

Duran, Lucy. 2015. "Soliyo" (Calling the horses) – song and memory in Mande music' in Rowan Pease and Rachel Harris (eds). In *Pieces of the musical world: the study of music in culture*, pp. 27-44. Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis

Key words:

horses; oral history; gender; historical memory; identity; power of music; improvisation

Introduction

A Malian woman in her mid thirties, wearing a traditional gown of embroidered damask, crosses a road early one morning in a busy neighbourhood of Paris. She has spotted a fellow Malian, recognisable by his dress and way of walking, and she approaches him. During a brief exchange of greetings in Bamana - Mali's main language - she learns the man's surname. As if on cue, she stretches out one arm with a theatrical gesture, and in a piercing, declamatory style that can be heard over the roar of traffic, she sings an age-old song from the Mande tradition, whose title may be translated as 'Calling the horses':

"Horses- oh! Jimbe! The horses of Silamakanba Koita! A patron of a jeli is better off than someone who has no jeli. I bless the person who has shown me love. If you are a true noble, you will love those who love you. Horses, oh horses!! War goes well for you. You seized him, you killed him. War is not good for cowards!"

The song has only lasted about 40 seconds, a blast of fiery and piercing melody, during which the man has been rooted to the spot. There is not a horse in sight, only lots of cars whizzing through the streets, and people going about their daily tasks in the French capital. Who are Jimbe and Silamakanba Koita, why are their names sung for this person, and which war goes well for whom? The recipient of the song, looking rather dazed, reaches into his pockets and hands the singer a wad of bank notes before hurrying off to work, to earn back some of the money he has just given away.

The researcher's connection to the piece

I cannot remember when I first heard the 'Calling the horses' song. It may well have been one of the very first pieces of music I was exposed to, when I began to study Mande music, back in the late 1970s. Since then it has been a constant part of the musical environment around me during my many periods of fieldwork - first in the Gambia and Senegal and later, from the mid 1980s onwards, in Mali.

The Mande are a Muslim people, and men and women occupy different, but overlapping social spheres. Jelis, the Mande term for a person born into a hereditary lineage of musicians and wordsmiths, are assigned with the task of most professional music, and the division of musical labour according to gender is strict. Instruments are played by male griots; female griots (known as *jelimuso*, jeli-woman) are the preferred singers, (though male jelis do sing as well). My initial purpose was

to study the kora, a 21-string harp, very much a male domain, and as a foreigner, I was permitted to cross this particular gender barrier. In most other ways, however, I was expected to be part of the women's world, helping out with domestic chores, and participating in song and dance.

One of the best things about that experience was going along with the women to the joyous music parties that mark every birth, circumcision and wedding. These are lively, noisy, colourful occasions, known as *sumu*, organised by women for women, usually held in the courtyard of the house or outside in the street under a canopy. The only men present were the instrumentalists, all men. From the 1990s onwards, in Bamako, Mali's capital, the music would be heavily amplified, especially at wedding parties, which were the most lavish of all life-cycle events. I would sit at one end of the canopy with the musicians. On the other three sides were seated the female guests and relatives, some dressed in brightly coloured matching gowns, who would leap to their feet to dance whenever a song was dedicated to them. As they shuffled by the singer, they would give her money. When the singer spotted someone special, such as the bride's 'godmother', she would belt out the *Soliyo*, which raised the temperature of the event by several notches.



Hawa Kasse Mady Diabate (right, holding microphone) sings the Soliyo to the accompaniment of jembes and dununs at a wedding party. Bamako, 2013.



Babani Kone, Mali's most popular jelimuso, at a wedding party, calling the horses for the bride's relatives, who prepare to give her money. Bamako, 2008

The women I was staying with taught me a basic version of *Soliyo*, and encouraged me to sing out as confidently as I could, adding improvised text where possible. 'A *jelimuso* can't be shy' they would say. 'Do you think the horses will hear you if you sing quietly?' Of course, I took this as a reference to the opening line of the song ('horses, oh!'), which I had been told was how the jelis would praise their patrons. I doubted that any amount of my singing would have attracted a real horse's attention. My gate-crashing of wedding parties as honorary jeli meant that at some point I had to justify my presence to the guests. There was always that moment when all eyes would turn to me as if to say, 'well? You're a *jelimuso*? Prove it!' I would be handed the microphone, and mustering all my courage (I am not a singer), one arm outstretched, I would launch into as powerful and elaborate a rendition of the opener, 'horses, oh!' in my most strident voice. Which invariably provoked a gasp of astonishment – some people even coming up to me and giving me money.

No other song had the same impact. On many occasions, it helped me through difficult moments. For example, going through roadblocks on country roads, or being stopped by police in towns for ID checks late at night, whenever a policeman or soldier behaved threateningly, I would 'Call the horses'. This seemed to have the instant effect of calming down the official in question; sometimes he even gave me money, an interesting twist since what he was after was money from me.

Once when crossing the border into Guinea overland, - a notorious spot for having to hand out bribes – just by 'calling the horses', I sailed through the various police checks. In fact, I came out with my pockets stuffed with money – given to me by immigration officers who were astonished to hear me sing the song. Another time, an immigration officer at Mali's Bamako-Senou airport tried to tell me that my visa was

not in order. Discovering that his surname was Traoré, I sang *Tiramakan*, the song that praises his ancestors. He looked surprised, but would not budge. However, when I 'called the horses' for him, he grabbed my hand and shook it heartily, then waved me on through customs. That was his gift to me for reminding him of his social obligations.

The social context

The woman who sang the song in Paris was a jeli or griot. The man she sang to was a *horon*, or "freeborn", a descendant of Mali's pre-colonial rulers and warriors. It is the *jelimuso's* business to know the genealogy of every Malian surname; it is the *horon's* business to reward this act with some kind of a gift, nowadays usually money.

The *jelimuso* automatically considered this man a 'patron', merely by virtue of his surname, even though she has never met him before and may never see him again. Neither he nor she understood the exact meaning of the song's rather obscure lyrics, except that they refer to the heroes and wars of the great Mali Empire of many centuries ago. But clearly, some exchange happened that is considered meaningful by the two protagonists.

Scenes of this kind, with a *jelimuso* 'calling the horses' for a patron, are played out frequently wherever there are Mande people, either in their region of origin in West Africa, or abroad as immigrants. The song is archaic, and unique, but also ubiquitous. No one except a jeli may sing it. It is fundamental to the expression of jeli culture, and yet, little has been written about it. At worst, the song is formulaic and predictable; at best, it is an exhilarating vocal tour de force, technically demanding, powerful, improvisational and highly individual - a praise song *par excellence*, a kind of 'calling card' of the jelis.

Soliyo is widely performed by jelis across a vast geographical area, from Gambia in the West to Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire in the east. This broad diffusion of the song and the consistency of its features, language, and social function, suggests that it is very old indeed. Its special features include:

- emphasis on horses, their might and their metaphorical power
- the mention of the name Silamakanba Koita, in connection with horses
- it is short, lasting anywhere between 30 seconds to two minutes
- it is ideally performed acapella and is in free rhythm
- it begins with the word '*Soliyo*' (or in dialectic variants, *Soruwo* or *Suolu-o*). -- Yo or -wo at the end of a name indicates that it is being called (a kind of vocative tense). It ends with a formulaic reference to the battlefield, but the rest of the text and melody may be improvised

These features suggest that *Soliyo* has an essentially ritual function, and acts as a fundamental statement of the relationship between the jeli and other members of Mande society. And so it may be sung at any time that a jeli encounters someone they consider a 'patron', in order to praise him/her.

Little girls in jeli families are trained to sing the basic lines of this song before they can even speak, and certainly before they can possibly understand the meanings of

the words. There is something slightly surreal about hearing these archaic lines from a bygone era glorifying war and conquest, coming out of such tiny mouths. Despite political instability in Mali since 2012, and insurrection in the north of the country, war has not occurred in the southern part of the country since the struggle against colonial rule at the end of the 19th century; the Mande are well known for being a peaceful people.

From the age of about ten, jeli girls begin to sing with their mothers in public, such as at wedding parties. By this time they will be expected to be able to perform the *Soliyo* in a reasonably complex version. This song is indeed how girls begin to learn the skill of improvisation, which is so intrinsic to the griot's art.

Soliyo crops up in performances of Mande epics, such as in the story of Sunjata Keita, who founded the Mali Empire in c. 1235. Singers will tend to place it at strategic moments in the story, for example, when narrating the events of a battle. Often it sounds like more of a praise song for horses, than for the warriors who rode them.

Versions of the *Soliyo* are also embedded in thousands of recordings of vocal music by Mande jelis - a song within a song, serving to heighten the emotional intensity of the performance. Sometimes just the opening or closing lines of *Soliyo* are sufficient to add what is like a dose of strong pepper.

There are many passing mentions of *Soliyo* in the vast literature on Mande music and oral tradition, but little in-depth discussion of it. Somehow it has slipped under the radar of most scholars. Why?

One of the problems in identifying and understanding the piece is the variation in language and dialect across the geographical area where Mande culture exists, which means that it may be referred to with apparently different titles. It would appear, however, judging from musical features, that the piece comes from the west of Mali. As we shall see, however, some elements in the song point to a different regional origin, further east.

Obscure words, powerful sounds

In one of the most comprehensive published accounts of the story of Sunjata Keita (founder of the Mali empire in c.1235), the senior Malian jeli, Wa Kamissoko, refers to 'Calling the horses' as the song with which the *jelimuso* ritually begins her singing, but comments, 'if not for that, most *jeliw* don't even know its meaning any more, nor can they pronounce all of it' (Cisse & Kamissoko 1988: 323; my translation).

'Jelikan' (literally, the language of jelis) is the name for the special vocabulary and phrasing that the jelis use in both speech and song during particular ritual moments. Some of the vocabulary is extremely obscure, because it has been retained from a much earlier period of history, possibly even going back to the period when the Mali empire was founded (c1235). Thus, it would be like hearing words and grammar from the time of Chaucer, but passed down through the ages via word of mouth. Inevitably, words have been transformed and given new meanings. There is also the belief that the jeli's spoken or sung word contains an esoteric force, known as *nyama*.

Bards, called jeliw, are the genealogists and epic poets of Mande society. They are at once historians, musicians, and political motivators... while the great bards pride themselves on knowing history most authoritatively, they are rarely interested in its accurate public presentation. They manipulate the details of history to motivate their audiences. One of their most important tasks is to inspire the Mande citizenry, to fill people with the desire to live up to their potential so that society remains solid and vital... For the Mande, words are full of special energy, which can be dangerous if misused. Bards are believed to possess great reserves of this same power, and they are trained to manipulate it. Thus their songs become more than inspirational. They are instrumental. The power in them can inhabit an audience and literally drive it to all manner of acts.

Patrick McNaughton 1988: 6-7

(note on terminology and orthography: *jeliw* is the Bamana plural of *jeli*. The term 'bard' rather than griot is used by many scholars to describe jelis.)

McNaughton's study focuses on the world of Mande blacksmiths, whose craft, like that of the jelis, is inherited within special families. They belong to a sector of society known as *nyamakala* - occupational hereditary artisans - but many of the concepts he describes are central to the thought of jelis as well. His insight into the way that songs have 'power' and can 'inhabit' the audience, helps us to understand why a song like 'Calling the horses' can produce such a strong impact on the listener.

In another part of his book (pp. 143-44), McNaughton writes about the concepts of *jayan* (clarity) versus *dibi* (darkness, obscurity) used by blacksmiths to describe the masks they carve.

The blacksmiths' ideas about clarity versus obscurity that McNaughton documents are also relevant to the songs of jelis. Veteran jelis emphasise the importance of clear delivery of text and melody; the lyrics must be enunciated in such a way that each word and phrase can be heard distinctly. This resonates with the blacksmiths' concept of *jayan* or clarity in the lines of a mask. Clarity of lyrics is especially important, given that most information in Mande culture has circulated orally rather than in written form, and that song has played a vital role in this for centuries. The flow of the words and phrases should determine the melodies in the improvised, recitative sections, while the choruses are more rhythmic in jeli song. On the other hand, the actual words used may be obscure, allowing performers and listeners to provide various interpretations, according to the situation. This conforms to the concept of *dibi*, or obscurity. And as the jeli Wa Kamissoko rightly comments (quoted above), even the singers themselves do not always understand the words, nor from what wellspring of oral knowledge they have drawn their text.

'Something happens when you improvise the great songs of the past' comments Hawa Kasse Mady Diabate, one of the finest singers of the younger generation of *jelimuso*, whose version of *Soliyo* is analysed later on. Each time she performs a song from the Mande repertoire, she does it differently, as she told me in Bamako in 2013:

I myself sometimes don't even know what I've just sung. It comes from deep inside me. Maybe they're words I've snatched out of my memory from having heard my parents and grandparents perform. Others will ask of me, "what is that name you sang then?" and to be able to answer, I may have to listen back to a recording of myself, and even then I may not know. These are names from a long time ago. You must ask the elders if you want to know what they mean.

The Mande have a strong belief in something they call 'yeredon' – to know yourself, which means, to know who your ancestors were and what they did, and the jelis have always played an important role in imparting such information. Hence the line, 'A patron of a jeli is better off than someone who has no jeli.'

'If you know who you are, and what your origins are, you'll never do bad things' Bako Dagnon, one of Mali's most respected veteran *jelimusow*, told me when I interviewed her at home in Bamako in 1997.

The jeli sings to his patron, 'you are so and so, your father did this, your grandfather did that, you don't have the right to do something bad.' If you see someone doing something bad, the jeli says to them, this is unworthy of your culture, of your country.... Women observe much more than men. Men go straight for the action, women check it out first, they have lots of little ways of doing things. The jelimuso is a good commentator.

Musical features

Mande music, like Mande culture in general, has not developed in a vacuum. It has been in contact with many different styles across North and West Africa for centuries, to such an extent that it is sometimes hard to unravel what is indigenous and what comes from elsewhere. It is tempting to think that 'Calling the horses', with its melisma and free rhythm, is in some way influenced by the Muslim call to prayer. But the descending and declamatory melodies are shared with the Mande repertoire in general, especially in the improvised sections (known as *teremeli* in Maninka and Bamana, and *sataro* in Mandinka). These sections, which are undoubtedly part of a centuries-old style, are the true test of a jeli's skill and knowledge. The more likely explanation for any similarity between the *Soliyo* and the adhan or call to prayer is that the region is located on the trade routes between sub-saharan Africa and the Near and Middle East, and has absorbed elements from both.

Soliyo does have musical features that set it apart from other Mande jeli songs. These are: its acapella performance; its short length; and its opening and closing phrases which are exclusive to the song. It must begin with the exclaimed word '*Soliyo!*' (or *Soruwo!*) which usually starts on the 5th and goes down to the tonic; and it must close with some version of the following text: '*y'a muta, y'a faga, kele*' (you seize him, you kill him – that's war'), which falls from the 3rd degree of the scale to the 5th below tonic, finally ending on the tonic. In between these two 'musical book ends', the singer will insert any number of formulaic phrases. In addition, individualised textual material related to the regional background, knowledge and skill of the singer, and the person to whom he/she is singing, is inserted. The scale may include both a major and minor 3rd, and both flat and natural 7ths, and each phrase tends to go

downwards, or go up and down rapidly within a range of a 4th. (This is also a characteristic of other Mande griot melodies).

'Calling the horses' is the only piece in the Mande repertoire that is performed acapella. When inserted into another song, however (as described above), the scale and rhythm may be adapted accordingly, but it fits best with a major key accompaniment such as *Jawura*.

Timed listening guide: Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, *Soliyo*, audio track, recorded in December, 2012

Summary: This listening guide analyses this particular rendition of *Soliyo* according to its text, which is in short phrases, each separated by a very brief pause. The listener can compare this analysis with another version by the same singer (video recording) which is shorter and less elaborate (quoted later on).

The tonal centre (tonic) for this *Soliyo* is F, and the melody is in a major heptatonic scale, with both a flat and natural 7th. The melodic range is a 10th; it goes up to a flat 7th (Eflat) above the tonic, and down to the 5th (C) below the tonic. This is fairly typical of performances of *Soliyo*. Most of the phrases are in syllabic and descending contour, following the rhythm of the spoken word, in an improvisational style known as *teremeli*. This texture is varied by a few words such as 'horse' being drawn out with melisma, sustained notes, heavy vibrato and some microtonal variation (presumably a legacy of the literal 'call to horses'), to dramatic effect.

Time	Words	Translation	Notes on the melodic structure
------	-------	-------------	--------------------------------

00:00 *Soriyo* (calling the horses) begins with a rapid glissando up to C in the treble clef on the syllable *So-* and descends in a melismatic phrase to the tonic.

00:07 *iyehhe* (a meaningless exclamation, - probably a call to horses) – drawn out over pitches 3, 4 and 5, with sustained vibrato on the last note 3 (note A)

00:12 *Jalitigi ni jalitan mankan/ Mògòtigi ni mògòtan mankan/ Mògò lakali mand'i konyògòn ye*

(A man/noble with *jelis* is not comparable to the one without *jelis*/ A popular noble is not comparable to a man without followers/ A man is not always best praised by his peers) A recitation of three phrases with an almost identical melodic profile: using one note per syllable on pitches 3,2 and 1 of the scale, and a dropped almost spoken final syllable, characteristic of much of the Mande griot repertoire.

00:23 *N'bè soli welela*, (I call the horses) The singer adds intensity by going up to the 6th (high D) and then descends down to the 3rd (A) with some ornamentation on the last syllable

00:26 *jatigi baro/ i ka di jatigi min ye/ ni ye jatigi jugu baro* (Entertain a patron who likes you/ if you entertain a bad patron,), three phrases which start on the high 6th (D) and descending to the 3rd (A) with some tonal inflection and vibrato on the last syllable of each phrase

00:32 *N'a ma fi ye son ye, a b'a fi ye fana ye* (They will either accuse you of being a thief or a gossip) Two phrases, the first descends from the 5th to the 3rd, and the second goes from the 2nd to the 4th and then down to the tonic.

00:37 *Jatigi jugu la baro man di n'ye abada* (I do not like entertaining bad patrons at all) the phrase starts on the 3rd and goes up to the 5th before descending to the tonic. The last six syllables are all on the tonic (F). There is a longer pause between this and the next phrase.

00:41 *N'bè jigi barika da*, (I thank patrons) a syllabic phrase that starts on the high 6th (D) and descends to the 3rd, (although the last syllable is almost spoken)

00:44 *ah n'bè kanu barika da – yi* (I give thanks to love) This single phrase, which goes across an whole octave, goes up to the flat 7th (Eflat) and down to the Eflat an octave below, also has some longer held notes performed with a rich vibrato on the first and last syllables of the phrase.

00:51 *A ye hòròn nyumannu barika n'ye* (Please give thanks to all good nobles) The phrase descends from the 5th to the tonic.

00: 55 *Ala mògòlu da/ Ala ma mògò bè lakanya/ kè mògò fè min bĩ fè/ fara mògò de la/ mògò min tĩ fè* (God created men / but God not make them equal/ love someone who loves you back/ and avoid those who do not love you. Four syllabic phrases descending from the 6th to the 3rd.

01:06 *Ne bè n'ka jigi barika da jatigi nyumannu ye lon o lon/ Kanu ka wusa ni fa ye/ jigi ka wusa ni fa ye.* (I give thanks to all patrons every day for all their good deeds. Love and good deeds from a patron is better than having a father) Three phrases in syllabic recitation with descending lines across the notes that fall between the 5th and the tonic.

01:14 *I dali so nina hee-yi* (Get used to this horse) This phrase signals that the song is coming to an end, as the singer is calling the horses for a last time. There is a pause between the two parts of the phrase; the second part of the phrase ascends from the tonic up to the 4th, and then glides down to the 2nd with heavy vibrato before dropping in almost spoken mode

01:21 *ahh kèlè yi fè/ i y'a muta o i y'a faga/ kèlèeee* (the battle is yours/ when you capture someone, you kill them, that's war!) This is the standard formulaic ending to the piece, with melismatic melody descending an octave down to the 5th below tonic, via the flat 7th, and ending on the sustained tonic with the word 'war'.

Why 'Call horses'?

There is no doubt that the tradition of singing this song goes back to pre-colonial times, when horses were highly prized because of their prowess in the battlefield. But when and why did this tradition come about? The first question is therefore, 'who are the horses and why call them?' To answer, evidence must be pieced together from a number of sources – oral literature, live performance, recordings, interviews, observation, the culture of horses in the Mande world and even, as it turns out, archeology.

Whenever I asked about the meaning of 'Calling the horses', both singers and listeners would describe it in metaphorical terms; there have been no battles on

horseback for well over a century, not since the pre-colonial era. The reference to horses was not considered important per se, except as a signifier of the power of the person to whom the song was dedicated, because kings rode horses. 'The opening call *solio* establishes a sense of grandeur' was how some jelis have expressed it to me.

However, I began to wonder if this elongated musical cry could originally have been quite literally a call – a call that a horse would be trained to recognise and respond to. This would explain why the song is so short, and acapella. Perhaps the real protagonist of the song is not the patron after all, but the horse itself. This would explain a recitation of the epic story of Sunjata, recorded in the Gambia in 1970, where Sunjata asks his jeli to call the horses, and a white stallion appears.

Sunjata said to Bala Faaseega Kuyate [his jeli]

'Haven't you called the horses for me?'

Bala asked, 'what sort of a thing is a horse?'

*Sunjata said to him, 'a griot is an impatient fellow,
Just call the horses'.*

'Come horses! Oh horses! Mighty Sira Makhang'...

'When he called the horses,

a white stallion appeared,

and Sunjata said, 'this is a fine looking horse'

(Bamba Suso and Banna Kanuteh: Sunjata, Penguin edition pp. 17-18



Horses wearing the traditional ornamental tack, on parade at the Segou Festival, 2006



A young Fulbe man shows off his riding skills to a local crowd, Bandiagara, 2010

Horses have been in the West African savannah at least since the 9th century, probably introduced to the region by Berber traders. They are still widely used for transport in rural Mali. For some populations of the middle Niger valley, such as the Fulbe, skill in the saddle is an important aspect of cultural identity to this day. (The Fulbe are a large and influential ethnicity throughout West Africa who have lived alongside the Mande for centuries).

In the pre-colonial era, that is, up until the late 19th century, Mande warlords practiced equestration, and fought wars on horseback. According to oral tradition, they trained their horses to prance to the music of jelis when returning victorious from battle. It is, of course, well known that horses have an ear for music, as in the Spanish and Viennese riding schools, where horses dance to waltzes and pasodobles.

There are many songs that tell of horses dancing to the sound of two of the jeli instruments, the balafon (Mande xylophone) and kora (a 21-string harp). The popular balafon piece *Keme Bourama*, dedicated to the 19th century warlord and Muslim cleric Almami Samory Toure (1830-1900) and his half-brother Keme Bourama, is sometimes also called *So bala* (the horses' balafon tune), because its lively interlocking melody made the horses spring in time to the rhythm. One of its refrains reflects how much Keme Bourama valued his horse – comparing it to his wife. It says '*Keme Bourama has three brides: Yoro [his horse], Mariama Sire [his wife], 'enemy-slayer' (the name of his sword)*'.

Another well-known Mande song, *Kuruntu Kelefa*, supposedly the first piece ever composed specifically for the kora, has the refrain, '*Ah, see the horses dancing / Look, the war is over, the horses are dancing*'.

Horses are depicted in *Soliyo* as creatures of awe, a 'fearsome thing' (*so man nyin de*). Some of the lines describe horses as 'traitors', because they are more powerful than their riders: 'the horse can betray, even the horse's reins can betray' (*so ye*

jamfati ye, so nugulen ye jamfati ye). The jelis explain these lines as follows: 'even if a rider tries to hold tight to the horse's reins, the horse may not obey. Or the horse may die, leaving its rider on the ground, vulnerable.'

Some lines in the Mande epics attribute horses with almost human qualities -

*This is how we praise the horses, we say
Master of the wild bush,
Host-killing hunter.
Stranger in the afternoon and village chief by morning.
Mouth full of chain and back full of saddle,
Your forefeet dig a grave and your hind feet close it.
Your tail fans misfortune away from your neck.
Your spine tramples misfortune,
The pupil of your eye blinks at misfortune,
Your nose snorts at misfortune,
Your ears twitch at misfortune.*

[quoted from David Conrad, 1990 p. 201]

Sorotomo – a city of horses

This opens up an exploration of how song can throw light on history and vice versa. It may also provide a missing clue as to the specific origins of *Soliyo*.

As already stated, Mande jelis belong to hereditary lineages of specialist families who have been entrusted with the art of music for centuries. These families have special surnames, one of which is Koita. The Koita jeli lineage traces its ancestry to Soro, an ancient city which now remains only as archeological site in central Mali, and to its most prestigious ruler, Silamakanba Koita. The site of this city is known as Sorotomo ('the ruins of Soro') and has long been uninhabited. It is a huge field of mounds in a rolling plain not far from the Niger river to the west of Segou, near a market village called Konodimini (a name which means, 'stomach pain').

Biography of the *jelimuso* Ami Koita

Some Malians believe that the only truly authoritative versions of *Soliyo* are those sung by *jelis* of the Koita lineage, because they are considered descendants of Silamakanba Koita. Ami Koita was one of the most popular and innovative *jelimuso* in the 1990s. Born in 1952 in Djoliba, a village some 40 kms west of Bamako, she is an example of how female *jelis* are grounded in the tradition but find ways of innovating as well. Ami grew up in a celebrated family of *jelis*: her mother, a noted singer, was from Kirina, one of the major centres of *jeli* learning. Kirina was founded by two lineages – the Koitas (*jelis*) and the Keitas (nobles), according to Ami. Her maternal uncle, Wa Kamissoko (1925-76), was probably the greatest orator of his time, famous for his knowledge of ancient Mande history and for his recitations of the story of Sunjata Keita which were published in 1975. In 1969, aged 17, Ami won a competition to join the state-sponsored Ensemble Instrumental National of Mali, where she stayed for two years. In 1971 she composed and recorded *Wadjan*, a song in honour of her uncle Wa Kamissoko. Only a few years later, this became one of the most successful tunes of the Mande repertoire, when Salif Keita recorded a version with the title *Mandjou*, in praise of Guinea's first president, Ahmed Sekou Touré.

With her background in the deep traditional styles and songs of *jeliya*, Ami Koita was also a moderniser, changing the sound of the traditional *jeli* ensemble by adding an electric guitar, drum machine, synthesiser, and global rhythms. Her most successful album was *Tata Sira*, in praise of a woman patron, in 1990. Because she sometimes used Latin rhythms in her music she was called “*jeli pachanga*”, and also was known as “*jeli finesse*”, because of her dress style. During this period she was in great demand on local television and at concerts in West Africa, and also received generous financial support from several patrons, including ‘Concorde’ Gaye, a Senegalese businessman, so-called because he always flew Concorde.

I interviewed Ami Koita in Bamako back in 1991, asking her about the Koitas and her connection to the *Soliyo*.

LD. *Can you explain about calling the horses? Because the song mentions the name Koita, and that is your surname.*

AK. *This song is uniquely for the Koitas: it's dedicated to Soro Siramakanba Koita, the first warlord. The jelis used to sing for him and call the horses because he loved horses - he used to speak to them. So whenever someone does something good, the jelis will 'call the horses' for that person, but always remembering Sira Mankanba Koita.*

Jimme was his brother: That's why we sing Soliyo Jimme. This was long before Sunjata's time, it happened at Sorotomo near Segou. At Konodimini there's a museum which tells the story of Siramakanba Koita. These are my ancestors. They were originally from Segou during the Wagadu empire, but then they moved west to Manden, at the time of Sunjata. There are Koitas who were noble and others became jelis, they are my ancestors.



Ami Koita holding one of her music awards, 1993, Bamako. Photo: Lucy Duran

Ami Koita's statement that her ancestors moved westwards into the Manden region (present-day western Mali and eastern Guinea) may answer one question about the melody of 'Calling the horses'. Sorotomo is located in central Mali, where the music is characterised by its pentatonic scales. Why then is 'Calling the horses' in a heptatonic scale, the style of music further west? Possibly because of the migration of its jelis, who would have adapted their songs to the different musical aesthetic of the locale. And why would they migrate and leave this powerful kingdom?

The answer lies in the story of Sorotomo, the second largest archaeological settlement site in Mali. In this sense, the study of *Soliyo* is a rare instance where a song of oral tradition can contribute to the findings of conventional archeology in Africa.

The meeting point between Archeology and Ethnomusicology is often referred to as Music Archeology, and focuses primarily on reconstructions of a non-extant musical past through material culture – sound artifacts such as musical instruments, and depictions of music performance. Looking at a West African past through song texts and melody is more problematic because of the dynamic nature of oral tradition. In this case, work on the archeological site of Sorotomo has begun to reveal the story of a prosperous city whose power was based on its cavalry. This may well unlock the meaning of the obscure references and musical features in the piece *Soliyo*, which in turn, provides further evidence to support the findings of archeology in West Africa.

Sorotomo only began to be excavated in 2006, by a team led by the UK-based archeologist Kevin MacDonald and Malian historian Seydou Camara. Little was known about it before. Their excavations and research into local oral traditions suggest that Silamakanba Koita, - whose name features in many versions of *Soliyo* -

was its most prominent ruler. He was a warlord who owned an enormous cavalry; some say he had as many as 100,000 horses.

Oral traditions collected by the team from elders in villages around the site, provide a colourful account of the culture of horses in Sorotomo.

When he [Silamakanba Koita] rose up to go and conquer another place, he would have trees cut down and placed across the road. His cavalry would then pass over them. So numerous were the horses that they would continue until their hooves had cut the tree trunks in two. At that moment he would say 'Stop, that's enough horses!' ...

MacDonald et al, p. 54-5

It is possible that the horses may have been called to the road by women singing some version of what is now known as *Soliyo*, a song equally in praise of the ruler and his horses.

Interview with the *jelimuso* Kandia Kouyate, (Primary source)
Kandia Kouyate (b. 1958 in Kita, western Mali) was considered one of Mali's most knowledgeable and greatest voices of the 1980s and 90s. I conducted a lengthy interview with her in 1998 which was published in a magazine called *Folk Roots* in 1999.

LD - what is the importance of the soliyo, why do you sing it all the time?

KK. Soliyo? You know, in the old days you couldn't do anything without horses. All the big things that happened, were with horses. The religious wars of Almamy Samori Toure happened with horses. The religious wars of Cheikh Oumar Tall were fought with horses! So when the griots saw horses, they would sing:

(sings) "Soru-wo! Yeh, Su kele mansadingo nyara yariyari" (Horses oh, the princes' war horses were beautiful).

[speaks] yariyari means the horses have left like this, yariyari. The horses were well-dressed - yes! The king's horses were well dressed. So when they rode off, they went like this: yari - yari - yari. That's why when i sing Soliyo, I put this into my song.

Soliyo, soliyo - all the griots start with soliyo. Because one can never "sing a king" if he has no horses. He always has horses. In the old days there were no cars! One travelled from country to country with the horses. ...

LD - is this soliyo a fixed song or can you sing anything?

KK - You can sing anything but it must be things that the great warriors have done, involving horses. For example, soliyo is the Magan [Makan]. The Magan was someone who had many horses, Makanba Koita, that was before the time of Sunjata. He was a great warrior. You can never sing Soliyo without singing Soru Siramaganba [Silamakanba] Koita...

LD - there are many things in your songs that are not everyday language. When I asked your sister-in-law what you sang..., she said she didn't know, it was 'jelikan' (the special language of jelis).

KK - (laughs) Yes. But what I mean is that there are many words [in my songs], expressions one doesn't hear elsewhere - words that I learnt from the elders. They're not just any words, they're words that are carefully controlled. Not everyone can understand.

Both Ami Koita and Kandia Kouyaté place the time of Silamakanba Koita from before

the Mali empire, in other words, before the 13th century. But MacDonald's excavations at Sorotomo suggest that it was founded in the early 13th century, and *'abandoned in the 15th century at the time of imperial Songhay's initial military surge into the region... [suffering] 'a brutal and sudden abandonment, with possessions – from pots and grinding stones, to spindle-whorls and cowries – left in place.'*(MacDonald et al pp. 57-8).

Perhaps this 'brutal and sudden abandonment' gives us another key to the mysteries of *Soliyo*. Could it be that the fall of Sorotomo was predicted, as a result of which the *jelis* called the horses to get ready for battle?

The belief in the power of diviners and omens is a running theme in the Mande world to this day. Many examples of this can be found in the Mande epics. Omens are mentioned in the texts of *Soliyo*, with the words *'kawuru* (also spelt *kauru*) *santigi*', that occur in many different performances across geographical space and time. Though difficult to translate, *jelis* believe they refer to an omen of some kind. They occur in another version of the song, by the same singer, and the text is quoted here for comparison. Readers may view the video of this performance.

SOLIYO as sung by Hawa Kasse Mady Diabaté, December 2012.

Hawa Kasse Mady Diabaté, quoted earlier in the chapter, was brought up in Kela, a village in southwest Mali that is famous for its oral traditions. Her father, Kasse Mady Diabaté, is considered one of the finest voices of the Mande world, and his family are well-known for their powerful performances of *Soliyo*.

This is a translation of another of her performances of *Soliyo*, which if compared to the previous version (analysed in the timed listening guide), shows how different the lyrics can be, even if the melodic contours and some of the textual imagery remain roughly the same. [Possible explanations of the Maninka language lyrics are placed in square brackets].

(Compare this with a version sung by Hawa's father while teaching his granddaughters, in the film 'Da Kali: the pledge to the art of the griot', at 23 minutes 30 seconds into the film. <www.growingintomusic.co.uk>)

Soliyo,

Horses, oh!

Eh, m'be kanu barika da

I give thanks to love

Soliyo ye-i

Horses, oh!

Mm, kèlè yĩ fe

You are good at war

Kawuru santigi

[no clear explanation of this line; possibly 'there is an omen']

Yoro-jan-kibaru fobaga

The teller of far-away news [note: is this the jeli? Or has a rider brought news from afar about imminent invasion? Or is it the horse who brings news?]

I da kali yo i da kali, yo yi,

Pledge your oath!

Sama duna nyoo tu la

elephant in the millet field [a metaphor for power]

Gènbaga tĩ la.

No herder can drive you out

I kera i fa ye,

You have your father's qualities

I kera i bembaye

You are like your ancestors

Ah, kèlè yĩ fe

War goes well for you

Ya mina le y'a faga,

You captured someone, you killed them

A m'fa,

Oh my elder,

Kèlè man di dangaden na.

War does not go well for the useless

Thus '*kawuru santigi*' (not a standard phrase in modern-day Maninka) could refer to an 'omen', connected with the 'bearer of far-away news'. Could it be, then, that the jelis used this song as a special melody to call the horses when the city was threatened, and its inhabitants then scattered and slaughtered? Could the jelis of Sorotomo have then moved westwards, sometime in the late 15th century, keeping

alive the memory of Sorotomo with its giant cavalry, - a musical reminder of its extraordinary might and power?

Conclusion

This very short piece of music, *Soliyo*, holds many stories across a long period of time and a wide geographical space in West Africa. This chapter has explored its meanings and its contexts, and by drawing on new archeological research, it has speculated on a possible original function for the song, which accounts for its unique qualities. *Soliyo*, I suggest, began life during the early period of the Mali empire some 700 hundred years ago as, quite literally, a musical call to horses, performed exclusively by the jelis. Embedded in the melody is a musical cry that a horse might have been trained to respond to.

If the ruler could control his vast cavalry of horses with reins and whips, the *jeli* could, perhaps, cajole them with music and song. The song adds weight to the argument, based on archeological excavations, that Sorotomo may have been a forgotten capital of the Mali Empire.

Unlike the Mande epics, 'Calling the horses' is not about transmitting specific historical knowledge. Instead, it conveys a sense of Mali's powerful past through both its obscure words and its special melodies; the acapella performance gives it a raw power and evokes a feeling of bygone times. It is sung to remind people of their place in and their obligations to society; its value is as an expression of individual and collective identity. It may also lend a significant piece of evidence in the reconstruction of the importance of Sorotomo. *Soliyo* has thus played a crucial role in the continuity of Mande history and cultural values across the centuries.

References cited

Charry, Eric. 2000. *Mande Music: traditional and modern music of the Maninka and Mandinka of West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute. 1999. *Sunjata*. Edited by Graham Furniss and Lucy Duran. London: Penguin Classics

Both, Arnd Adje. 2009. 'Music archaeology: some methodological and theoretical considerations', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 41, pp. 1-11

Conrad, David. 1990. *A State of intrigue: the epic of Bamana Segu according to Tayiru Banbera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Durán, Lucy. 1999. 'Kandia Kouyate: flying in Kita, in: *Folk Roots*, 189, pp. 20-25

----- . 2007. 'Ngaraya: women and musical mastery in Mali', in *Bulletin of SOAS*, 70/3, pp. 569-602

Knight, Roderic C 1973. *Mandinka jaliya: professional music of the Gambia*. PhD thesis, UCLA

MacDonald, K.C., Camara, S., Canós Donnay S., Gestrich, N., Keita, D. 2009-11. 'Sorotomo: a forgotten Malian capital?' *Archeology International* 13-14, pp. 52-64

McNaughton, Patrick R. 1988. *The Mande blacksmiths: knowledge, power, and art in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press