. Saharan Trade during the Empire of Mali	
D. The Songhay Empire and Trans-Saharan Trade	
CHAPTER 4. WEST AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONAL CENTERS	51
<hr/>	
A. The Great City of Koumbi Saleh	
B. The Great City of Timbuktu	
C. The Great City of Djenné	
D. The Great City of Gao	
E. The Great City of Segou and its Kingdom	

CHAPTER 5. AFRICAN CULTURAL CONCEPTS
EXPRESSED THROUGH THE ARTS 67

- A. Rhythmic Intuition
- B. Why Do African Americans Clap on 2 and 4 as a Musical Norm?
- C. The Oral Tradition: Intrinsic African Mode of Transmission of Knowledge
- D. West African Visual Arts
- E. The Role of Music in Traditional West African Societies on the Banks of the Niger River

CHAPTER 6. THE MUSIC OF WEST AFRICA AND
THE CASTE SYSTEM (JALIYA) 101

- A. The Balafon
- B. The Ngoni
- C. The Kora
- D. Instruments Related to the Kora
- E. Percussions

CHAPTER 7. THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE 119

- A. Historical Perspective: Slavery and the Atlantic Slave Trade
- B. The Economics of the Slave Trade

CHAPTER 8. RHYTHMIC INTUITIVE CREATIVITY: THE BLUES 129

- A. Fundamental Expression of West African Standards of Tonal and Rhythmic Aesthetics as a Necessary Means of Survival and Vehicle for Identity
- B. The Mississippi Delta Blues

CONCLUSION 149

BIBLIOGRAPHY 157

INTRODUCTION

As a child of mixed Senegalese and French heritage who grew up in Mali, Senegal and France and whose journey led him to teach Jazz in the United States of America, I was always fascinated and intrigued by the level of cultural amnesia and the dearth of academic information that existed with respect to the socio-cultural contributions that West Africans taken from their continent through slavery had brought to the United States of America for 350 years.

As an outsider looking in, I was often puzzled by and sought to understand why European Americans generated dance moves and rhythmic expressions on the dance floors of the US that were closer in aesthetics to those of West Africans than the original dance moves of their informed European ethnic heritage from Vienna or the Paris Opera.

I struggled to figure out why the African American community clapped on beat two and four when expressing the rhythmic pulse of the music it created and how it was able to drive a whole nation whose majority was of European descent to integrate this sense of groove in its cultural norms, to the point where people would give you strange looks at a night club or a church if you were found clapping on the wrong beat, i.e. beat one.





It was particularly interesting to me since I know that in West Africa we clap on beat one and that Europeans also use beat one as their starting rhythmic referential point in the metric system of measures that codify their music.

In the absence of academic information, I tried to grasp why the vocal tonalities, inflexions, bent notes and rhythmic instrumental patterns of the rural Blues of the Mississippi Delta were so eerily reminiscent of the sounds of the *ngoni*, the songs of the *Djalis* and the melodic systems of the *Soundiata Keita* repertoire of eleventh century West Africa.

Lastly, I wanted to find out why the United States of America, a nation with an ethnic majority from Europe would incubate a music so vastly different from that of Baroque, Classical and Romantic European styles, that its identity markers laid in the bent and blue notes of its vocal stylings and instrumentations, the syncopation of its rhythms, the swing feel of its expression and the harmonic and melodic tonalities of its oldest instrument of African descent, the banjo.

One of the issues confronting the assessment of the cultural relevance of West African contributions to North America and the world in general, was that the great majority of books or articles depicting such contributions had been written and published mostly by Europeans in academia, who although well-intended, were not issued from these sub Saharan African societies and thus lacked perspective and access to the knowledge, cultural foundation, subtleties, and sensibilities that only heritage in such traditions can inform soundly. Other European scholars writing about Africa and Africans for Africa, Africans and the world were simply blinded by their own prejudices and overtly promoted a sense of European cultural supremacy in line with the colonial thinking of



the times. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, West Africa as a whole was mostly under French and British colonial rule from Senegal to Gambia, Guinea to Mali, Ivory Coast to Benin, Togo, to Tchad, Niger to Nigeria, Cameroon, etc. ...

As expressed by African scholars Senghor, Cesaire, Diop, Leakey, Mazrui and echoed by British scholar Basil Davidson, it is of foremost importance that Africans define their heritage from the wealth of their languages and the horizon of their traditions. The purpose of this book is to look at the West African musical contributions and standards of aesthetics that have informed the music and the culture of the Mississippi Delta, in an effort to bridge this cultural and academic gap born out of a culture of indifference promulgated by former colonial institutions, out of respect for the unimaginable suffering, and in the memory of the millions of West Africans taken from their native lands for a period approximating three hundred and fifty years, and whose children paradoxically and intuitively created in the United States, drawing from the depths of their collective souls the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic foundations of the musical traditions of the Mande, as expressed through the sonic landscape of the fieldhollers and worksongs, the Gospel and the Delta Blues, America's only indigenous artform Jazz.

Jazz in its aspirations and its blues, in its despair and its hopes embodies through creative rhythmic intuition the African forms of expression and the cultural standards of aesthetics of the African continent exacerbated by the poignantly violent and bloody socio-cultural experience of Africans and African Americans with American slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws of segregation, economic, political and academic oppression in the United States.

The essence of Jazz steeped in the concepts of liberation, freedom and the highest cultural standards of aesthetics has ensured that Jazz will remain the symbolic art form of expression of oppressed people around the world. This journey began on the mighty banks of the Niger River. ...





West African Dancers at the White House



Young Americans dancing at the Disco

No. 1.

DANCING ON DE KITCHEN FLOOR

Mammoth Song and Dance. 35
Dedicated to the "Big Four," SMITH, WALDRON, CRONIN and MARTIN.



No. 2. Listen to the Silver Trumpet's Sounding.
Dedicated to Harrigan & Hart. *Great Character Song and Chorus.* 35

JAS. A. BLAND,

Author of "Close Down Windows," "Pretty South Carolina Rose," "Father's Growing Old," Etc.

DANCING ON DE KITCHEN FLOOR SCOTTISCHER 35

BOSTON:
WHITE, SMITH & COMPANY, 516 WASHINGTON STREET.

Chicago: Best & Dear Music Co. New York: Wm. A. Pond & Co. New York: Spear & DeWitt. New York: E. T. Allen. New York: E. W. Washburn. St. Louis, Mo.: E. W. Washburn. Springfield, Ill., Cal.: L. E. Koster.

Dancing on de Kitchen Floor. 1880s sheet music cover, with cartoon caricatures of dancing African Americans. Song is by African American songwriter James A. Bland.

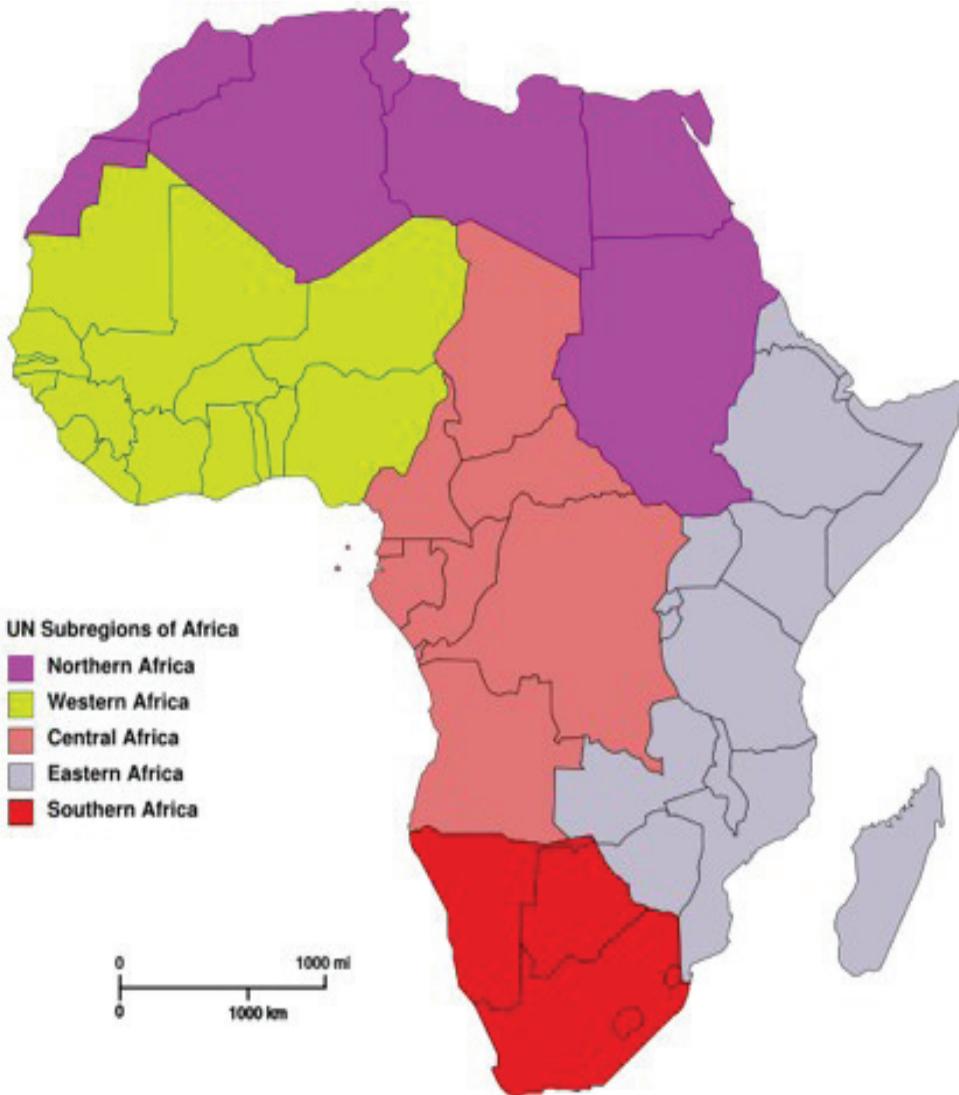
CHAPTER 1

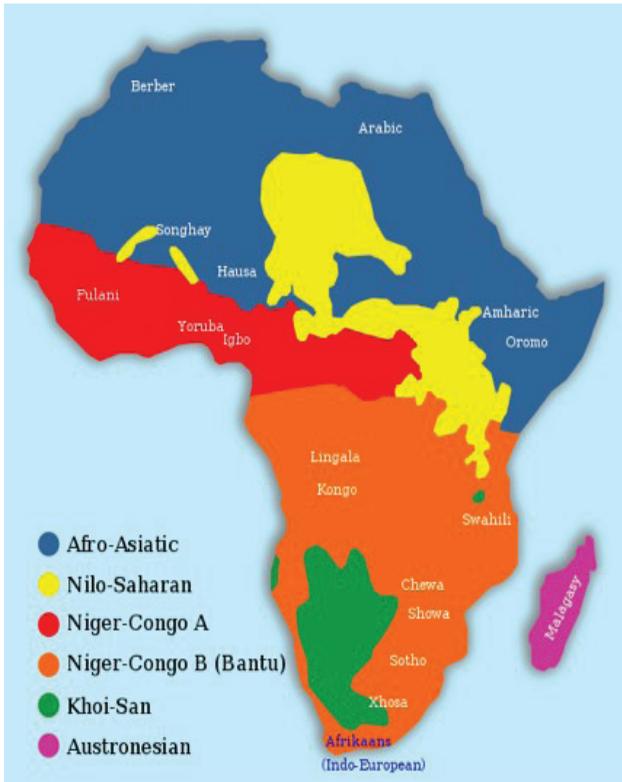


Culture of West Africa

A. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To better understand the significance of the cultural contributions of West Africans to North America we must first look to the chronology of the West African empires of that time. From the 5th century through the 17th century the Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai provide the background through which we come to appreciate the depth of the culture that exists in West Africa prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade. These African Empires are well organized, well administered and rely upon sophisticated taxation methods to stabilize and grow their respective economies. They have an extensive





Map of African Languages

administrative structure that allows for the governance of large states of diverse population groups. These Empires create an architecture that defines their identities and their standards of aesthetics. Such architecture will later extend to the South of Spain in Andalusia and in the South of France past the Pyrennees.

The Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai manage an economy based on commerce, trade and agriculture. They have in place a military structure

that supports them and secures their trading routes. As such, an artistic culture flourishes that involves the use of very specific musical instruments that can be found today in their present constitution, from which derives a musical repertoire of epic narratives and songs that is still sung today by the Djalis (musical and historian cast of West Africa).

From the 5th century until the 17th century, these three empires codify the cultural standards of aesthetics in education, in administration, in trade and commerce, in the arts, in medicine, in religion, in science and music. These standards of aesthetics had been defining the lives of these West African populations taken away from their native lands for centuries. The captured Africans will bring this civilizational background to the Americas from the 16th century through the 19th century. This intellectual and cultural life of West Africa is a known entity to European monarchies whose trade in gold and salt with the merchant dynasties of the city of Timbuktu is well documented (Caille, 1830).

This map shows the consistency of cultural standards of aesthetics developed through a similarity of languages thus demonstrating the cultural sense of cohesion throughout West Africa and particularly with the states primarily afflicted with the Atlantic Slave Trade (red).



Ghana Empire, Capital Koumbi Saleh, 6th–11th century



Mali Empire, Capital Timbuktu later Niani; 11th–14th century



Songhai Empire, Capital Gao, 14th–17th century

In 1325, Moroccan traveler Ibn Batouta writes of the existence of the West African instrument called *ngoni* (lute like) and the *balafon* (xylophone like) at the court of Malian Emperor Kankan Musa (Gibbs, 1929). The *balafon* is an important instrument in West Africa because of its fixed tonalities. These tonalities anchor the standards of aesthetics of harmony in West Africa and codify the melodies used in the Mande musical repertoire dedicated to the supernatural powers of Malian King Sunjata Keita. Sunjata Keita rules the empire of Mali during the 11th and 12th century. Today, the *djalis* continue to play the *balafon*, *ngoni* and *kora* in the performance of this Sunjata Keita repertoire that dates of the 12th century.

In academia, the *kora* or African harp is the instrument depicted by Scottish explorer Mungo Park in his travels to West Africa around 1799 (Park, 1799). The *kora* according to the *Djalis* of Mande is well over 1400 years old and certainly predates the *balafon* in the Mande (Diabate, 2008). Toumani Diabate, the current torch holder of the Mande historical tradition of the Sunjata Keita repertoire from the Diabate lineage of *Djalis*, indicates that he is the 71st generation of Diabate *kora* players. Thus, even by the most conservative accounts of mortality rates in West Africa, the *kora* would be in the range of 1450 to 1600 years old. The tuning of the *kora* would therefore infer that diatonic, major, minor and dominant tonality systems, including the use of blue notes exist in West Africa long before the five tone systems of the Gregorian chant modes present in Europe in the 7th and 8th century which themselves (Mazrui, 1988) derive from the Ethiopian Christian church repertoire.



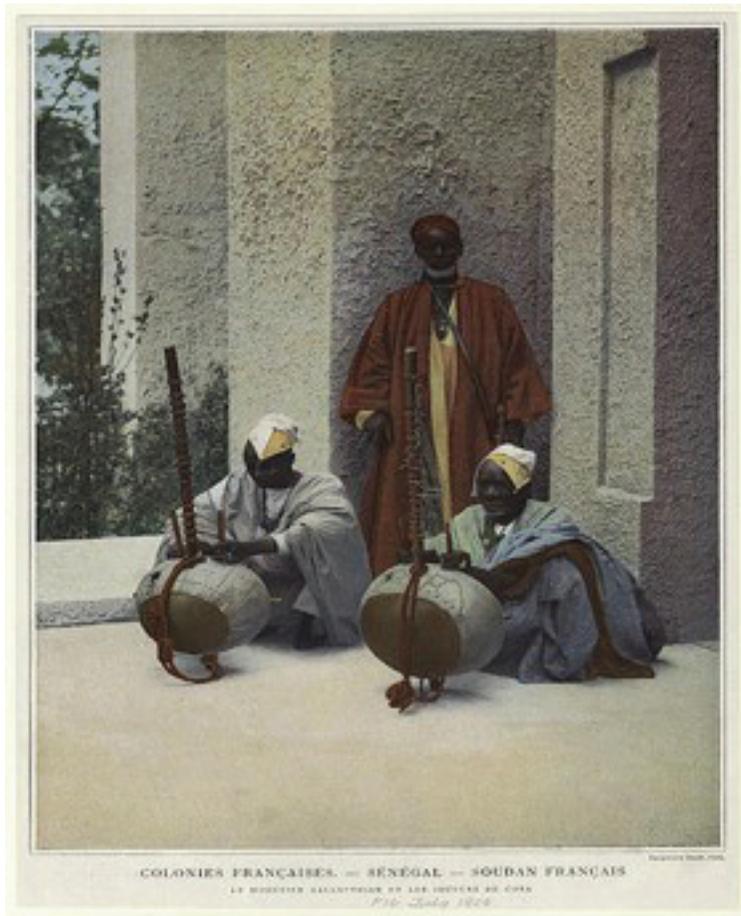
**Toumani Diabate,
current torch holder of the Mande tradition**

Why do these epic narratives and body of songs of 11th and 12th century Sundiata Keita repertoire of West Africa matter? Simply because this body of songs and these instruments attest to the fact that high standards of aesthetics governing the role of the voice, governing harmony (major third, minor third at the octave creating the sharp nine concept), melody, counterpoint (both hands on the kora creating simultaneous counterpunal melodic systems), rhythm (steadiness of tempos and pulses), polyrhythm (superimposition of rhythmic figures resolving sequentially), phrasing, musical expression and improvisation using pentatonic, diatonic, heptatonic, blue notes, the use of the dominant seven tone in a major seven tone system which appropriate implementation during improvisation is central to the aesthetics of Malian sensibilities, and the microtonic harmonic and melodic systems are already in place in 11th and 12th century West Africa.

Lastly, we know that during the Atlantic slave trade balafon players were brought to North America. The Virginia Gazette of 1776 records Africans playing a “barafoo” an instrument which looks like a balafon (Southern, 1976).



A young balafon player, Mali



Jeweler Gallo Thiam and the Kora Players

The presence of these three Empires Ghana, Mali and Songhai indicate that from the 5th through the 18th century there are in West Africa, all along the banks of the Niger River, communities of Africans who have generated conceptual frameworks of intellectual references defining excellence in the arts, architecture, sciences, religious discipline, education, administration that indicate a high degree of civilization. That high level of community standards, socio-cultural and intellectual references which we find all along the Niger River consequently binds the people who will later be taken as slaves to the New World and for our purpose more specifically to the plantations of North America. West African standards of aesthetics are felt more acutely in the emerging culture of the South of the United States because it is primarily the place where we encounter the greatest concentration of West Africans brought during the Atlantic slave trade, thus generating a rural musical style which will later be termed “Blues”.



Basekou Kouyate performing on a Ngoni



Papa Diabate performing on a Kora



Taj Mahal performing on a banjo



Honeyboy Edwards performing on a blues guitar

These West African standards of aesthetics will provide the foundation for this emerging music and the expression of socio-cultural traits that defines the life and identity of the African and African American community in the geographical area referred to as the Delta. These standards of aesthetics will manifest themselves through the rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic patterns of the fieldhollers, the worksongs, the voodoo rituals and the final harmonic, rhythmic and melodic conceptualization of the Delta Blues. They explain why the foundation of American popular music born out of the Mississippi Delta Blues created by the African social experience in North America through slavery has more to do with West African cultural standards of aesthetics than the musical standards of Vienna or the Paris Opera of those days.



**Mandinka woman with gold earrings
symbolizing social status**

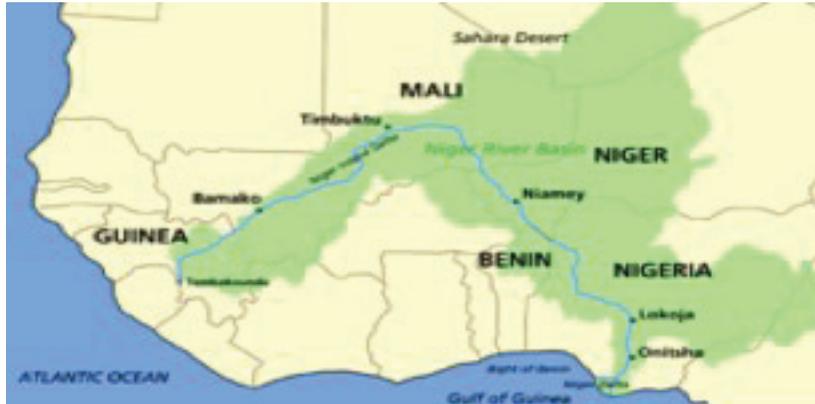


Basekou Kouyate performing on a Ngoni



Papa Diabate performing on a Kora

B: NIGER RIVER: WEST AFRICAN CULTURAL HIGHWAY OF CENTRAL SIGNIFICANCE



Map of the Niger River and Niger River Basin, shown in green

To appreciate how cultural standards of aesthetics travelled and permeated the various ethnic groups of West Africa, we need to look at the paramount cross-cultural fertilization role the Niger River played, economically, socially and linguistically in the dissemination of such information. Sourcing in the southeastern part of Guinea, approximately 240 miles inland from the Atlantic ocean the Niger River takes an unusual route as it takes and heads away from the sea toward the Sahara Desert to the important imperial cultural cities of Timbuktu, Djenna, Gao, Segou and Mopti before coming back south to the Gulf of Guinea and the Delta of Nigeria.



Boats on the Niger River unloading blocks of salt from Taoudeni being just like it was done ancestrally

During the respective eras of the Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, this river served as the development point of these West African civilizations. The Niger River supplied life and trade through navigation and commerce. Socio-cultural exchanges took place with the various ethnic societies that bordered the banks of the river. The Niger provided a lifeline to the semi-arid western Sahelian zone. It was a way of life for many of the ethnic groups (Mandinkas, Maninkas, Malinkes, Songhai, Sossos etc. ...) who will codify the societal norms and values in West Africa. The Niger River supplied livelihood to the Bozos who were fishermen, irrigation to the Bambaras or Malinkes who were farmers, and transportation to the herders of Touareg and Fula descent.

The Niger River is approximately 2,600 miles and it links the countries of Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, and Ivory Coast. Most of these countries were at one point or another part of, or under the Empires of Ghana, Mali and/or Songhai socio-cultural rule and administrative influence. The Atlantic Slave Trade centered on such countries.

The civilizational depths of these three empires coupled with the centuries of cross-cultural fertilization on the banks of the Niger River explain the common cultural identity traits found in the various ethnic groups of West Africa. These cultural traits are born out of the convictions of polytheism, the necessity of the oral tradition as the preferred mode of transference of knowledge, the subdivision of polyrhythmic syncopated patterns, the constant rhythmic interplay of three against two generating this sense of balance or pulse which will later be termed “swing”, and a philosophy of life that while differing on the margins depending on the geographic location of these ethnic groups remains strongly anchored in a uniquely West African sense of community linking religious and secular life rituals, with an identity of philosophical and intellectual historical perspectives.



Crossing of the Niger River

These traits are exemplified through the study of epic narratives, the etymology, the linguistic concepts and the articulation of grammatical rules, the philosophical appreciation of symbolism where expression is not necessarily a function of what is but rather a function of what it suggests, the social codification of family names, and the notions of social status through the organization of the caste system. These common cultural identity traits are expressed culturally in ceremonies and musically through the celebration of the

Sunjata Keita musical repertoire. The use of the koras, balafons, ngonis, and djembes and all their related string and percussion offsprings throughout West Africa, coupled with a reliance on the standards of aesthetics that define rhythm, harmony and melody bind these diverse population groups so to infuse them with an unmistakable sense of identity which is expressed through this appreciation for and of rhythm which colors the landscape of all socio-cultural life in West Africa.

The West African cultural citadels of Koumbi Saleh, Timbuktu, Gao, Djenne, Mopti, Niani, Segou, Niamey, Lokoja and Onitsha all of which border the banks of the Niger River, as shown on the map below, alternate as beacons of influence between the 6th and 17th century. Between the 5th and 17th century, the Niger River is the economic and cultural unifying engine of West Africa. While the cities through their architecture provide testimony to the significance of their cultural historical legacy and the role they played in the shaping of the socio-economics of these West African kingdoms, these cities were cultural and administrative institutions which boasted the best trade centers with great open markets where business was conducted by populations from various ethnic groups from, Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Europe, as well as populations from the Arabic Peninsula.

Passengers travelling on the banks of the Niger River at Gao

