

OF YOUTH-HARPS AND SONGBIRDS: THE SWEET MUSIC OF WASULU

by

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“You are a musician? What instrument do you play?” the Afghani store owner asks me as he fixes me a fresh brewed cup of tea. I pull down my heavy scarf, and gently tap on my throat, smiling. “Ah, you are a singer!” he exclaims. “Yes, I reply playfully. The voice is my instrument.” He, too, smiles and adds, “you know, a good musician can make excellent music but without a song, it’s just good music. A song makes it a thing of beauty.” I nod my head in empathetic agreement and walk over to the counter to pay. The merchandise on the shelf against the back wall reminds me of Mali: incense, soap, an assortment of teas, perfumes and colognes, all in Arabic. He follows me half way and adds, “You know, in my country they say, you can make a rice porridge,” he pauses, preparing to execute the punch line, “but without ‘sugar,’” and we both say smiling in unison, “it isn’t sweet!” I walk out of the store into the blustering cold chill of a January day in Charlottesville, Virginia but my heart is warmed with thoughts of Mali and sugar. (Charlottesville, VA. 2008)

Introduction

In 1992 the West African nation of Mali proudly became a democratic republic (la III ème République) under the leadership of the dynamic president, Alpha Oumar Konaré. With this political transition came a host of dramatic cultural changes in the nation’s capital, Bamako. One such change was a new kind of music called *wassoulou*.¹ Gritty and funky, yet deeply rooted in the Wasulu traditions of Mali’s southeastern heartland, *wassoulou* and its brilliant female singers carried a new voice to Bamako and beyond: a democratic voice that expressed fresh, youthful, and feminine perspectives about life. In the early 1990s, this new sound invaded the nation’s commercial music sector, radio, and television with astounding success and swiftly became the driving musical force in popular culture.

Why did *wassoulou*, of all regional styles throughout the country, become such an omnipresent and powerful force in Mali? What makes it so special? This article investigates this question through the lens of local epistemologies and perspectives about *wassoulou* from those who know it most intimately: singers, musicians, local scholars, and music entrepreneurs. Making use of parallels between linguistic anthropology and ethnomusicology I draw particularly on linguist Dell Hymes’ findings regarding language style within various speech communities, to explore the idea that “fluent members of

¹ For the sake of consistency, I comply with Lucy Dúran’s adoption of two different spellings to distinguish the region (Wasulu) as used in modern Bambara orthography from the style of music (*wassoulou*) commonly used in the music industry (Dúran 1995:101).

communities often evaluate their languages as *not equivalent* [italics mine]” in terms of music style within music communities (Hymes 1989:451). Hymes observes that one language, or variety, is often preferred for some uses, another for others. “All of them may find, say, Kurdish the medium in which most things can best be expressed, but Arabic the better medium for religious truth. Users of Berber may find Arabic superior to Berber for all purposes except intimate domestic conversation.” (Hymes 1989:451)

The present study explores how Malians also view music styles as *not equivalent*, with a focus on the common opinion that *wassoulou* is the nation’s “natural” choice for popular dance and song music, while other music styles are preferred for other uses. Simply put in the words of one Wasulu student, “The Dogon have the best dance, the Bamanan have the best *jeliw*. The Wasulu – the best dance music and singers” (Diakité 2002). This paper digs deep into the regional roots of *wassoulou* to understand how this common opinion has been formed. Descriptive narratives from several personal histories and experiences constitute the bulk of my primary source data, while musical transcriptions and analyses of rhythms, songs, vocal techniques, repertoires, and instruments from the Wasulu region also illustrate many salient points. The analysis ultimately reveals that Wasulu tradition places an extraordinarily high aesthetic premium on musical innovation, dance rhythms, freedom of expression, and mastery of the female singing voice.

Most of these regional, traditional traits of Wasulu music translate directly into modern *wassoulou* music styles and performances. *Wassoulou* symbolizes a youth ethos for its association with the youth-harp (Bambara: *kamalen n’goni*), femininity for its association with its leading singers, also known as *kòndòw*, and freedom for its folkloric roots verses *griot* music culture (*jeliya*). Lucy Dúran is the only other ethnomusicologist to have extensively researched *wassoulou*. Her publications on singers and musical artistry have made a significant contribution to knowledge of Malian music culture. Dúran has duly treated *wassoulou*’s symbolic impact, and her work on the historic aspects of its development as a modern music style resonates with my own on many levels (see Dúran 1995, 2000, 2007; Maxwell 2002, 2003).

This paper will add to Dúran’s work, as well as to that of Eric Charry, David Conrad, Pascale Couloubaly, and others who have written on the Wasulu youth-harp and folksong from the region, a deeper understanding of the traditional music culture from which *wassoulou* emerged, and from which it continues to draw. While the current body of literature has produced evidence of certain key Wasulu repertoires, playing styles and techniques, and musical instruments, there remains a wealth of music tradition still needing to be documented.

In a related study on women and musical mastery in Mali, Dúran makes use of the Mande concept that “the true *ngaraw* [masters] are all at home” (Dúran 2007:569). Here, she refers largely to *griots* and to the comparison between those that live and work in

Mali with those that live and work abroad. I suggest that similarly, the true sweetness of *wassoulou* – that modern, urban style that took wing in Bamako – is at home in the region of Wasulu.

The first section describes the Wasulu region as a place of natural abundance. It examines the musical terrain with a survey of indigenous musical instruments, rhythms, and repertoires. The focus then narrows in on a brief history of the region's most famous musical innovation, the youth-harp, as told through lively conversational narratives. The second section begins with local descriptions of *wassoulou* musicians and singers as “free” and as “artists” with a brief description of non-noble castes and bards in Mande social structure. The major focus turns to an analysis of Wasulu vocal music. It examines the feminization of popular song, and the musical terrain of its vocal repertoires. This section pays a great deal of attention to the art of singing through analyses of form and function of its most important repertoires, including call and response, improvisation, vocal sonorities, rhythm, and other stylistic elements. The final part of the article features a brief narrative history of one songbird, Bintu Sidibé, remembering her days growing up as a young singer in the Wasulu heartland. This narrative provides songs, rhythms, and contextual data about the roots of traditional Wasulu music culture.

Methodology

In 1999–2000 and with the support of a Fulbright Hays research award, I researched *wassoulou* from a wide range of perspectives in Bamako, Wasulu, and later in Paris. I had well-established connections to the music world in Mali because I served in the Peace Corps as an agroforester a decade previously. In the southwestern Minyanka village where I lived I also actively pursued the study of song, xylophone (*bala*) music, and dance, which was integral to everyday life and one of the most highly cherished and common forms of entertainment for the local youth (including myself at the time). In 1991, near the end of my service, I met several Bamako-based singers and musicians during a collaborative music project that culminated in a thematic album (cassette) and video clip of maternal health care called *Keneya*.² Furthermore, as my Peace Corps tenure ended during the time of the democratic revolution, I experienced first-hand, the dramatic impact that some of *wassoulou*'s emerging stars had on the nation, particularly Oumou Sangaré and Nahawa Doumbia.

These early experiences in Malian lifeways and music-making brought me to terms with popular music and musicians in many ways, some of which I have articulated

² *Keneya* was recorded at Ou-Bien Studios and first published by PRITECH and the Ministry of Health in 1991 for local distribution to healthcare workers across the country. It changed hands in the same year to Samassa Records and was distributed as *Keneya Ji* on the commercial markets. The band was called KO TO NYOGON T'ALA, and included the following members: myself aka Heather “Anna Traorè” and Malian singer, Jenneba Seck – vocals; Johnny Sissoko – musical arranger; Sega Sidibé – *jembe*; Shiaka Sidibé – *kamalen n'goni*; Moussa “Remi” Mariko – flute; Stephen “Daouda” Gasteyer – keys and narrator; and Jacquelyn “Tabara” Geier – narrator. All of the songs were co-written by me, Remi, Stephen, Jacquelyn and myself.

in previous articles (Maxwell-Adou 1998; Maxwell 1999). They established for me a close relationship to many of the popular singers, musicians, and music entrepreneurs in Bamako that, ten years later, assisted me in researching *wassoulou*. Several of my former Malian colleagues such as singer Bintu Sidibé, youth-harp player, Shiaka Sidibé, flutist and bandleader Moussa ‘Remi’ Mariko, and music promoter Maikano contribute to this article. Other data comes from singers and researchers I met during the research in 1999–2000, literary works on Malian popular music and song, and local popular music literature. All photographs in this article were taken by myself in the course of field research.

Wasulu: The True Reservoir of Malian Music

The Wasulu region is situated in the extreme southwestern corner of Mali’s Third Region and extends into Eastern Guinea and Northern Côte d’Ivoire. Its people are a mix of ethnicities closely aligned to the Mande culture-complex group and they speak a unique Malinke dialect.³ The geographic zone is much closer to the equatorial zone than Bamako and other central and northern parts of the country. The vegetation is dense, thus it is the most abundant region, providing Mali with mangos, oranges, peanuts, vegetables, and cotton. The Wasulu (and Mande) believe that the physical environment has great influence on the nature of people. In one sense, dense forested areas are natural hosts of creatures from the spirit world, and of important life forces for the living as well such as wild game, herbs, medicines, ore, wood, and other important natural substances.

In a musical sense, the dense forests provide abundant resources for musical instruments. Malians everywhere I went, including France, have something to say about the special musicality of the Wasulu. Many people in Bamako gently teased them for not meeting their agricultural quotas for cotton production because “all they do” is play music, sing, and dance. Others refer to the Wasulu region as “the true reservoir of Malian music” (Diarra 1998a).

Music, Musical Instruments, and Repertoires (*Fòli*)

In Wasulu, music is an interactive mosaic of singing, storytelling, playing music, and dancing defined as *fòli*. In its most general sense, the word *fòli* refers to a statement, a greeting, a word of congratulations, salutation, or public recognition. In music, *fòli* refers to the production of musical sound with “the aid” of instruments or a playful “distraction” and is used in wide range of contexts in rural life. The word *fòlikan* (*kan* meaning language) is the noun used to describe a music style, genre, or repertoire of music; its language of musical sound. The word for song itself is *dònkili*, meaning at once

³ Current statistics from Ethnologue 2001 identify 41,200 Wasulu speakers in Mali, 73,500 in Guinea (1991); and 15,000 in Northern Côte d’Ivoire (1991). Linguistic analysis shows that in Mali, Wasulkan is a dialect of Mande and, in Guinea, a dialect of Kankan Malinke. These analyses emphasize the need for further research and not that Wasulu speakers do not “identify” with either language group therefore suggesting that Wasulkan (the language) might best be considered as its own language (SIL International 1996).

“the egg or testicles of the dance”, or “the egg or testicles of knowledge”, depending on how one interprets *dòn* (*dòn* is a noun for both knowledge and dance).

Musical Instruments (*Fòli Fenw*)

There are several indigenous musical instruments in Wasulu including, but not limited to a cluster of six-string plurars with calabash resonators (*kamalen n'gòni* [Figure 1], *donson n'gòniw*, and *danw*); an array of hollowed gourds and calabashes (*gitan* [Figure 2], *gitan filènw*, and *n'gudew*); drums (*dumuba* [Figure 3], *dumu*, *jembe*); rattles (*wassembaw*); loose-keyed, wooden xylophones (*kòrò kòròw*); wood flutes (*fiyèn*); one-string violins (*juru kelenin* [Figure 4]); horns (*buruw*); metal idiophones (*karinya* [Figure 5]), and a host of others which “haven’t come to Bamako” yet (Diallo 1999; Sidibé 2000).

Men, women, and children all play musical instruments in Wasulu. Most instruments are associated with particular types of events and audiences, the latter often organized on the basis of gender, age, and occupational affiliation. Chart 1 provides an overview of the instruments and their social organization. Men’s instruments include all of the regions’ drums, flutes, horns, string instruments, metal idiophones, and rattles. These are the most important instruments for public performance events, especially dance-entertainment and storytelling events that involve participants of mixed gender, age, and social groups. Theoretically, every man is free to play any of these instruments except for the hunters-harp (*donson n'gòni*) which may only be built, played, or sung to by initiated bards of the occupational society of hunters, known as the hunters’ bards (*donsonjeliw* or *donson n'gònifòlaw*).



Figure 1. youth-harp (*kamalen n'gòni*), Mali, 2006



Figure 2. The *gitan*, Mali, 2006

Apart from women's primary instrument of the voice, which will be examined in more detail later, they play idiophones that are modified only slightly from their natural state to produce rhythmic and timbral sounds. The human hand, for example, is transformed into a formidable rhythmic instrument when clapped together (*tègèrè fò*). Large, hollowed, semi-calabashes (*filèn*) that are staple household containers in every Wasulu kitchen are temporarily transformed into musical instruments when the occasional need arises, and then returned to their original use after the performance is over, with minimal adjustments. The *gitan*, another semi-calabash, is ornately decorated with cowry shells and tossed in the air to produce rhythms by the sound of the shells crashing and clacking against its sides as they catch it. The *n'gude* (Figure 6) is a long, tubular gourd with openings at each end, which produces an unusual rhythmic sound as the player stops and unstops the ends with the palms of her hands.



Figure 3. Wasulu *dumuba* played at a wedding in Djelibougou, Bamako, 2000



Figure 4. *juru kelenin*, Mali, 2006



Figure 5. The *karinya*, Mali, 2006



Figure 6. Woman playing the *n'gude* in Wassada (Wasulu), Mali, 2000

Instrument Type	Indigenous Name	Player: Men	Player: Women	Player: Children
Voice	<i>Kan</i>	X	X	X
Chordophones				
Harp	<i>Kamalen n'gòni</i>	X		
Harp	<i>Donson n'gòni</i>	X		
Harp	<i>Dan</i>	X		
Harp	<i>Samankoro</i>	X		
Membranaphones				
Hand drum	<i>Jembe</i>	X		
Hand & stick drum	<i>Tamani</i>	X		
Stick drum	<i>Dunuw</i>	X		
Aerophones				
Side blown flute	<i>Fiyen</i>	X		
Animal horns	<i>Buru</i>	X		
Idiophones				
Metal scraper	<i>Karinya</i>	X		
Wood balafon	<i>Kòrò kòrò</i>			X
Stick calabash drum	<i>Filèn</i>		X	
Calabash percussion	<i>Gitan</i>		X	
Gourd percussion	<i>N'gude</i>		X	
Gourd rattle	<i>Sira</i>		X	
Gourd rattle	<i>Wassemba</i>	X		
Hand clap	<i>Tègèrè fò</i>		X	

Chart 1. Wasulu Musical Instruments

Musical instruments are also assigned to types of events and audiences. Women play gourds, calabashes, and clap their hands to provide a rich rhythmic accompaniment for their singing at initiation ceremonies, dance-entertainment events, or simply among their friends or age-mates on an informal basis. The percussive *wassemba* and *sira* are played during circumcision and excisions ceremonies (respectively) where only the initiates and their educators participate. The *kòrò kòrò* is used by children for chasing birds and pests from crops in the fields; and the flutes are used by individuals to pass the time while tending the cattle in the bush. The drums are primarily used for dance-entertainment in ceremonial and secular performance events that range from naming ceremonies (baptisms), weddings, and excision and circumcision celebrations, to work songs, and youth-organized dances and masquerade events. The harp-lutes accompany storytelling and animate dance-entertainment events.

Music Repertoires (*Fòliw*)

Since *fòli* is a complex cluster of several music expressions, including song and dance, it can be broken down for analysis in multiple ways. Here I present four *fòliw* as defined by rhythms, the instruments that play them, their dances, and the particular context in which they are performed.⁴ The data in Charts 2–4 was gleaned from results of a three-year fieldwork mission in Wasulu by Brehima Sidibé, and from interviews with various Wasulu singers and musicians in Bamako.

The first represents the dance-entertainment genre, often referred to globally as *sogoninkun fòli* but which contains several different rhythms and corresponding dances. *Sogoninkun* itself is masquerade *fòli* (cd 1). The name of the event, the rhythm, and the dance are all called *sogoninkun*. The other rhythms do not feature masked dancers but are also performed in recreational-dance events that usually take place several nights out of the week during the harvest season, just for fun. In *Sogoninkun*, the male dancer wears a mask of a variety of bush animals carved from wood, known collectively as *sogo*, on his head – never revealing his face.

Rhythms	Number of dancers	Instruments	Other details
<i>Sogoninkun</i>	1	2 <i>jembe</i> 1 <i>dunun</i>	<i>Sogoninkun</i> is practiced all across the Wasulu
<i>Bari</i>	Group dance	2 <i>jembe</i> 2 <i>dunu</i>	The <i>bari</i> is also practiced all across the Wasulu but less commonly performed today
<i>Jagewara</i>	Group dance	Same as <i>bari</i>	The <i>jagewara</i> is practiced all across the Wasulu and often played in wedding ceremonies
<i>Didadi</i>	Group dance	Like <i>jagewara</i> and <i>bari</i>	<i>Didadi</i> reaches across Wasulu especially on the Bougouni side
<i>Yankadi</i>	Paired dance of young women only	Same instruments as <i>sogoninkun</i>	A dance of seduction, often proven through rivalrous dance competitions
<i>N'kirin</i>	Pair or group dance	2 <i>jembe</i> 1 <i>dunu</i>	<i>N'kirin</i> is similar to <i>yankadi</i>
<i>Cou-Cou</i>	Group	Like <i>jagewara</i>	Performed throughout Wasulu, but centered in Foutah Djallo in Guinea
<i>Samudugula</i> 9	Organized group – wave of women – wave of men	4 players and 4 instruments like in <i>jagewara</i>	<i>Samudugula</i> is the name of the village where the dance was created

Chart 2. Dance-Entertainment Music (*Sogoninkun Fòli*)

Another Wasulu repertoire is *nama fòli*, or the music of the village youth-associations of agricultural farmers. These associations called *ton* consist of groups of able-bodied

⁴ In Lucy Düran's 1995 article on singers of *wassoulou*, she discusses two Wasulu genres in her section on the "roots of wassoulou", both of which are also represented in this analysis (*sogoninkun* and *didadi*) in terms of social context and impact on the development of *wassoulou* (Düran 1995:112–115).

young men and non-married women from between the ages of fifteen to thirty, ranging in size from approximately twelve to thirty-five members. Also known as *gwamina*, these groups provide their services to village-community members who need help with various aspects of the hard labor of cultivating the land such as clearing fields, planting crops, or harvesting. During these activities, the *gwamina* solicit musicians and singers to perform for them during their work to help encourage them and complete their work efficiently and quickly.

Rhythms	Number of dancers	Instruments	Other details
<i>Nama fòli</i> 1	0	2 <i>jembe</i> or <i>kamalen n'gòni</i>	<i>Namafòli</i> is performed in the fields and is practiced in Wasulu and other Mande regions

Chart 3. Cultivator's Music (*Nama fòli*)

Two more core repertoires are hunters-harp music (*donson n'gòni*) and the youth-harp music (*kamalen n'gòni* [Figure 7]). Unlike all of the other repertoires, the hunters-harp, its rhythms, and even dancing to it, is performed exclusively by hunters. Youth-harp music, on the contrary, is an entirely free and open music for all to enjoy. Each repertoire contains scores of distinct rhythms of which, for purposes of economy, I only list a few.

Rhythms	Number of dancers	Instruments	Other details
Hunters-harp (<i>Donson n'gòni</i>) Multiple rhythms	Variable, but restricted only to hunters and their wives	<i>The donson n'gòni</i> (hunter's harp) <i>Karinya</i> (metal scraper)	There are several <i>donson n'gòni</i> rhythms that all have names. Many non-specialists, however, do not know them and refer to all rhythms as <i>donson n'gònifòli</i> .
Youth-harp (<i>Kamalen n'gòni</i>) Multiple rhythms: <i>Yayoroba</i> <i>Sabunyuman</i> <i>n'kirin fòli</i> , etc.	"Free"	<i>The kamalen n'goni</i> (youth-harp) <i>Karinya</i> (metal scraper)	The <i>kamalen n'gòni</i> rhythms also have many names, many of which are familiar rhythms of other instruments, and others that are named after the composer.

Chart 4. Hunters-Harp and Youth-Harp Music



Figure 7. *Kamalen n'gòni* and *jembe* musicians. Bamako, 2000

The Wasulu Youth-Harp (*Kamalen N'goni*)

The abundance of musical instruments and genres in Wasulu, as outlined above, all contribute to its renown as “the true reservoir of Malian music”. No instrument compares, however, in its symbolic and sonic power of Wasulu musical and cultural identity, to the youth-harp. Created sometime in the late 1960s by the Yanfolila musician, Alata Brulaye, this new musical innovation revolutionized music in Wasulu

and then rapidly spread to Bamako and beyond in the 1980s and 1990s. This emergent style called attention to the region and its musical artists' aptitude for novel styles and fantastic rhythms even at the expense of social reprimand (Sidibé, Coumba 2000; Diarra 1998b).⁵

The youth-harp sound and structure is modeled in construction after its predecessor, the hunters-harp. Sometimes the only apparent difference between the two is the youth-harp's slightly smaller gourd size and thinner strings. In terms of sound, youth-harps tend to have higher registers and a "lighter touch" than the hunters-harps. The most important difference between the two is that the youth-harp is a "free" instrument while the hunters-harp is surrounded with restrictions in terms of who can play it and sing and dance to it. In a lively conversation in Bamako one day with my colleagues, Remi Mariko and Maikano, the story of the youth-harp (*kamalen n'gòni*) unfolded as one of Mali's most dramatic events in the history of popular music:

Maikano: The *donson n'gòni* is the same instrument as the *kamalen n'gòni*. The *donson n'gòni* is the instrument of narrators, people who talk of the power of the warriors, of the power of men who had done something for humanity. So one played the *donson n'gòni*, one thanked them, one encouraged all those who were ready to do something for people, the country, and for humanity. So the *donson n'gòni* most often is very serious. When your father, when you get together people to listen to the *donson n'gòni*, everyone comes to listen but really, it is a serious affair . . . one doesn't talk too much. One follows that and there is the respect. One knows who is who in the crowd.

Remi: . . . one knows who does *what!*—

Maikano: . . . yes—

Remi: . . . and there are pieces that are not just devoted to *whoever*—

Maikano: . . . yes, there are chiefs who, when they get up to dance, no one else should get up without being authorized to do so.

Remi: If someone does get up it is to go touch his foot, or to raise his *hand*—

Maikano: . . . Yes, raise his hand . . . *voila, voila* . . . now, while you are raising his hand or touching his foot, he can authorize you to dance with him, and then you dance together.

Heather: That would be a man or a woman?

Maikano: Yes, that is in general the men. (Maikano and Moussa Mariko 2000)

Because of the *donson n'gòni*'s exclusivity both for playing and dancing, the young musicians of Wasulu revolted by creating their own, popular version of the instrument. Many Bamakois and Wassolukaw know "the story" well, but Remi's passionate version tells it most poignantly:

Me, I know this story. I know why. Because before there wasn't any *kamalen n'gòni*. There was only the *donson n'gòni*, the guitar of the hunters. But not everybody was a hunter. And

⁵ Lucy Düran's informants suggested that the *kamalen n'gòni*'s emergence dates from as early as the 1930s to the 1940s and possibly later. Her data indicates like mine, however, that the musician accredited for having invented the instrument is the late Alata Brulaye from Yanfolila.

not everybody was able to dance to this rhythm, you see? It is like that, that people – to feel happy – they copied, they said “good, since the *donson n’gòni*, we can’t dance, we can’t dance to that with our girlfriends”, they made a similar *n’gòni*, and they called it at that time, the *kamalen n’gòni* instead of *donson n’gòni*. We will name it the *kamalen n’gòni* – the youth *n’gòni* (youth-harp). Otherwise, the *n’gònis* are almost identical. They left behind their rhythms of the *donson n’gòni*, they created their own rhythms. (Maikano and Moussa Mariko 2000)

In Chart 4, three specific youth-harp rhythms are listed that are well-established, having been some of the first of the youth-harp’s original creators. Today there are countless rhythms; many are transfers from the Wasulu rhythms of other instruments such as identified in Charts 1–3, and still more are newly invented at the fancy and discretion of each artist (cd 2). The only rhythms that are off limits are those played by the *donson n’gòni* and despite youth-harp musicians’ claims that they never play *donson* rhythms, they often change them only slightly: just enough to demonstrate truth to their claim despite infuriated hunters who recognized them as their own rhythms.

The youth-harp became an instant success for its local audiences that consisted mostly of youth, but especially problematic, also of married women. Movement and social interaction of married women outside of the home has always been discouraged in Wasulu (and Mande) society. Thus entertainment and especially dance parties are activities that married women are usually “forbidden” to attend. Even married men and especially those of the older generations rarely attend these events because they will be criticized and even quietly taunted for trying in vain to re-live their youthful days.

According to an article in one of Mali’s leading popular music magazines, *Le Mag*, its popularity was in part due to the fact that since “everyone knows” how important a role music plays in rural life, it is “easy to imagine” the impact that a new musical instrument would have. “The *kamalen n’gòni* incited people to *faire la fête* [to party]. In Wasulu almost every day was spent organizing all night parties; the consequences of which, for young men and women, we can all imagine” (My translation: Diarra 1998b). In the same article *Le Mag* further deemed it “indispensable for a successful party or a cassette”. The music had such an irresistible appeal that married women began “sneaking out” of their homes at night to attend the dance parties. Again, Remi explains:

Their music was so popular among the young people that when one played it in the town or village, even the married women went. When their husbands instructed them not to go, they declared divorce! “We’ll divorce, then.” Since then, the elders have said that “that is no longer the *kamalen n’gòni*, it is no longer the *n’gòni* of young people, that is the *n’gòni* of prostitutes! You go there to prostitute yourselves – you embrace there, and you give yourselves to men.” Do you see? That is a little bit of history.

(Maikano and Moussa Mariko 2000)

Seen by much of Wasulu “mature” (*mògòbalu*) patriarchal and gerontocratic society as acts of outrageous rebellion toward traditional gender, and age-grade roles, youth-harp

players were also severely criticized, punished, and sometimes threatened for their lives. Elders and hunters fiercely objected on the grounds that it was “putting the instruments at the disposal of women and children” (Conrad 2002:61). Some say that this threat was one of the reasons so many early players went to Bamako: not so much as to search for opportunity, but to run away from death threats.⁶

The creation of the youth-harp is thus often recognized as a revolutionary moment in Wasulu music history, and as a testimony to the region’s natural musical genius and innovative spirit. Lucy Dúran gives another vibrant account that brings other musical artists into the story and which includes an informative section on the construction and tuning of the *kamalen n’goni* (Dúran 1995: 112–122).

The Free Voices of the Non-Noble Peasantry: Wasulu Musical Artists

Wasulukaw are known throughout Mali for their “natural” vocal prowess and musical abilities. The prevailing explanation for their extraordinary musicality is that “there are no bards [*jeliw*]” in Wasulu but rather, “free artists” who sing publicly without social reprimand or cause for shame. The difference between bards and singers is common knowledge in Mali and in many other regions throughout West Africa.

In the Mande world, society is stratified on a caste-system of nobility, non-nobility, and slaves. Free people of non-noble birth include marabouts, merchants, and the *nyamakalaw*. The *nyamakalaw* are a class of endogamous groups of occupational specialists such as blacksmiths (*numuw*), bards (*jeliw*), tanners (*garankew*), woodworkers (*kulè*), or weavers. All of the *nyamakalaw* groups represent the artisan social-strata in Mande society whose role is to provide important services to their noble patrons and to the community as a whole. Each occupational group holds mastery and ownership over their specialization such that smiths are “masters of iron”, and bards are “masters of words”. Bards are the masters of speech who are recognized by the patronyms Jabaté, Kuyaté, or Tunkara and their duties and responsibilities are well researched and documented (see Hoffman 2000).

In Wasulu, as with other ethnic groups from Mali’s Third Region such as the Minyanka and the Senufo, the social organization of music is such that there is a very small representation of bards, leaving the whole of the *nyamakalaw* and ex-captives classes free to play and sing “for fun” (*ka tulonkè*) in secular, ceremonial, and ritual contexts. Singers are not considered the owners of the word; nor are they tied to political client-patron relationships as the bards are. Wasulu is a cultural music zone understood by most Malians as essentially *folklore* and *musique populaire* – music, songs, and dance that represent “the people” and that have been handed down from generation to generation. But folkloric expression is widely viewed as a creative realm, too, where

⁶ This is not the only version of the youth-harp’s creation. David Conrad’s book *Somono Bala of the Upper Niger* provides other narrative accounts of its birth in the Fulbe Ganadougou area (2002:61–65). Others lay claim to the notion that it evolved, not from the *danson n’gòni*, but from a similar instrument called the *dan* (Diarra 1998b).

individual artists compose and create new music, songs, and even genres. These free voices of the non-noble peasantry “speak” to, and about, all members of society and the experiences life holds for them.

Samba Diallo, one of Mali’s most popular male singers, proudly distinguishes himself and his Wasulu contemporaries from the Mande bards (*jeliw*) by notions of freedom and artistry in music:

But it’s the Wasulu musicians who are *artistes*. Everyone can sing in Wasulu. We don’t have *jeliw* here; everyone sings. They brought artistry to music. Otherwise, before us, all there was were *jeliw* . . . But the Wasulu changed that. We said, “You don’t need to be a *jeli* to sing.” It’s not true. Now people have started to see the difference. They said, “Hey, we can sing for fun, too.” It serves something for us. It erases nostalgia. You have fun, you wash dishes, or the laundry – you have fun with singing. It comes like that [naturally, without effort]. You emit warmth or anguish that you have. Sometimes you sing and you cry, you sing alone and you cry. You just express yourself, your anguish, you know? (Diallo 1999–2000)

Songbirds (*Kòndòw*) and the Feminization of Popular Song

Anyone and everyone is, indeed, free to sing in Wasulu. It is the female singers, however, who capture the most attention. Wasulukaw appreciate birdsong for its musical quality, but they draw a clear difference between the two: birds cry (*kasi*) and humans sing (*dònkilida*). Songbirds (*kòndòw*) are girls or women who are appreciated for their beautiful, birdsong-like voices and performances and who are solicited to animate a wide variety of public performance events. Regardless of their vocal skills, most women sing among themselves while fetching firewood and water, pounding millet, washing clothes, or just for fun. Solo singing of this nature is perceived as such a feminine act that the image of a man doing it was comical and quite out of the question. I asked Remi once if men ever took the lead singing roles of any of the dance-entertainment music or the cultivators’ music. He broke out in a fit of laughter and retorted, “Oh no, no, no! It would be quite ridiculous for a male singer to sing *namafòli* or *sogoninkunfòli!*” (Mariko 1999).

The feminization of popular song was a topic that I consistently pursued in interviews, performances, and discourse with my community of peers. Some are of the opinion that the sound of the female singing voice is simply superior. For example, in a concert I attended in Bamako at the Centre Culturel Français in 2000, the world’s most famous *wassoulou* singing star, Oumou Sangaré, invited her audience to sing along with her. She divided the crowd into men and women and, to encourage the women to sing louder, she proudly stated, “Women . . . they have the most beautiful voices so [ladies], why not sing loudly?”

Several musicians explained it from a purely technical standpoint. Female singers are better than men, they say, because since they rarely accompany themselves with musical instruments other than gourds, mastering vocal control and finer points of style and finesse is much easier than it is for men who often have the added complication of playing an instrument simultaneously. As many youth-harp players told me “it is really

hard to sing and play at the same time”. Others offered up the allure of feminine beauty, “a certain kind of harmony” and sensuality as other reasons explaining women’s natural superiority in song. Returning again to the conversation with Remi and Maikano, they broke it down for me in this way:

Maikano: Well, you know that in general, in music, when women sing, and when men sing, the woman has much more luck to be admired by fans than men . . . Because if a woman sings as well as a man, if you are at the same level in front of a crowd, women always have more chances at being applauded than men.

Heather: Here, in Mali you mean?

Maikano: Well, everywhere. Well, why do I say that? Excuse me, but God has created women, women, the woman herself, and the way she was created—

Remi: Femininity—

Furthermore, the natural attractiveness of women is not only felt by men and children, but by other women as well, who admire and appreciate (and sometimes loathe) the natural beauty of a woman:

Maikano: I don’t know if this is the word. God has created women with melody. Everything is clean with her: her body, her voice, her way of walking, and her feelings, you see? So when this woman sings, all that she naturally has helps her to be even better seen, loved by men.

Heather: And women too?

Maikano: Yes, even women. (Maikano and Moussa Mariko 2000)

One of my closest research assistants, Brehima Sidibé explained the dynamic of attraction between a songstress and her audiences with the analogy of children’s natural attraction to run to their mama when looking for affection, attention, or almost any need. “The child always runs to her mother because she is sweetness and goodness” (Sidibé 1999). And finally, Ivorian scholar Mamadi Kaba further naturalizes the femininity of popular song with regard to compositional talent: “In the enthusiasm, during a circumcision, a baptism, a marriage, women’s sensibility predisposes them to the composition and adaptation of a song to the social, cultural, economic, or even political circumstances” (Kaba 1995:6).

Lucy Dúran’s 1995 and 1997 articles on Malian music furthermore address this all-pervasive idea of feminized song in Wasulu with well-documented ethnographic data that, while different from mine, confirms the same powerful idea. The voice of the *wassoulou* songbird is thus decidedly feminine and sweet in nature. Her compositions, too, are perceived as superior by virtue of her femininity. Let us now turn to the songbirds’ performance domains with an analysis of song repertoires (*foliw*) and stylistic features to examine how *wassoulou* songbirds earn their privileged place as “the best” singers in Malian popular culture.

Song Repertoires (*Dònkili Fòliw*)

Song repertoires are generally implied by their social function and corresponding

musical environment, especially rhythms. Each repertoire has a unique vocal style, form, and message, yet they are fluid and flexible. Songs are detachable entities that often move from one repertoire into another. Three main repertoires addressed here include dance-entertainment (*sogoninkun*), hunters' bards (*donson jeli*), and wedding (*sumu*) songs.

DANCE-ENTERTAINMENT SONGS (*SOGONINKUN*)

Sogoninkun is an enormous repertoire of dance-entertainment songs used to invoke participants to dance, or to move in a coordinated fashion to accomplish work-related tasks such as farming or pounding millet. Songbirds take leading roles in all of the *sogoninkun fòli* identified in Chart 2, and in other recreational music-making events such as handclapping (*tègèrè fò* or *tèkèrè klòkè*), and rites-of-passage (*solì*). The role of the voice in relation to the music or rhythmic accompaniment in these songs is more-or-less equal. That is, the vocal parts of a song take turns with instrumental parts thus maximizing the rhythmic effect of the music. The result of this relationship is that the singing style in these genres tends to be characterized by short solo verses and repetitive choral parts that duplicate the melody in octaves, a form known as *polarity* (Nketia 1974:161). Dance-entertainment songs generally deal with love and marriage, praise, genealogy (often of the dancers or the musicians themselves), morality, and wisdom. Many are humorous, bawdy, or sharply critical. Others such as *solì* are joyous and celebratory.

Solì songs are an excellent example of the fluidity and detachability of songs. In addition to being dance-entertainment songs, girls and boys sing them in all events associated with excision and circumcision rituals. Accompanied by musical instruments especially reserved for *solimaya*, including the *sira*, *wassemba*, and others, initiates sing them on the eve of their operations. Both initiates and their terrifying excisors and circumcisors sing a different set of *solì* songs during the operation itself to prepare the young initiates for the terror and pain they are about to endure and to distract them from the pain during the actual cutting. After the initial cutting procedures all initiates undergo a long period of rehabilitation and isolation in neighboring secluded forests (*solimaya*) during which they are educated fully about their new status as women and men. Another set of songs are used for educational purposes during this time but they are kept secret from the public. When *solimaya* is complete, and the newly circumcised/excised young adults (*solimaden/bolokoden*) return home on foot, they sing yet another group of *solì* songs specifically suited for this spectacular and proud moment when they approach home to a village of proud mothers, fathers, and members of the community.

The other "life" of *solì* songs is the public performance of them in *sogoninkun* dance-entertainment events. The *jembe* and *dunuw* drums accompany the songs and dances in place of the ritual musical instruments like the *wassemba* and *sira* that are exclusively used for the circumcisions and excisions. Everyone in the village community is free to sing them in the spirit of celebrating the bravery and stoicism that the initiates displayed, and the joy and promise they bring the community. Malian scholar Pascal Couloubaly, characterizes *sogoninkun* well in the descriptive quote below:

Song is thus the support of an ambiance without which it does not exist. Seen as such, its workmanship is participatory in type. The soloists do not know how to monopolize their lyrics by long, philosophical, flowing couplets. The message's constant return by the chorus responds to a mission: that of engaging the entire community in the incessant dizziness of the vocal and instrumental cadence. The song rhythms, it does not dissertate. (Couloubaly 1990:18)

HUNTERS' BARDS SONGS (*DONSON JELIW*)

The hunters' bards enjoy another vast repertoire of vocal music mostly accompanied by the hunters-harp, as discussed previously. Their singing is characterized by long, solo verses sung by men in recitative style, or what John Johnson identifies as narrative or praise-proverb mode (Johnson 1986:7). Similar to the Mande *jeliya*, Wasulu hunters' bards tell stories, recite histories, or praise the great deeds and characters of particular people or groups of people whose individual acts of merit have benefited the entire society. In contrast to the vocal arrangement of melodic singing, hunters' bards are accompanied, not by a vocal chorus, but rather by assistants who shout responses such as "*namu*", "*walahi*", or "*kosèbè*" – meaning "yes, I'm listening", "swear to God", or "exactly right". Furthermore, since the music is used primarily as background accompaniment to storytelling or dancing, vocalists and instrumental sections do not "take turns" as consistently. I include this repertoire here because, as the following analysis shows, songbirds borrow from it extensively to perform their role as educator in wedding songs, the final repertoire we explore in this article.

WEDDING SONGS (*SUMU*)

Wedding celebrations are always celebrated with music, song, and dance and in Wasulu the purpose of the music is to celebrate the marriage and to educate the young bride-to-be. Singers, drummers, and instrumentalists perform an extensive, energetic and danceable repertoire of songs to communicate rules of proper new-wife and young-bride behavior; give advice; and congratulate and praise wedding party members. As one of my informants Brehima Sidibé explained, the job of the singer is "to tell the girl all the good things she has done during her young life, and give advice through music".

The musical accompaniment to *sumu* is completely open and idiosyncratic provided there is a *jembe* percussion section. The role of the singer, however, requires a songbird to lead her chorus of singers and dancers, to lead the musicians, to "speak" well in song so as to inspire the bride and other wedding participants:

In our area when someone comes to do a *sumu*, that is when a girl is getting married, she will leave her home the next day. So, it is the night before the wedding and she'll have to go to her husband's house. So people are invited. The old ladies, everyone comes, and one sings only words for the girl so that she will be nice to her husband. One sings nothing but that. One sings love songs, songs that could show how you should be very nice between your husband and the other families, you should weld the family, you shouldn't go to the families to separate them, you shouldn't be an *escrot* [swindler] between them, and you should integrate and accept. Because you leave your family to go into another family and

you are there normally till the end of your life. So you have come and you have to accept because when you leave your family to come into another family its like you have entered into another culture. The education is different . . . but you should always be very good with them. So *sumu* is that. In our place it's like that. When one says *sumu* they are talking about people who have come to educate someone who is leaving their family. (Diallo 2000)

Many *sumu* songs have a distinctively moral and educative value yet that does not diminish in any way their capacity to provide delightful entertainment. Singers are able to stretch out lyrically in *sumu* and “talk” about anything in a narrative and improvisatory way. Compared to polarity of *sogoninkun*, on one hand, and the narrative praise-poetry of the hunters’ bards on the other, *sumu* strikes a beautifully powerful middle ground.

Songbirds “talk” using a flexible type of “call and response”. They sing the verses or “calls” in between their chorus, who sing the “response” similar to the *sogoninkun* style but with one major difference. In *sogoninkun*, the verses are, as Pascal Couloubaly aptly describes “rigid semantic frames, with hardly the inflection of a new phrase (often just one word) which do[es] not introduce a new idea, but simply specify [ies] a specific situation” (Couloubaly 1990:18). In *sumu*, however, songbirds expand their verses and incorporate the recitative or praise-proverb style of singing from the hunters’ bards. Thus, as Kate Modic remarks in her analysis of the vocal form and function of Bamanan women’s song, call and response can be quite flexible and nuanced. She notes in her research of women’s association songs in Bamako that:

. . . the songs were not so much a “call” but a message, and not a “response” but a comment on or answer (*jaabi*) to the message, a lyrical communication among the solo singer and chorus . . . The *jaabi* was usually a repetition of the first lines the singer sang. The singer and chorus would repeat the song and *jaabi* together at the beginning of most songs. Then, the singer would break away from the chorus to sing other verses while the chorus of women would continue singing the choral response established in the beginning. (Modic 1996:115)

In Wasulu *sumu*, the calls are the verses and songbirds use the verb *wòlòmali* to describe singing them. *Wòlòmali* means to unravel, to smoke, to perfume, or to peel off and blow away peanut skins. Songbirds smoke their verses by linking specific places, people, ethnicity, age-group, and the like to the refrain, or by telling a story, bit by bit, in between the refrains which, in the hands of a master songbird, will poetically illustrate the refrain’s core message. They sometimes “unravel” with reserve, simply inserting one or two words in the verse that orients the songbird’s relationship to the refrain. This is generally done, however, in *sogoninkun* songs. But just as often, singers “break away” from the chorus, and from its “incessant dizziness”, when they want to communicate “seriousness” to their listeners or, as they often say, “chat” with them (*ka sumu ké*).

The Sonorities of Song

Wasulu music, you know we speak a bizarre Malinke, I find it bizarre. We understand each other, the Malinkes and us but we don’t have the same tonality in the song. Salif Keita, for example, he is Malinke but he could never sing a Wasulu song. Never. A Wasulu singer

can't sing Malinke, yet we speak the same language. But the Malinke sing on a note that we can't sing on . . . we have a melody not Malinke, not Bambara, but in between the two and it sounds good, even if you don't understand the language. (Diallo 1999)

In response to my prompting of artists to articulate what makes *wassoulou* singing unique, I received a wide array of colorful responses. Some prioritized instruments, several noted rhythms, but all unambiguously prioritized language as the most distinctive quality. Sata Doumbia aka Kon Kan Kon Sata, a young songbird originally from the village of Shikoroli, explained it in this way:

For me it's by the language. Because the instruments now are used by everybody. Salif [Keita] plays it, Aicha Koné plays it, but it's by the language that one feels the difference . . . everyone has married the rhythms now. Even the ballets . . . now my point of reference is the language. (Doumbia 1999)

Obviously one “feels the difference” in hearing the Wasulu dialect of Malinke but, linguistics aside, what of Wasulu “notes”, “melodies”, and “tonalities”? How does it sound good even if one doesn't understand the language? In this section, I turn to an in-depth analysis on the sonorities of song (mode, melodic contour, tonality), and its rhythm (*fòli sen*).

MODE AND MELODIC CONTOUR

Some singers like Diallo describe the sonorities of song using the French words for “tonality” and “notes” and “melody” but many, especially songbirds whose discourse rarely involves Western music terminology, refer to them collectively as “a way of speaking” (*fòlicogo*). The mode is a mixolydian, of the diatonic scale without the 3rd and 6th notes as presented below on a C major scale.



Example 1. Wasulu Mode

This mode matches that of most pentatonic Bamanan, Minyanka, and Senufo xylophones and stringed instruments in the area (the *dan*, and the youth- and hunters-harps). In this light, Wasulu vocal music is not unique but, rather, just a small part of a larger genre of popular song that is only different in terms of its distinction from Mande bard music, which uses a heptatonic diatonic scale.

The melodic contours of verse, on the other hand, are often distinct. I use the term “melodic contours” here because, while some melodies are stable and easily reproduced, many are executed in such a rapid-fire melismatic and improvisational style, they are never sung the same twice. Songbirds, however, develop their verses by adding length and color with quick, short bursts of melismatic embellishments and several lines of verse to a new melodic idea. Since Wasulukan words often consist of short, one-syllable

utterances, and have a high concentration of vowels (and especially on word endings), and sharp consonants, the verses sound busy and fast often running up and down the mode in two to three octaves stretches.

Despite its verbal busy-ness, the general shape of Wasulu verse is simpler than it sounds. Finding the basic melodic contour to verses was a daunting task that took several sessions with singers and musicians in order to understand. For example, when I worked with Bintu Sidibé, I asked her to sing the same song several times within one interview session, and then each consequent time I interviewed her. Bintu finally became so tired with singing it that she began singing the bare minimum. She slowed down her verses and cut away the decorative and stylistic embellishments. This bare minimum proved to be the basic melodic form, as corroborated by the flutist, Remi Mariko and other women who recognized the song when I sang it back to them without the refrain. When I was learning the song, sometimes Remi would play the melody on his flute, or he would sing it for me in a less ornamental way. On several occasions he told me that I don't really need Bintu or any other singers to teach me how to sing . . . he knows everything I need to know. "After all," he'd say, "I can play the melodies on my flute; I know the rhythms."

Songbirds often begin their verses below the tonal center of a song with vocables such as *iiyee*, *woi*, or *aye*, and then scoop or jump up to it or other higher, sustained pitches. The tonal center is most prominent near the middle or end of phrases and a song's refrain sung by the chorus. *Sumu* songs characteristically string together several long verses before singing the refrain and songbirds use the tonal center for the cue. If she "smokes", for example, six long lyric verses before coming to the refrain, she will end her first five verses on a note *other than* the tonal center such as on the second or flat seventh while instruments are playing the tonal center (tonic). On the sixth verse she will end it singing loud and strong on the tonic.

TONALITY AND TIMBRE

When Malians declare that songbirds have the most beautiful voices, they are often referring to tonality or timbre. Some say that songbirds strive to match their voices to the sounds of their local harps or to the most melodious birds. Others, like Samba Diallo, believe that the songbirds' beauty is due to the prevalence of music-making in the region (as discussed earlier), and an innate musical ear for all things melodious:

With a Wasulu musician they are never out of tune, especially the *n'gòni*, one must really tune it well in order to sing. So Wasulu singers, even if they've never seen a guitar, if they sing out of tune, they know that it's out of tune. All Wasulu people have musical ears; it is innate with us. There's no school for that but all Wasulu people are *like that* . . . (Diallo 2000)

In contrast to bards' timbres that are characteristically nasal and pitched at their highest registers, songbirds use a straighter and rounder tone. Both types of singer manipulate the throat muscles (particularly the glottis) and head cavity, but songbirds make extensive use of the mouth as a resonator. Since they sing in their lower registers

the vocal timbre is already thicker and louder than that of most bards. They also achieve a broad timbre by drawing out their vowels, powered by the breath, and then closing their phrases at the very last millisecond with a nasalized melisma or straight ending. When they do sing high, the intensity of these higher pitches is maintained by keeping the voice lodged in between the throat and the head. Many singers from Wasulu have lower, deeper registers as well (hear Coumba Sidibé, Oumou Sangaré, for example). Melismas are sung on open, slightly nasalized vowels and are most prevalent in the middle and especially in the endings of phrases.

The popular love song, “*Samba Jan*” (“Tall Samba”) in Example 2 is a transcription of one that Bintu Sidibé made famous in the early 1990s. She sang it to the accompaniment of the youth-harp and it was one that she often used to teach me how to sing. We sang it often in practice sessions with youth-harpist Shiaka Sidibé, my former band mate from the *Keneya* cassette in 1991. The transcription provides a visual example of the melodic contour and light 6/8 rhythm of a classic Wasulu song (cd 3).

Sam-ba Jan ne b'i we - le Si - di - be Sam - ba
 Sam-ba Jan I'm cal - ling you Si - di - be Sam - ba

3
 Jan ne b'i we - le la - a, mo - go lon - na i k'o to - go le
 Jan I'm cal - ling you oh, peo - ple are known by what fol - lows their

6
 fe - e. Sam - ba Jan ne b'i we - le e. ka - ma - len
 name. Sam - ba Jan I'm cal - ling you oh, young men are

9
 lon - na da - ba ka - la - ma - a, Sa - am - ba Jan ne b'i we - le la, so du - man
 known by their shape - of their hoe - s. Sa - am - ba Jan I'm cal - ling you oh, fami - lies are

13
 lon - na dun ka fa la fe - e, Sam - ba Jan ne ne b'i we - le la, mu - so mi - sen
 known by eat - ing till their fil - l Sam - ba Jan I - am cal - ling you oh, Young wo - men are

17
 lon - na ba - ya nyu - man fe - e. Sa - am - ba Jan ne b'i we - le la. Sam - ba
 known by their pret - ty waist be - ads, Sa - am - ba Jan I am cal - ling you. Sam - ba

Example 2. *Fòlisen*

The Rhythm of Song: (*Fòli Sen*)

Wasulu singing is also distinctive from other types of popular music for its rhythmic quality. A song's rhythm or its "foot" (*sen*) is usually a short, repetitive pattern. Songbirds are noted for their fine rhythmic sensibilities. Even when strings accompany them, the style of playing is rhythmically motivated. Bintu Sidibé once told me that people who do not know the rhythms do not understand the music. "Even *wassoulou* songbirds," she said referring to urban stars, "they may be Wasulu, but unless they were born and grew up there; they may sing – but they don't *really* know how to sing because they don't know all the rhythms."

When Bintu gives singing lessons she always sings the rhythm of a song to demonstrate the way it goes. Even Kon Kan Kon Sata, who denied that rhythm was very important; singing me the rhythm of each song she was teaching me was one of her most consistent pedagogical tools. Sata, along with Bintu and Samba, always taught the correct entrances to the songs I was learning in relation to the rhythm of the piece. "Oh, Anna, you came in upside down!" Sata often said it to me when I entered too late or too early. "If you don't enter on the right note, you'll never catch up again." Rhythm is a fundamental element that every singer must master. They rely on it to cue them at entries, breaks, changes, solos, and endings, and on what appropriate repertoire choices they need to make in impromptu situations. We see the centrality of rhythm and song in the way Bintu Sidibé narrates how she learned to sing as a young girl in the Wasulu heartland.



Figure 8. Bintu Sidibé at author's home in Badalabougou, Bamako, 1999

A Songbird Remembers: Growing up in Wasulu

Bintu Sidibé is an experienced songbird whom I have known and sung with since 1989. She lives in Bamako with her husband and is a very respected, older artist, who has recorded and released two cassettes in her lifetime, both in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Although not considered by most people today as a superstar, Bintu has been singing since she was a little girl in her natal village of Tolomba, Wasulu. This would have been in the mid-1950s because the youth-harp had not been invented yet and its first recordings were in 1960. As Bintu remembers and recounts her past, *sogoninkun* and *nama foli* come to life. *Wassoulou*'s "infectious" dance-rhythms, lovely sonorous songstresses, musical functions, contexts, and forms, all come together in the abundant natural environment in an organic way. In sum, Bintu's narrative brings the reader closer to understanding music as *foli*; that interactive mosaic of singing, storytelling, playing music, and dancing.

She learned to sing *nama fòli* with the *gwamina* – in the cornfields where men would race each other to finish their row the fastest. Men farmed, and still do, with a hoe called a *daba*. To encourage and motivate them, musicians would play the drums, and women would clap, and sing their praises. Bintu was the solo singer and she would sing during three events in the course of one day’s labor in the fields. First, there were the songs that accompanied the men on their way to the fields (often several young men of the village walk together early in the morning with their *daba* swung over their shoulders). Next there were those that accompanied the actual hoeing, and finally, another group of songs to receive the weary cultivators came back home.

In the first stage, as all the young men walk to the fields with their *daba*, the singers would sing about who might be the winner as they walked “who will finish their row first?” on their way to the fields behind them. Often, the field owner would bring a large chicken, a goat, or even a cow as compensation to the man – a lion (*wara*) who worked the hardest. Bintu sings for me what she used to sing as a girl as part of her narrative, with a nostalgic air of lost, happy days (cd 4):

<i>E iye, wara na ta bagagè jugulenna.</i>	Oh, the great lions are angry.
<i>E iye wara.</i>	Oh, the great lions.
<i>Ka bò ni donokòrò di.</i>	I gave a brand new white rooster.
<i>Ko ke ni bèn fènw di o tè waralu</i>	A white rooster isn’t enough for a
<i>bèn fènw bò.</i>	great lion.
<i>E iye wara.</i>	Oh, the great lions.
<i>Ka bò ni misiba di,</i>	I gave a big cow,
<i>ko kè waralu bèn fènw ye (bò).</i>	that is deserving of a great lion.
<i>Waralu sènekè bèn fènw bò.</i>	The great farmer-lions deserve that.
<i>E iye wara.</i>	Oh, the great lions.

Once in the fields, songbirds would sing to encourage them to work hard. In this context, as soon as a farmer takes the lead in front, she promptly praises him for his strength and bravery, the essential qualities of real manhood, and flatters him against his competitors, likening him to old hyenas (*namakòròlen*) and lions; both revered animals for their exceptional strength, bravery, and style. It was during these events in the fields that Bintu started to sing behind the cultivators to encourage them (cd 5):

<i>E iye iyo, nama le, wuli k’I yongo.</i>	Hey, brave one! Rise up gallantly and strut.
<i>E iye iyo, nama kòròlen!</i>	Hey, real men!
<i>Wuli k’i yongo.</i>	Rise up gallantly and strut.
<i>Ka ye yala yala la wagajòlòrò,</i>	You others just walk around in the grass,
<i>k’aw ye wara ye.</i>	Telling everyone you are great lions.
<i>Sènekè foro tè fo cekòròba ye</i>	Real farmers do not wander around
<i>fò da fa taama.</i>	the edge of the fields.
<i>E iye iyo, nama le wuli k’i yongo!</i>	Hey, hyena! Rise up gallantly and strut.

In the third stage, when the day was done and all the farmers walked back home, the songbird followed behind them singing this song of praise and encouragement for the next day's hard work, and to make them feel happy with the work they'd just completed (cd 6):

Aye, an bèn ji la, aye iyo. Hey, meet us with water, hey.
Aye, waraw bèn ji la – ji sumalen. Meet the great lions with water – cold water.

When describing how she learned to sing in the fields as a little girl, Bintu sings the rhythm of *nama fòli* (the cultivator's or farmer's rhythm) without even a moment's pause:

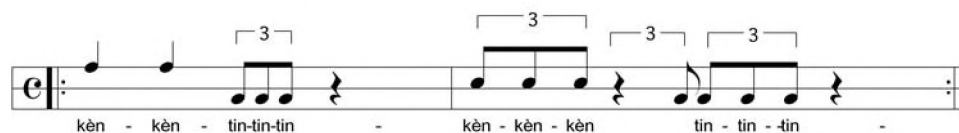
Heather: . . . and what instruments accompanied you when you sang these songs?

Bintu: The *dunu* plays, the *jembe* plays, and the hands clap.

Heather: Oh, I see . . . and what rhythms were played?

Bintu: They *all* play the same *nama fòli* “bin-tin bah m bin-tin bah [breath] bin-tin bah m bin-tin bah”—it is all the same. *Everybody*—“bin-tin bah, bin-tin bah m in-tin bah”.

Here Bintu was singing the *jembe* part to *nama fòli*. I joined in with her, trying to feel this rhythm in the voice, but she then suddenly switched to singing the *dunu* rhythm to *nama fòli*, leaving me trailing off in the dust (cd 7).



Example 3. *Nama Fòli* Rhythm

Bintu began getting solicited to star in *sogoninkun*. She explained how it was then, “The men dance *sogoninkun* and the women fan them, dance a little around them while fanning, and they sing. The other men and women come and just watch, and sometimes help the dancer who’s wearing the mask.” When I asked her what rhythms are used in *sogoninkun*, she began singing two *sogoninkun* rhythms for myself and Remi, and he instantly joined in. They sang the rhythms in perfect synchronicity. It was a marvelous performance and my face must have displayed an air of astonishment because Remi suddenly stopped, looked at me and said with a nod and a grin, “Hey, really, she doesn’t miss a beat, Anna!”

“These events during the dry season,” Bintu explained, “are the time for people to have fun. It is at this time when the *sogoninkun* is performed often. Men, women, and children all participate: women dance and clap, men play *jembe* and dance, and one solo songbird sings.”

Continuing my conversation with Bintu about music-making in Wasulu, she explained about the *gwamina*, and that during the rainy season, all of the capable, healthy

men divide themselves into groups and they would cultivate people's fields for them. For their services, they would receive money, cows, goats, and grains, and other gifts from the families whose fields they worked. They saved some of this money until the end of the rainy season when their work was over and then they would start to celebrate. It was then the dry season and they would organize dance parties that last up to an entire week: a week of dance and a week of music. Bintu was the songbird who animated those weeks of celebration. "I would sing seven nights out of seven without resting during those days," she insisted proudly (cd 8).

bin tin bah m bin tin bah bin tin bah m bin tin bah bin tin ba kéng-kéng ke m

bah kéng kéng ke m bin tin bah m tin bah bin tin bah m bin bah

Example 4. *Sogoninkun* Rhythm

The rhythms that animated most of these dances were *sogoninkun*: the *bari*, *didadi*, *yankadi*, and *sogoninkun* played by the drums and lead in song by Bintu. The lyrics were completely secular and oriented towards invoking audiences to dance. The lyrics made colorful references to the beauty of movement that women's behinds make when they shake to the music, or to the prideful achievements of particularly skilled young men or women dancers. References to romantic love and desire are also common themes as well as to specific people, events, and places that are meaningful to the audience.

Tègèrèfò: Clapping and Tapping the Calabash

Women have their own, internal rhythmic accompaniment that they articulate by clapping and tapping on calabashes. Men do not *tègèrè*, so this form of accompaniment does not apply to male singers. According to Bintu, one claps "whatever one feels like". Yet when in a group of women at a performance, all of the women clap the same pattern and play around with it by omitting various beats in the rhythm, double-timing others, or inserting new ones here and there. The pattern is usually clapped in a 6/8 feel but to a 4/4 pulse, which is always indicated by the steady movement of women's feet and sway of the hips (cd 9).

Example 5. *Tègèrèfò* Rhythm

It is not only songbirds who understand this rhythm, but most Wasulu and Mande women. Women have always provided their own rhythms for song and dance. Weddings, baptisms, and much of women's work attests to this as one hears women clapping basically the same pattern. Thus even when women are not clapping that rhythm, it is silently heard and used as their rhythmic reference. Below I present two transcriptions of a popular song from Wasulu called "*Nene*" ("Love's Chill"). Example 6 is just the voice as Bintu performed it for me, and Example 7 is her singing it again with her own handclap accompaniment.

Voice

A de - li lo - go - ro ke - e - ro yo ne - ne, ne - ne - ma nyi - i dia - ra - bi ne -
I am mis - sing him a - a - gain, the chill, the chill of love is bad

3
ne, ne - ne ma - a nyi - i du - ni - ya - a - a a - a -
the chill is ter - ri - ble, oh, oh world - a - a a - a

5
ko fu - nan - ke - ni - sa - ya, sa ya ge - le - ma - a, a - ne - ne ma a - nyi -
oh, oh my lov - er's di - ed, death is ter - ri - ble it's chill is so - o cold.

Example 6. "*Nene*" Solo (cd 10)

Notice how Bintu's "*Nene*", first without her *tègèrefò*, and then with it, shifts the orientation of the melody in a completely new light. *Tègèrefò* accompaniment is so powerful that it demands an aural reorientation of the melody, often sounding like a different song altogether. The *tègèrefò* rhythm, whether played by the clapping or simply sung with the clap feel, adds another rhythmic dimension to the song. In a musical ensemble like *kamalen n'gòni*, however, most of the instruments' rhythms have a different feel to that of the woman's clap pattern.

Songbird sonorities and intricate rhythmic sensibilities are a rich and lovely aspect of Wasulu music. It must be noted that Bintu is one of only a few of the living pioneer songbirds who dared to sing with the new, rebellious youth-harp players in the late 1960s. She and a few others were the singers who brought this music to Bamako. Youth-harpists often sang to their own accompaniment, but it was their local *kòndòw*, the lovely songbirds with that marvelous sense of rhythm, improvisation, and round tone, who made their music sweet.

A de-li lo-go-ro ke-e-ro, yo ne-ne, ne-ne-ma - nyi - i dia-ra-bi ne-
I am mis-sing him a-a-gain, the chill, the chill of love is bad

3 ne, ne - ne ma - a nyi - i, du - ni - ya - a - a a - a -
The chill is terr - i - ble, oh, oh - world ah - a a - a -

5 ko fu-nan - ke - ni - sa - ya, sa ya ge - le - ma - a - a - ne - ne m - a - nyi
Oh, oh - my lov - er's di - ed, death is ter - ri - ble it's chill is so - o cold

7 A de - li lo - go - ro ke - e - ro

Example 7. “Nene” with *Tègèrefò* (cd 11)

Conclusion

So what of youth-harps and songbirds? In an effort to describe what makes *wassoulou* so unique to all of Mali’s regional popular music styles, I used a palette of local epistemologies and perspectives about it from those members of its listening community: singers, listeners, musicians, local scholars, and music entrepreneurs. The overwhelming response concluded that Wasulukaw are “naturally” the most gifted people when it comes to dance music and singing in Mali and therefore, quite naturally, they produce the nation’s preferred popular music. Guided by these sources of local

knowledge to unpack this local stereotype and search for evidence for this claim, I went to the regional roots of *wassoulou* and explored ideas, histories, instruments, repertoires, songs, and vocal techniques of the Wasulu region. The analysis revealed that Wasulu tradition places an extraordinarily high aesthetic premium on musical innovation, dance rhythms, freedom of expression, and mastery of the female singing voice. These qualities, then, and the beautifully rich music and song they produce, are what I argue constitute the basis of the Malian music community's common opinion that Wassulu "naturally" has the best dance music and singers.

This study has provided new evidence of Wasulu as a rich reservoir of Malian indigenous musical instruments, practices, rhythms, and repertoires, including the youth-harp and vocal music. Its musicians and singers are "free artists" as opposed to the casted bards of its Mande neighbors, giving them room to create and invent new styles, traditions, and instruments. From an ideological and social view, it also shows how Wasulukaw naturalize the feminization of singing popular music, thus creating a culture of highly skilled songbirds and rich musical terrain of vocal repertoires. Close attention to the art of singing through analyses of form and function, including call and response, improvisation, vocal sonorities, rhythm, and other stylistic elements has also provided some musical evidence explaining local evaluations of the songbird's voice as being "naturally" and "always in tune" and harmoniously sweet, above all. Bintu Sidibé's narrative provides songs, rhythms, and contexts of traditional Wasulu music and performance. Analyses of her music and song transcriptions also showed that the unified attention of musicians *and* singers to complex rhythms produces an exceptionally appealing dance music.

Studies already made on the Wasulu youth-harp (Charry 2000; Conrad 2002) and on *wassoulou* songbirds (Dúran 1995, 2000; Maxwell 2003) have laid a strong foundation of rigorous academic research on music from Wasulu that contributes significantly to knowledge of popular and traditional African music. It is largely due to the diligent work of Lucy Dúran that so much of *wassoulou* music and its female singing stars is already known to academic and African/world music communities. This study is meant to enrich her work and contribute to the larger mission that seeks to spread and encourage knowledge about Wasulu music and the important contributions women singers have made and continue to make in it. For a nation that so proudly believes in and enjoys the extraordinary musical gifts of its Wasulukaw, the lack of published information about Wasulu music culture begs for further attention. Finally, it is my hope that the present study of youth-harps and songbirds contributes to the global spirit the Afghani store owner showed me, of honoring excellent music, sweet songs, and things of beauty.

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