THE BUZZ AESTHETIC AND MANDE MUSIC: ACOUSTIC MASKS AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF ENCHANTMENT

by

MERLYN DRIVER

Abstract: This article concerns the widespread preference for 'buzzy' timbres in African traditional musics; and, in particular, the ways in which this preference has been borne out in the Mande region of west Africa. The two main types of buzzing mechanisms in Mande music are metal buzzing rattles, which are attached to the neck or bridge of various string instruments, and mirlitons (vibrating membranes), which are placed over small holes on the resonating gourds of wooden xylophones. Over the last seventy to eighty years, an older and rougher 'buzz aesthetic' within Mande music has become increasingly endangered, with buzzing largely disappearing from instruments such as the *kora* and the *ngoni* in favour of a 'cleaner', more 'Western' aesthetic. Considered in a wider cultural context, I discuss the possible origins of the Mande buzz aesthetic and attempt to explore how the incorporation of buzzing sounds within Mande music might be connected to forms of 'esoteric', 'supernatural' and spiritual power.

Keywords. West Africa, buzz, timbre, Mande, griots, mirlitons, masks, blacksmiths.

An introduction to the buzz aesthetic

In the early 1960s, Alan Merriam described what he saw as the "persistent search for a 'burred' or 'buzzing' tone" among musicians throughout Africa (1962: 128). Over the following five decades, the discussion of timbre as a 'key feature of African music' has, as Fales puts it, "taken on the same aura of banal truth" that once characterised the citing of rhythm (2002: 57). Unlike rhythm, however, which continues to be explored in great depth, the 'slippery' concept of timbre is often "no sooner mentioned than forgotten" (*ibid.*). While ethnomusicologists such as Turino continue to describe a distinctly African "preference for dense overlapping textures and 'buzzy' timbres" (2015: 201), very few scholars have attempted to offer explanations. It is my aim to do just that, albeit primarily in relation to the Mande region of west Africa, where both hereditary '*griots*' (*jelis*) and 'hunters' musicians have traditionally used buzzing tones within their music. While many musical traditions in Africa are recognised for their incorporation of buzzing sounds, the use of 'buzzy' timbres within Mande music is less well-known. This is partly due to the modifications and adaptions that have taken place during the trajectory of the *kora*, and, more recently, the *ngoni* lute onto the international music scene (Durán pers. comm. 30 August 2016; 2008: 18).[1]

[1] My exploration of this topic has benefited from correspondences with a number of scholars,

As we attempt to come to grips with the 'buzz aesthetic', it is important to clarify as far as possible what 'buzzing' actually means in different musical contexts. While we may all agree that a bumble bee makes a 'buzzy' sound, the issue of exactly where a sound signal starts (and ceases) to be 'buzzy' is clearly a more subjective matter. There are however, a number of acoustic factors that can contribute to our understanding of buzzing in music.

The term "auditory roughness" was introduced into the field of acoustics and psychoacoustics by Helmholtz (1885), who used it to describe the 'buzzing' sound quality associated with narrow harmonic intervals; for example, the notes of a minor second played simultaneously on two flutes (Vassilakis 2005).[2] More generally, roughness can be used to describe the sound quality of various other signals, including fast trills and vibrato, rattles and drones. Buzzing, then, can be considered one type of auditory roughness. The sensation of roughness occurs as a result of the way in which we perceive rapid sequences of brief auditory events, and the inability of mechanisms within the ear to resolve certain inputs (Greated 1994: 61). For roughness to be perceived, the time interval between successive auditory events must be less than approximately 30 milliseconds (Terhardt 2000; pers. comm. 21 August 2017). Where the interval is greater than 30 milliseconds, sounds are more likely to be experienced as oscillations of volume (or 'beating'). This phenomenon is undoubtedly significant when it comes to understanding the acoustics of buzzing. We know from instruments such as the *sitar* that the presence of overtones and harmonics can have a major effect on the perception of 'buzziness'. Other factors, such as pitch instability and sustain should also be considered, as should the almost infinite number of variables involved when it comes to playing different types of instruments in their environment. By manipulating these various acoustic parameters, musicians throughout the world harness the creative potential of buzzing in a number of different ways.

While it is important to place the 'African buzz aesthetic' within a more global context, it is clear when it comes to acoustic musical traditions that Africa shows a particularly strong preference for 'buzzy' timbres. On no other continent is the buzz aesthetic spread over such vast regions and among such a wide array of different ethnic groups. Surprisingly however, there is no indigenous or regional term for the buzz aesthetic in Africa.[3]

---

including lengthy discussions with Lucy Durán, who has been engaged with Mande music as a producer and ethnomusicologist for more than thirty years. The "aesthetic of the buzz" is a term Durán uses in her teaching to describe the deliberate incorporation of 'buzzy' timbres within music (pers. comm. 27 June 2016). Paraphrasing Durán, I refer to it in this article as "the buzz aesthetic".

[2] A harmonic interval refers to the sound of two different notes played at the same time.

[3] Africa is by no means the only continent where a strong buzz aesthetic has prevailed. Several Indian chordophones such as the *veena*, *tānpurā* and *sitar*, share a distinctive, highly valued buzzing sound called *javārī*, thought to have existed since at least the ninth century. In traditional Japanese music, *sawari* is the name given to a comparable buzzing effect found on the *shamisen* and *biwa* lutes and some musicologists believe that the term sawari must come from the Hindi *javārī* (Widdess pers. comm. 3 June 2016). There was even a fashion for a distinctive buzz

Mechanisms for buzzing in African acoustic instruments

From a technical point of view, buzzing instruments in African countries (and elsewhere) can be separated into two categories – those that depend upon "timbre modifiers" (Weisser and Quanten 2011) to generate their sound, and those that have an 'inherent buzz'. According to Weisser, a timbre modifier can be defined as a mechanism that "produces an effect which is a constitutive part of the timbre of the sounds generated by the instrument" (2011: 123). Aware that all of the constitutive parts of an instrument can influence timbre, she adds two further qualifiers. The mechanism must not be dependent on a "specific playing technique", nor should it be needed for the production or transmission of the main vibration created by an instrument (123–124). All timbre modifiers can be separated into two categories: those that "add sonorous components to the main sounds [or "secondary instruments", usually positioned some distance away from the main vibrating element]" and those that "modify the main vibration [or "vibration modifiers", usually touching or positioned very close to the main vibrating element]" (125). These interactions between timbre modifiers and primary vibrations result in the "fusion" of noise and tone, with both components integrated into a "single sound event" (Fales and McAdams 1994: 69).

Several types of lyre and other chordophones in central and east African countries use mechanisms that interfere with the main string vibration.[4] On the sacred Ethiopian *begena* lyre, small pieces of leather (*enzirotch*) are placed between each string and a wide bridge. These adjustable pieces raise the strings up slightly, which results in a deep buzzing sound as they vibrate against the top edge of the bridge. The characteristic buzzing sound of the *begena* is considered an essential part of the instrument's identity; if it does not buzz, it is not a *begena* (Weisser and Quanten 2011: 125).[5] The same can be said of the Kenyan *obokano* lyre, which has one of the loudest and most vigorous buzzes of any African acoustic instrument, caused by the strings vibrating against a reed bridge. The Ugandan *ennanga* 'bow harp' meanwhile, has movable rings made from banana fibre and lizard skin positioned along the neck in order to make contact

in western Europe during the Renaissance period (1400–1600), when the "ordinary harp" (Praetorius 1985: 62) – the bray harp – was fitted with vibration modifiers called "bray pins". These pins were designed both to secure each string to the soundboard and, "when carefully adjusted, to produce a softly buzzing, semi-sustained sound" (Tyler 2007: 245).

4 Video of a *begena* performance: https://youtu.be/ge4PwKqyZcw
Video of an *obokano* performance: https://youtu.be/MnWeklkxt9Q
Video of an *ennanga* performance: https://youtu.be/9tLXef8WEeA
Video showing the *karindula* (Zambia/Congo) being played: https://youtu.be/hVwGxKXvBHQ
Video of an *endongo* lyre (Uganda) performance: https://youtu.be/YXJt8Ew5KNc
Video of a *nyatiti* lyre (Kenya) performance: https://youtu.be/tFWtriBS6qM
Video of a *litungu* lyre (Tanzania) performance: https://youtu.be/qzGwyWhgbVw

5 The *begena* bears a striking resemblance to what may be the oldest stringed instrument ever discovered – the 'Golden Lyre of Ur' (c.2500 BC), excavated in southern Iraq in 1929. The lyre, which has been carefully reconstructed, produces a strong buzzing sound, similarly created by the strings vibrating against the bridge. Found in the grave of a queen (or possibly a princess), the lyre has a front panel depicting images of the afterlife.

with the strings when they are played. And, proving that modernity does not always equal complexity, the 'tradi-modern' *karindula*, a large four-stringed bass instrument from Zambia and south-eastern Congo, makes do with a piece of cardboard positioned between the strings and the neck.[6]

Timbre modifiers within the context of Mande music (buzzing rattle attachments and vibrating membranes) are all of Weisser's 'secondary instrument' type. Other instruments that traditionally feature secondary modifiers include the Shona *mbira dzavadzimu*, on which shells or bottle tops are loosely attached to the soundboard, and often on their gourd resonators (some lamellophones have buzzers *around* their lamellae, which would technically be considered vibration modifiers).[7] Secondary instrument modifiers can similarly be found on various lutes from north Africa (with west African heritage) such as those with attached rattles in Morocco and Tunisia,[8] as well as on several types of wooden xylophone such as the Ghanaian *gyil*, the *timbila* from Mozambique, and the Zambian *silimba*, all of which feature vibrating membranes (mirlitons) on the resonator gourds attached beneath their keys.[9] Finally, there are several drums that use mirlitons, including the *ditumba* resonance drum from the Kasai region of Congo, which provides the distinctive waspish buzz of the Congolese band Kasai Allstars, and the *mukupela* double skin hourglass drum from Zambia (Kubik 2000: 283).[10]

In addition to those with specific timbre modifiers, there are a number of African instruments that might be considered 'inherently buzzy', although their buzzing is rarely as intense. This category includes musical bows, such as the amaXhosa *umrhubhe* and the endangered Swazi *sikhelekehle* friction bow and monochord instruments such as the *babatoni* 'gut bucket' from Malawi.[11] With instruments of this type, a buzzing sound originates primarily from the vibrations of a single metal string, which tends to be long, slightly slack and rubbed or struck with a stick (or with a short fiddle-like bow in the case of the *sikhelekehle*) (Impey pers. comm. 9 July 2016). Also 'inherently buzzy' are African jews harps such as the amaXhosa *isitolotolo*, and certain 'labrosones' (lip-vibrated instruments) like the traditional long trumpets played by the Wolaitta of

---

6 All of Congo's 'tradi-modern' groups [Karindula music and Congolese bands such as Konono No1 and Kasai Allstars] are connected with spirits. Their primary function is to play at funerals for the dead and for the ancestors (Font-Navarrete: 2011).

7 Video showing the buzzers on the *mbira dzavadzimu*: https://youtu.be/c4pjO6Vh6Ec

8 Documentary [The spleen of the *yenna*] Tunisian healing ritual, Stambeli (buzzing rattle on *guembri* lute at 09:26): https://vimeo.com/34149295

9 Video of a *gyil* performance: https://youtu.be/OAqmo9ovaSQ
Video of a *timbila* performance: https://youtu.be/3tUUAbAczNU
Video of a *silimba* performance: https://youtu.be/4xusWO1HFHs

10 Video by Kasai Allstars, featuring the sound of the buzzing *ditumba* drum: https://youtu.be/jaWENBBVzpk

11 Video showing the sound of the *umrhubhe*: https://youtu.be/OvGLwAkE9po
Video of a *sikhelekehle* performance: https://youtu.be/czUgs1sLB8I
Video showing the *babatoni* being performed: https://youtu.be/HlUQ2keLGsI

southern Ethiopia.[12] While all of these instruments emit buzzing sounds without the aid of particular timbre modifiers, their overall timbre is still shaped to some extent by playing technique and other factors. In the case of the *babatoni*, the use of bottles as a 'slide' mechanism also modifies timbre; but since the mechanism is primarily intended to alter *pitch*, it should not be considered a timbre modifier in the true sense (Weisser pers. comm. 16 August 2016). With jews harps and mouth bows, the main vibrating element is amplified through the use of resonators (gourds, or the mouth of the player). Their timbre is also affected to some extent by the overtones created around the fundamental note/s (achieved by changing the position or shape of the resonators) and when the mouth is used as a resonator, by inhaling or exhaling small amounts of air. Finally, in the case of gourd trumpets and other labrosones, the player can adjust the buzz by vibrating the lips in different ways, with the air in the tubular body (resonator) vibrating in sympathy and producing a much louder overall sound.

The buzz aesthetic in Africa – possible explanations

According to Philip Peek, the acoustic realm within many African cultures is "fundamental" to "the maintenance of cultural norms" and the reinforcement of "systems of meaning and signification" (1994: 474). Having discussed some of the main ways that musicians throughout Africa incorporate 'buzzy' timbres, I now turn my attention to the task of exploring the possible origins and significance of the buzz aesthetic in African music.

Considering that the majority of non-human buzz comes from insects, I believe that we should bear in mind the possibility of historical connections between insect noises – chirps, buzzes and whirrs – and the incorporation of similar timbres within music (Rothenberg 2013). This may have particular relevance for Africa, given the exceptional diversity of insects in the Afrotropical region (Scholtz and Mansell 2009: 79). Although very little research has been carried out on this topic, an interesting case has been documented by Dave Dargie, who notes that in parts of South Africa's Eastern Cape province, *umqangi* is a type of loudly buzzing beetle. Young amaXhosa boys have been known to impale the unfortunate creature on a thorn, and, as it buzzes frantically, play melodies "by shaping the mouth, using the beetle's buzzing as [the] fundamental tone" (2005: 155).[13] This overtone technique is identical to that used by amaXhosa musicians to play the *umrhubhe* mouth bow, which in the past was also called *umqangi* or *umqunge* (*ibid*.: 154). Whether *umrhubhe* timbre has been partly inspired by the beetle, or the beetle simply named after the bow, is difficult to say. Dargie gives a further example, however, that demonstrates precisely how *umqangi*

[12] Audio recording of the *isitolotolo*: https://soundcloud.com/merlyndriver/isitolotolo-jews-harp-1979/s-HwMP0 Video featuring the 'buzzy' trumpets of the Wolaitta: https://youtu.be/U2l84Mo1Es4 (I have not been able to confirm the local name. Among the Berta people who live along the border of south western Ethiopia and Sudan, a similar instrument is called *waza*).

[13] Similar use of a beetle has been documented in East Sepik, Papua New Guinea, where jews harps are also played. See video: https://youtu.be/ES414PwyRKw

'beetle music' might inspire other forms of musical creativity. Nowayilethi Mbizweni is a Thembu amaXhosa woman known for her own unique style of *umngqokolo* overtone singing called *umngqokolo ngomqangi*.[14] She claims to have developed *umngqokolo ngomqangi* from the aforementioned method of 'playing' the *umqangi* beetle (2005: 155).[15] Regarding west Africa however, Durán told me that she has "never in forty years of working in Mande music heard anyone make any reference to the buzzing sound of insects" (pers. comm. 27 June 2016). What is often referenced are the practical, musical aspects of buzzing.

While many scholars have pointed out a widespread "African aesthetic that values a buzzing or jingling sound" (Charry 1996: 5), few have mentioned what this aesthetic achieves on either an abstract or a practical level. Referring to the Ugandan *ennanga* bow harp, Kubik points out the "less known" fact that its mechanism for buzzing, "like other devices for modification in the practice of African instrumental playing, amplifies tone volume and [increases the] length of notes" (1967: 21–22).[16] Buzzing rattles such as those found on the *kora* and other stringed instruments are also known to have a strong percussive effect (Durán 2000: 152; 2008: 15). Additionally, Kubik explains that the "perception of scale patterns" can be affected by the "timbre structure of individual notes" (Kubik 1985: 49) and that the timbres of xylophone or lamellophone notes can differ from one another to such an extent that they often introduce a "structural element of their own" into a pattern of music (*ibid.*). He describes how an Angolan musician, Kufuna Kandonga used to attach metal buzzing rings to "only the four lowest lamellae of his *likembe*, in order to amplify inherent patterns emerging from these notes" (*ibid.*). Andrew Tracey similarly argues that the importance of tonal qualities, including buzzing, may be "founded on the desire for *difference* between the parts" (pers. comm. 26 August 2016 emph. in orig.). It is clear that 'buzzy' timbres may be used by musicians for a number of practical reasons, with amplification and sustain perhaps chief among them.

Turning finally to the more abstract dimensions of the buzz aesthetic in Africa, Peek reports that religious specialists in African cultures are traditionally required, above all else, to "master sound" – it is they who initiate communication with animals, ancestors, and other-worldly beings (Peek 1994: 478).[17] In many parts of the continent there has been a "general pattern for the use of "unusual" (that is, non-ordinary) tonal

[14] See Nowayilethi Mbizweni performing her unique style of *umngqokolo* overtone singing (at 03:59): https://youtu.be/MYj-55T6Uzs

[15] Even if we cannot prove similar relationships elsewhere, it is clear that the aesthetic parallels between 'buzzy' musical timbres and insects have not gone unnoticed by various African musicians. Among the Shona for example, tunings for *mbira dzavadzimu* have either a 'high' or a 'low' buzzing voice. The low voice is called *mazingizi*, named after a large carpenter bee (*zingizi*), while the high voice is called *kanyuchi*; the same word used to describe the sound of smaller bees (Matuire 2009: 55).

[16] Kubik's view regarding buzzing and amplification is shared by other Africanists including Andrew Tracey (pers. comm. 26 August 2016) and Lucy Durán (pers. comm. 27 June 2016).

[17] This emphasis on sound may help to explain why ritual specialists are commonly blind, but rarely deaf (Jackson 1968: 296).

qualities to represent ancestors and spirits" (Lifschitz 1988: 225). Devices such as slit gongs, drums, ceramic pot resonators, water and earth-friction drums, whistles, and bullroarers have all been used to create other-worldly and spiritually significant sounds (Peek 1994: 480). Possibly the oldest method of establishing a spirit presence via sound is through the distortion or disguise of the human voice. In the ritual mask traditions that stretch in a vast diagonal band from the coast of west Africa to Mozambique in the east, the disguised human voice has played an important part in spirit manifestation (Lifschitz 1988: 222). Lifschitz suggests that when an audience "perceives a spirit – or "mask" – solely in terms of its sound output", the sound in question should be referred to as an "acoustic mask" (*ibid*.). In contrast to visual masks, which rely on being seen and heard, acoustic masks are heard, but rarely seen. "They are out of sight – most often performed at night inside or outside the village – but definitely not out of mind when they are made manifest, since their powers and importance in any community are generally considerable" (*ibid*.).

The most widespread devices used for disguising the human voice for spiritual purposes in sub-Saharan Africa are those that employ a vibrating membrane.[18] As well as providing the 'voices' of physical masks (voice disguisers such as these appear to be present in most, if not all, of the African countries where ritual [physical] masks have traditionally been used), these 'kazoo'-like voice disguisers have also been used in combination with the other auditory devices mentioned above, and as 'acoustic masks' in themselves (Lifschitz 1988: 224). For Lifschitz, the widespread predilection to add buzzing to other instruments throughout Africa (many of which, as he points out, are connected to spirits or the sacred) indicates that the "association of buzzing and reverberating sounds with ancestral spirit[s] … may be widespread", and "probably [a] very ancient technique for creating a spirit presence" (1988: 226). The fact that there is a high concentration of buzzing instruments in and around the countries that have a strong tradition of ritual masking, lends further weight to the possibility of a historical link between these practices and the buzz aesthetic in Africa. If there *is* a widespread historical connection between buzzing sounds and the spirit world (or other forms of 'esoteric' or 'supernatural' power), then this could surely help to explain the presence – and persistence – of the buzz aesthetic throughout large parts of Africa, including the Mande region.

Buzzing and the technology of enchantment

As an art form, music contributes to what the Alfred Gell refers to as the "technology of enchantment" (Gell and Hirsch 1999: 163). Gell's ideas regarding art and agency might help us to understand how buzzing contributes to spirit manifestation and notions of 'supernatural' or 'esoteric' power. Take, for instance, his example of the elaborately decorated Trobriand canoe prow-boards in Melanesia, intended to 'dazzle' overseas

[18] Balfour (1948) describes mirlitons being used to represent the "voices of ancestral spirits" among a number of different ethnic groups in west Africa, as well as in Cameroon, Congo and South Africa (among the BaVenda of the then northern Transvaal).

trading partners to such an extent that they take leave of their senses and become easier to negotiate with. While one might be tempted to think it is the patterns on the prow-board that do all the 'dazzling', this, according to Gell, is not the case:

> The canoe-board does not interfere seriously, if at all, with the intended victim's perceptual processes, but achieves its purpose in a much more roundabout way. The canoe-board is a potent psychological weapon, but not as a direct consequence of the visual effects it produces. Its efficacy is to be attributed to the fact that these disturbances, mild in themselves, are interpreted as evidence of the magical power emanating from the board. (Gell and Hirsch 1999: 166)

Might the buzz aesthetic within Africa function in a similarly "roundabout way"? In order to answer this question, we must consider the sensory aspects of the buzz. The Shona *mbira* player, Chartwell Dutiro, told me that the buzzing of his instrument sometimes makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end (pers. comm. 4 June 2016). The *begena* player, Temesgen Hussein meanwhile, described to me the "tingling sensation" that he has experienced since childhood when listening to *begena* songs (pers. comm. 14 June 2016). Comments such as these highlight that buzzing on acoustic instruments is felt as well as heard (the sensory dimensions of the word, "aesthetic", perhaps become more obvious if we consider its opposite: *anaesthetic*). It seems reasonable to suggest that buzzing, as a multisensory phenomenon, might increase a sense of agency emanating from music. Furthermore, in cultures that have a strong connection with the spirit world, this agency is logically more likely to be attributed to spirits. When direct spiritual associations are absent, other, often quite esoteric explanations can arise. Gusii *obokano* players from Kenya are known to have tuned their instruments next to powerful waterfalls in order to absorb some of their power (Weisser pers. comm. 11 July 2016).[19] The concept of musical mastery (*ngaraya*) in Mande culture is often traditionally associated with sorcery, while the most respected hereditary musicians (*jelis*) are considered to have their own spirit (genie), known as the "*jeliya* jinn" (Durán 2007: 587).

As well as directly representing 'the voice of the ancestors', buzzing sounds may alternatively be conceived as a 'channel' though which spirit manifestations or communication can take place. The *begena* player, Temesgen Hussein, and *mbira* player Solomon Murungu, for example, both compare buzzing to an "envelope". In the case of *begena* music, Hussien says, "the [buzzing] sound makes it easier for the words to be sent through [to the sacred]" (pers. comm. 14 June 2016). For Murungu, meanwhile, the buzzing of the *mbira dzavadzimu* constitutes "packaging for the gift" (pers. comm. 4 August 2016) – the "gift" being the music that calls the ancestors and leads to a spirit presence and/or possession of attendees during all-night *bira* ceremonies.

An ethnography of the buzz aesthetic in Mande music

The Mande homeland refers to an area usually understood to stretch approximately

[19] Traditionally associated with male strength and magical power, the buzzing sound of the *obokano* is thought to ward off evil spirits (Weisser 2014: 29).

from Kouroussa in Guinea, to Bamako in Mali (Charry 2000: xxi). Ownership of this region is claimed by the Maninka people (mostly in Mali and Guinea) and the Mandinka, who are descended from the Maninka and live primarily in Senegambia. I understand 'Mande music' (following Charry) to refer not only to music from this core region, but also to the music of Mande peoples (speakers of different Mande dialects) living in other parts of Mali, Guinea and surrounding countries such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire (*ibid*.: xxii). The buzz aesthetic within Mande music exists within the tradition of hereditary musicians, the *jelis* (sing. *jeli*) and in hunters' music, which is thought to be older and an important source for *jeliya* (the art of the *jeli*). What follows is a description of the buzz aesthetic within each of these contexts, starting with *jeliya*, where all of the *jelis*' main instruments have traditionally used timbre modifiers of Weisser's 'secondary instrument' type. I begin by tracing the demise of buzzing in the context of the *kora*, west Africa's most highly developed calabash harp. Unquestionably the most modern of the *jeli* instruments, the *kora* has probably existed for less than three hundred years (Charry 2000: 119, Durán 2008: 7). [20]

The earliest drawings of calabash harps (1825) show a metal "buzzing leaf", or rattle, inserted into the top of the bridge (Charry 2000: 116). The rattle, which is also used on the *jembe* drum (not a *jeli* instrument, although it is sometimes played by *jelis*), is called *segesege* in the Maninka language and consists of a thin sheet of metal with small metal rings attached around its edge. When vibrations are sent to the leaf, the rings jingle and produce a distinctive buzz. A rattle called *nyenyemo* was commonly used on the *kora* until the early 1970s (Durán pers. comm. 20 June 2016). [21] The loss of the rattle is part of a number of changes that have taken place within *kora* music, making the instrument more suitable for playing alongside instruments such as keyboard and electric guitar (Durán 2008: 14). Toumani Diabaté, one of the leading innovators within *kora* music, told me that he viewed buzzing as the "sound of Africa", but that "sound engineers don't like the way it interferes with other inputs" (pers. comm. 30 July 2016).[22] Over the last seventy-five years, an older and rougher aesthetic, marked not only by the buzzing rattle but also by the use of leather strings and 'non-western' intervals and scales, has been "largely abandoned for a cleaner, more resonant, and western aesthetic" (Durán 2008: 14). A small number of Mandinka *jelis* continue to use the *nyenyemo* on their *koras* to this day, particularly those from the Casamance region of southern Senegal, who play a traditional percussive style called *djimbasengo,* in which the rattle plays a

[20] According to oral traditions, the *kora* originated in the Kabu empire (modern day Guinea-Bissau), where it was discovered by a *jeli* (Jali Madi Wuleng), with the help of a jinn (spirit). Charry notes that all of his inquiries into the origins of Mande instruments "inevitably led to jinns" (2000: 119).

[21] Close-up video of the nyenyemo on the kora, showing how it works during playing: https://youtu.be/ZVvm94SmMGM

[22] Chartwell Dutiro similarly pointed out to me that [European] recording studios can sometimes be "allergic to buzzing". When he was recording in London with Thomas Mapfumo & the Blacks Unlimited, the British sound engineer silenced the buzzers on his *mbira* by sticking them down with gaffer tape. Dutiro was so upset by persistent efforts of sound engineers to eradicate the buzz, that he eventually left the band (pers. comm. 4 June 2016).

key part (Kouyaté pers. comm. 25 August 2016).[23] The *nyenyemo* has also been used on a probable antecedent of the *kora*, the *soron* (although in this case it is inserted into the end of the neck).

As on the *kora* and *soron*, a buzzing leaf (*segesege*) was traditionally used on various types of plucked lutes played by Mande *jelis.* The Bamana of Mali's middle Niger valley used the rattle on the *ngoni* lute until at least the 1960s (Durán pers. comm. 27 June 2016).[24] One of the last Bamana *jelis* to use the rattle on the *ngoni* was Banzumana Sissoko ('the old lion'), from Segou, remembered in Mali as a fierce traditionalist and a true master (*ngara*). The fact that acclaimed masters (*ngaraw*) have previously used the rattle may be significant. As Durán (2007: 587) explains, *ngaraya* (musical mastery) has in recent times become increasingly hard to achieve and "encompasses powers that cannot be fully explained." Over the last decade, Sissoko's grandson Bassekou Kouyaté has taken the *ngoni* onto the world stage, choosing in the process to omit the rattle and significantly modernise its sound. The rattle continues to be used on the *gambare,* the Soninke version of the *ngoni* (Durán pers. comm. 27 June 2016).[25] From a practical point of view, the buzzing rattle on plucked lutes, as on the *kora*, functions to amplify the instrument and provide a percussive effect.

The only *jeli* instrument that has largely retained a buzzing sound is the Maninka *bala* (*balafon*), a wooden frame xylophone closely associated with blacksmiths.[26] According to Mande oral traditions, the *bala* originated with Soumaouro Kante, the blacksmith sorcerer king defeated by Sunjata Keita in the Epic of Sunjata (c. 12th Century). Although crude *balas* could have been fashioned without the use of metal tools, several factors indicate that the *bala* was "a blacksmith invention" (Charry 2000: 138).[27] Like other traditional African xylophones, the *bala* uses mirlitons placed over small holes on its resonator gourds, in order to create a buzzing sound, which increases sustain, allowing notes to overlap. These membranes were formerly made from spider egg sacs, called *talingjalo* in the Mandinka dialect (Jessup 1983: 36). Today the buzzers on the *bala* are more likely to be made from cigarette paper (Charry 2000: 139).

While the *bala* is the only *jeli* instrument that has largely retained a 'buzzy' aesthetic, buzz continues to play an important part within the more traditional realm of hunters' music. Buzzing rattles, similar to those used (or formerly used) within *jeliya*, feature on both the Wasulu *donsongoni*, [28] a six-stringed hunters' harp played in the south of Mali,

[23] Video of Djeli Lamine Diawara, a Mandinka *kora* player from Casamance who still uses the nyenyemo: https://youtu.be/oV2gGCVS0hs

[24] Audio of Bazoumana Sissoko performing 'Bakari Jan', with a buzzing rattle on his *ngoni*, Musique du Mali, vols. 2 & 3: Bazoumana Sissoko, Le Vieux lion I & II: https://youtu.be/4nHf2JaFkcs

[25] The *gambare* is thought to have been the model for the *guembri* played by the Gnawa (Moroccans of Soninke, Bamana and Hausa origin) who use the instrument (with a buzzing rattle) as part of their complex liturgy.

[26] *Balafon* is a European term, probably derived from *bala fo*: "to play the bala" (Charry 2000: 138).

[27] As Charry (2000: 138) notes, the manner in which a blacksmith shapes metal with a hammer is "replicated in the act of playing the bala, striking wooden slats with a mallet".

[28] The Wasulu region covers parts of south-eastern Mali, north-western Côte d'Ivoire, and eastern Guinea.

and on the *simbi*, the seven-stringed Maninka hunters' harp (also played by Mandinka hunters).[29] As Durán explains, the fact that the buzzing rattle remains in use on hunters' calabash harps, may be significant given that hunters' music is widely known as the "most esoteric" (Durán pers. comm. 27 June 2016).

The main divinities of Mande hunters' associations are Sanin and Kontron, described by Charry as "a mythical mother and archetype hunter son" (2000: 81). As well as being initiated into the cult of Sanin and Kontron, hunters traditionally learn to protect themselves in the bush from various natural and 'supernatural' dangers (McNaughton 1982: 56). Through this education, the hunter acquires powers that enable him not only to kill animals but also to deal with the potentially hazardous 'life force' or energy (*nyama*) that is released when they are killed.[30] Despite being largely at odds with today's majority of Muslim faith, the arcane world of hunters and their music continues to function as a "locus of belief" (Herbert 1993: 166) within Mande culture. As Durán explains (1995: 116), the distinctive buzzing timbre and percussive sound of the *donsongoni* "evokes, by associative process, the 'mystique' of hunting (*donsoya*)", as well as the "esoteric power [*somaya*] that master hunters possess."[31] This 'mystique' has been drawn upon in a number of ways by Mande musicians outside the hunters' tradition (*cf* Durán 1995, 2000). In Wasulu, for example, the *kamalengoni* (or 'youth harp') was developed as a 'secular' and non-ritual version of the hunters' harp, and yet it still draws upon the power of the *donsongoni* by virtue of having an almost identical playing technique and sound (*ibid*.: 115). The youth harp also provides the main link between hunters' music and *wassoulou,* a style of semi-acoustic music based around the *kamalengoni* and women singers that originated in the same part of Mali during the 1960s. Although Durán has witnessed boys using rattles on their *kamalengonis* in village settings (pers. comm. 30 August 2016), those used within *wassoulou* music do not feature rattles. *Wassoulou* does, however, incorporate the distinctively 'heavy' sound of iron *karinyan* scrapers, which are another main feature of hunters' music.[32]

The *simbi* hunters' harp, which has metal strings and more of a gentle sound compared to the *donsongoni*, is thought to have been a particularly important source for the music of the *jelis* (Charry 2000: 77). The rattles that feature on the earliest drawings of the *simbi* provide compelling evidence that the *kora nyenyemo* was appropriated from hunters' music. While the *nyenyemo* has all but disappeared, the buzzing rattle remains integral to the sound of the *simbi.* Even when it comes to hunters' music it is clear that we cannot take the survival of the buzz aesthetic for granted. At least one *simbi* player,

[29] Video of a *donsongoni*, played by Sibiri Samake: https://youtu.be/x3PjwPoEXPQ
Documentary piece on one of the great hunters' musicians, Bala Jimba Diakite (rattle on simbi shown 6 mins into video): https://youtu.be/6CTXg59gHgA

[30] McNaughton compares *nyama* to electricity, "unconstrained by insulated wires but rather set neatly into a vast matrix of deeply interfaced social and natural laws" (1988: 16)

[31] This power and mystique manifests itself visually in the form of the hunter's clothes, adorned with claws, horns, strips of rawhide, amulets, and mirrors that catch the light and "suggest the vital forces and spirits" that lurk in the bush (Cashion 1984: 114).

[32] Video of *karinyan* scrapers played alongside the *donsongoni*: https://youtu.be/mY6nnQQDjjw

Sidikiba Coulibaly, regularly performs without a rattle, probably due to the fact that many of his performances take place in a non-traditional and 'non-ritual' context. [33]

Another type of calabash harp is the *bolon*, a rare three or four-stringed instrument played in several regions of west Africa. Traditionally used to "incite soldiers to battle and to praise them after victorious campaigns" (Conrad 2005: 88), the foreboding power of the instrument is such that many Malian bands refuse to have a *bolon* player as a permanent member (Durán 2008: 4). Judging by its close resemblance to a hunter's bow, Charry notes that the *bolon* may well be the oldest of all the West African calabash harps (2000: 77). The rattle on the *bolon* has a percussive quality that contributes hugely to the instrument's imposing and powerful presence. [34]

Sources of power within the Mande buzz aesthetic

As explained earlier, the use of mirlitons to represent the voices of divinities or ancestral spirits is a phenomenon that occurs throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In the only lengthy study of vibrating membranes to date, Balfour notes that mirlitons in west Africa are "widespread" and retain much of their "ceremonial significance" (1948: 46). I have found several descriptions of 'kazoo'-like devices being used throughout the Mande region and beyond, as the 'voices' of visual masks. Such masks are found among many west African peoples, and are often used within traditional associations that oversee or carry out important community affairs. In the Maninka and Bamana dialects, the two main types of traditional associations are called *tonw* and *jow.* While *tonw* deal with public and mundane matters, *jow* are secret "power associations" dealing with "natural laws and supernatural powers" (Charry 2000: 206–7). It is within the context of *jow* masks that one finds buzzing voice disguisers. As Jespers (1995: 39) points out, the systems of reference that give *jow* their power "can only function insofar as the masks are 'bearers' of voice" - voices which are themselves disguised, or 'masked'.[35] The auditory aspect of these masks is particularly important to non-initiates (normally women and children) who are forbidden from seeing the headpieces. Of the "trilogy" of *jow* (*Nama*, *Kono*, and *Kòmò*) that possess 'kazoo masks' in the Mande heartland through Segou, the *Kòmò* has traditionally been the most widespread (Jespers 1995: 40, Charry 2000: 207). [36]

There are two main types of masks in the *Kòmò* power association, both of which emerge after sunset during the seasonal "coming out" of the Kòmò, and have a substance that is "first of all a voice" (Jespers 1995: 45). The *jarawaraw* (or "catamount-lions", with a headdress carved to reflect the form of a lion's head) are the first to emerge (*ibid.*).

---

[33] Video of Sidikiba Coulibaly playing the *simbi* alongside guitar and *ngoni*: https://youtu.be/wwDWqe7H8XU

[34] Short documentary featuring Ibrahim Traoré, one of the last players of the Mandinka *bolon*: https://youtu.be/Qc0_7A6qrS8

[35] Mirliton voice disguisers are similarly used among the Dan (a Mande people living in Côte d'Ivoire).

[36] Jespers (1995) dates the Kòmò association to the 12th Century. It is possible of course that the tradition of ritual masking pre-dates the Kòmò. Famous cave paintings in Tassili, Algeria, suggest that masks could have been used in Africa for at least 4000 years (Mack 1994: 39).

Criss-crossing both the outside and the inside of the village, several *jarawaraw* render the territory "little by little to the *Kòmò*" (*ibid.*). The voice of the *jarawara* mask, which resembles the roaring of a lion, is created not by a mirliton, but by the sum of several friction drums held by the mask bearers. The 'roar' of each drum contributes to the perception of a single, omnipresent voice, referred to by elders as "the grumblings of *Kle* [God]" (*ibid.*: 46). Jespers describes it as "a voice of terror" (*ibid.*: 45) that keeps non-initiates hiding silently indoors. Following the emergence of the *jarawaraw*, the second type of mask, called *waraw* ("catamounts") or *suruku* ("hyenas"), make their appearance.[37] "Shrill little nasal voices [using 'kazoo'-like voice disguisers] announce that the 'catamounts' have arrived at the gates of the village" (Jespers 1995: 49). The *wara* headpiece (*wara kun*) is a horizontal helmet mask, like others found in West Africa (see McNaughton 1991, 1992). It is instantly recognisable, with a fixed, gaping mouth and long muzzle typically adorned with horns and porcupine spines. The entire mask is heavily encrusted with a mixture of - among other things – crushed roots, skull fragments from "wise men" or those that have experienced "bad deaths", and several coats of sacrificial blood (*ibid.*: 51).[38] Tilted upwards, the *waraw* are said to capture the utterances of *Kle*, inscribed in the sky:

> Holding a kazoo in his mouth, he [the mask bearer] speaks a language communicated to him by the "catamount head" as if he were possessed. The kazoo, called *warada,* "mouth of catamount", is made of a reed whose extremities are closed by a membrane that the bearer's voice causes to vibrate. These membranes are generally composed of the webs certain spiders spin to protect their eggs. The … kazoo so transforms the bearer's voice that the young initiate thinks that he hears another tongue." (Jespers 1995: 51)

According to an origin myth described by Burkinabe art historian Diamitani, himself a *Kòmò* member, the *Kòmò* was "originally a wild animal that lived in the bush, with two feet, feathers, and a head like a buffalo" (2008: 19).[39] One day, when a hunter and his dog, "Yougouba", came across this strange creature, it sang to them in the Bamana language, urging Yougouba to catch it in return for a "trick". The dog, which had been given a supernatural medicine, took the beast by surprise, catching and killing it. Later on, when the hunter was cutting up the *Kòmò*, he found a tube of bamboo in its mouth, covered at each end with a "fine membrane that gave the animal his very thin,

---

[37] Brett-Smith notes that the term Kòmò *suruku* ("hyena of the Kòmò") has been quoted as referring to several different things, including the voice of the Kòmò (the mirliton voice disguiser), the mask itself, and the mask bearer (see Brett-Smith 1994: 286). She concludes that "Kòmò members are not terribly bothered by Kòmò *suruku* being several things at once" (pers. comms. 22 July 2016).

[38] In addition to the *wara kun*, mask bearers also wear a large feathered tunic that symbolises the vulture. The *waraw* thus have a bizarre, hybrid appearance (half vulture, half "catamount"/hyena). Both the vulture and the hyena have deep symbolism in Mande culture. Frederik Lamp (2004: 235) notes that as a daytime creature, the vulture "is the guardian of 'white knowledge', the clear, open, knowledge of spiritual origin". Patrons of war, royalty and hunting, references to vultures abound both within Mande music (the traditional song "*Duga*" [The Vulture] is performed by both hunters' musicians and jelis).

[39] See Diamitani (2008: 19–20) for the full version of the myth: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/afar.2008.41.3.14

Figure 1. *Kòmò* members with *waraw* helmet masks. The *warada* ('kazoo'- mouthpiece) is visible on the member second from right. Photo, with permission: Barbier-Mueller archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

reedy voice" (*ibid*.). Having brought the remains of the *Kòmò* back to the village, the hunter built a small house and placed the head inside. One morning, he was awoken by the head singing with the same reedy voice with which it had sung to Yougouba in the bush. Having decided to keep the miraculous *Kòmò* head for himself, the hunter "asked a blacksmith to carve a similar head for the peoples' entertainment" (*ibid*.). A tube covered at each end by a membrane of "spider web" (sic) was used to recreate the *Kòmò*'s voice (*ibid*.). In this way, *Kòmò* became known as "a spirit that is above man" (*ibid*.: 18) and a messenger of *Kle* with supernatural power. While this myth emphasises a symbolic connection between hunters and the *Kòmò*, I find the role of the blacksmith in relation to the possible origins of the Mande buzz aesthetic more compelling.

In Mande mythology, there is an ancestral or 'divine' smith called *Noumfaïri* (also spelled "Noun Fayiri") who is supposed to have been the first Mande smith from which all living blacksmiths are descended (Keita pers. comm. 14 August 2017).[40] *Noumfaïri* is said to have come down from the sky using an iron chain, earning him and his descendants the name "*jòlòkò la jigin*" (those who were lowered into the world by means of a metal chain). All Mande smiths are thus connected to the divine power of *Noumfaïri*, and this reaffirms their place in the world as master technologists and sorcerers. Similar cases of the 'divine smith' can be found throughout west Africa, where the smelting of iron is known to reach back to at least 600 BC (Childs 1993,

[40] According to Cherif Keita Noumfaïri and the Mande term for blacksmith – *numu* – are etymologically connected (Keita pers. comm. 20 August 2017).

Holl 2009).[41] The most well-known examples relate to *Ogun* and *Gu* – comparable Gods of iron among the Yoruba and Fon peoples, respectively.[42] In her discussion of the metaphysical significance of African metallurgy, Marimba Ani explains that "the blacksmith in traditional Africa is always a spiritually powerful person" (1981: 237).[43] The reputation of the blacksmith as a toolmaker and scientist exists, according to Ani, not in spite of, but *because of* his spirituality; *because* he has "access to the awesome, beautiful and sacred mysteries of the universe" (*ibid*.).

As with other hereditary Mande artisans (*nyamakalaw*),[44] blacksmiths are strongly associated with 'supernatural power' – the ability to see into the future is one of the many skills they are said to possess (Durán 2005, Laye 1954: 19). Like hunting, the work of smiths is inseparable from the concept of *nyama*. As well as managing enormous quantities of *nyama* through the transformation of iron ore into various tools and artefacts, blacksmiths are involved in a range of other "mediating endeavours that require the same profound insight into managing power" (LaGamma and Pemberton 2000: 55). Smiths, as Durán explains, have always played an important role in Mali "as creators of the tools for agriculture and warfare, as the sculptors of sacred objects, and also as healers and herbalists, visionaries and sorcerers, rainmakers, hunters, and circumcisers" (Durán 2005: 28). Historically, moreover, there has always been movement by blacksmiths (as well as by leather workers) into the world of *jeliya* (Durán pers. comm. 13 September 2016). Through intermarriage and other, more circumstantial means, it remains possible for an individual born into a blacksmith family to end up singing and playing instruments in the *jeli* style. Many hunters and hunters' musicians are also smiths, since there are no hereditary restrictions to joining a hunters' association. This fluidity of blacksmiths across different groups of Mande society, and their involvement in several different religious and social enterprises, is of crucial importance when considering their possible relation to the buzz aesthetic within Mande music.

All Mande *Kòmò* associations are traditionally led by blacksmiths (*numus*), who also make the "exquisitely horrific" (McNaughton 2001:175, 182) *wara kun* headpieces and other ritual *Kòmò* paraphernalia (including the *warada* 'kazoo' mouthpiece).[45]

[41] The earliest evidence of metallurgy in sub-Saharan Africa comes from Nubia, where a small number of copper artefacts were discovered and dated to around 4000 BC. These items were possibly from Egypt, given that smelting technology is believed to have spread from there to Nubia around 1500 years later (Childs: 1993: 319–321). The earliest evidence in West Africa (again, relating to the smelting of copper) dates back to around 2000 BC in Agadez, Niger (Herbert: 1984), while in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, iron is the first metal to emerge in archaeological records, from around 1000–500 BC. The manner in which metallurgy spread throughout the continent remains unclear.

[42] These Gods of iron also appear in Cuba, Haiti and Brazil among peoples of West African descent.

[43] Marimba Ani formerly went by her birth name, Dona Richards.

[44] Traditionally the *nyamakalaw* includes four occupations: blacksmith (numu), leatherworker (*garanke*) griot (*jelis*) and praiser-genealogist (*fune*) (Charry 2000: 407).

[45] This paraphernalia includes a set of ritual iron flutes, containing deadly poison. Brett-Smith identifies these flutes as *Kòmò saman*, and claims that their importance eclipses that of the headpiece (1994: 286).

As mentioned previously, blacksmiths are also strongly associated with the *bala*. It is striking that exactly the same spider egg sac (*talingjalo*) membranes have traditionally been used for both the *warada* (*Kòmò* 'kazoos') and the buzzing mirlitons on *bala*s. These connections suggest that the ritual use of mirliton voice disguisers could have informed the development of 'buzzers' on the *bala*. If this is indeed what happened, one might expect to find evidence of spiritual associations being transferred from the former context to the latter. I have yet to find direct evidence for this among Mande regions, although the Malian *bala* player Lassana Diabaté stresses that the *bala* is "truly sacred" and that when you are at home with your *bala* you are "under its protection".[46] In northwestern Ghana meanwhile, a connection between spirits and xylophone buzzers seems to have existed in relation to the *gyil*, an instrument that closely resembles the *bala*. As Charry notes, the fact that frame xylophones in West Africa share many of the same features seems to suggest a more "unified West African xylophone culture sometime in the distant past" (Charry 2000: 135). The *gyil* is played mainly by Lobi-Dagarti ethnic groups, both in northwestern Ghana and in the neighbouring parts of southern Burkina Faso and northeastern Côte d'Ivoire. The established Lobi *gyil* player, Ichitey James, claims that the buzzing of the instrument's "spider web" membrane is traditionally used to "awaken the spirits".[47] It may be worth bearing in mind that the regions where the *gyil* is played were once part of the Mali Empire (c. 1230–1600). As McNaughton explains, names of Mande groups living in northwestern Ghana today – Dyula, Ligbi and Numu – reflect their origins as traders and blacksmiths sent south and east during this period of expansion (1982: 54). There is thus a possibility that Mande blacksmiths introduced the xylophone into these areas, along with certain spiritual associations of the buzz that have since disappeared from their Mande homelands. While the exact role of blacksmiths in the original use of buzzing *talingalo* membranes can only be speculated upon, their connection to buzzing *segesege* rattles is more clear.[48]

All of the buzzing rattles used within Mande music are, by virtue of being metal, inevitably connected to blacksmiths and to the esoteric power that their work entails. By the principles of smithing and *nyama*, Patrick McNaughton (1993) explained to me that power should enter metal "with every stroke of the blacksmith's hammer" (pers. comm. 12 August 2016). This power, according to the Mande scholar Cherif Keita, 'lives on' in the smith's creations, which "retain their charge (*nyama*) and are believed to continue to be effective because of this" (pers. comm. 19 July 2016). Given the potentially dangerous nature of *nyama*, McNaughton notes that tools such as iron hoes have typically been "made safe for non-smiths to use" (pers. comm. 12 August 2016:). In the context of

[46] These quotes are taken from a recent video (2017) by World Circuit Records: https://youtu.be/rNrGmtMscsE

[47] He makes these claims (01.20–02.05) in the 2010 video documentary, "Search for the Spiderweb": https://youtu.be/Kc_i_f7fJiE

[48] The invention of simple mirliton voice disguisers (made as they are from easily accessible and natural materials) and other acoustic masks is likely to have come about long before the emergence of metallurgy in west Africa (ca 600 BC).

hunters' music, there would logically be no need for buzzing rattles to be 'made safe', since hunters are thought to be able to protect themselves from the dangers of *nyama*. From this perspective, metal rattles might be considered a *conduit* for esoteric power. As McNaughton points out, Mande speakers have varied and nuanced attitudes to subjects such as *nyama*; some think a lot and care greatly about it, while others give it little if any attention at all (pers. comm. 14 August 2016). Clearly, one must be cautious about making generalisations.

While the manner in which the *segesege* developed within *jeliya* is not clear, its use on *jembe* drums, which are almost certainly of Maninka and Susu origin (Charry 1996), may be highly significant. Blacksmiths, who carve the bodies of *jembes* and often play them, are directly involved in many of the main enterprises in which the drums are used (Charry 2000: 213). As well as being played during circumcisions and in agricultural contexts, *jembes* are also used within the *Kòmò* power association. The fact that the *jembe* is the only blacksmith-associated instrument to use buzzing rattles suggests that it could have been the original source for the rattle. If this were the case, then the *jembe* drum (incorporated as it is into the fabric of Mande society) would have provided an ideal entry point for the rattle to spread throughout both *jeliya* and hunters' music. Evidence for the rattle's percussive origins may be gleaned from the onomatopoeic nature of the word, *segesege* (also spelled *sekeseke*, or *kesekese*), and from the more percussive use of the buzzing rattle on the *bolon* (probably the oldest calabash harp). When used as a timbre modifier on stringed instruments in general, the rattle takes on a 'mask aura' to a much greater extent, mirroring the buzzing effect of mirliton voice disguisers. It seems inconceivable that this transformation would have gone entirely unnoticed among Mande musicians familiar with the use of buzzing voice disguisers within *Kòmò* and other power associations. Although the strength of the buzz aesthetic within *jeliya* continues to fade, the old sound of Banzumana Sissoko certainly had something of this 'masked' quality, steeped in tradition and ancient Mande values, and radiating his own esoteric power as a 'true *ngara*'. Hunters' music, which is probably the oldest surviving melodic instrumental tradition (Charry 2000: 63), is another area where it makes sense to look for 'echoes' of auditory masking and other connections between the buzz aesthetic and spiritual or esoteric power.

Very little has been written about a link between the use of the buzzing rattle in hunters' music and the spiritual and esoteric power that this music is said to evoke. There are however, a few important clues. Youssef Tata Cissé (a Malian anthropologist, historian and member of a traditional hunters' association until his death in 2013) details the symbolic associations of the various parts of the *simbi* hunters' harp:

> The strings, which are seven in total, are logically the incarnation of the voice of the hunters' ancestors; its resonating body, half of a calabash, symbolizes the fertility of the land, while the stretched skin of the antelope on the instrument represents the sky where the spirits of the hunters dwell. Therefore "playing the simbi" means calling to the ghosts of the hunters and asking them to unify in order to act to the benefit of the living. (1994: 64–65 [translation, M. Driver])

The *simbi* is also played on behalf of the dead and the dying. According to

Figure 2. Unidentified hunters' musicians playing the *simbi* (note the buzzing rattles inserted into the top of the neck). Photo, with permission: Eden Otter.

Charry (2000: 68) the primary occasions for long epic singing and playing by hunters' musicians are funeral ceremonies. Cissé (1964: 209) notes that when a great hunter is on his deathbed, a hunter's musician will typically be at his bedside, playing the *simbi* and extracting from its strings, "murmurs from the depths of the ages". Although Cissé never mentions the *segesege* directly, anyone who has listened to hunters' music can testify that the buzz of the rattle is inseparable from the sound of the strings. Given that Cissé compares playing the strings of the *simbi* to "calling to the ghosts", it seems likely that buzzing has traditionally constituted either *part* of the "voice of the hunters' ancestors", or, as in the case of *mbira dzavadzimu,* "packaging for the gift".

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to explore the buzz aesthetic in Mande music within a wider African context. While recognising the important practical purposes of buzzing timbres within musical expression, my focus is on the more 'submerged' aspect of the buzz aesthetic - its abstract dimensions. Taking into account the ways in which 'unusual' sounds have traditionally been used throughout sub-Saharan Africa for spiritual manifestation and 'acoustic masks', I have set out to explore the possible connections between spiritual, 'supernatural' and 'esoteric' forms of power and the use

of 'buzzy' timbres within Mande music. Based on the evidence I have been able to put forward, there is a strong case for arguing that blacksmiths may have played a key role, both in disseminating the two main mechanisms for buzzing (the *talingjalo* membrane and the buzzing *segesege* or *nyenyemo* rattle) and in imbuing the buzz aesthetic in Mande regions with a powerful spiritual and esoteric significance. Today, much of the buzz aesthetic's power in the Mande context stems from the continued use of buzzing rattles on both types of hunters' harps. Ironically, the erosion of the buzz aesthetic from the music of the hereditary *jelis* may have led to a strengthening of its potency within hunters' music. Given the increasing absence of buzzing timbres from other areas of Mande music, the buzz aesthetic has become increasingly 'owned' by hunters' musicians, where it functions as a sonic evocation of the deeply spiritual and esoteric world that hunters represent. A further source of power relates to the use of buzzing rattles by the true masters (*ngaraw*) of previous generations; heroic figures such as Bamana *jeli* Banzumana Sissoko, who often – like hunters and smiths – are thought to have had their own supernatural power.

Finally, drawing upon Jespers and others, I suggest that buzzing within Mande music (and in musical traditions found elsewhere in Africa and beyond) constitutes an 'acoustic mask', though not always one with the kind of direct relationship with spiritual power that we find within ritual mask traditions and other religious contexts. Like a visual mask, buzzing leads to a transformation of 'appearance', while simultaneously opening up a metaphorical space within which ideas and the imagination can unfold.

References

Balfour, Henry
1948 "Ritual and Secular Uses of Vibrating Membranes as Voice-Disguisers." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 78(1/2): 45–69.

Brett-Smith, Sarah
1994 *The Making of Banana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Camara, Laye
1959 *The African Child*. London: Collins.

Cashion, Gerald A.
1984 *Hunters of the Mande: A Behavioral Code and World View Derived from the Study of Their Folklore*. PhD Dissertation: Indiana University, Bloomington.

Charry, Eric
1996 "A Guide to the Jembe." *Percussive Notes* 34(2): 66–72.
1996 "Plucked Lutes in West Africa: An Historical Overview." *The Galpin Society Journal* 49: 3–37.
2000 *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of West Africa.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Childs, Terry S.
1993 "Indigenous African Metallurgy: Nature and Culture." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 317–337.
Cissé, Youssouf Tata
1964 "Notes sur les Sociétés de Chasseurs Malinké." *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 34(2): 175–226.
1994 *La Confrérie des Chasseurs Malinké et Bambara: Mythes, Rites et Récits lnitiatiques.* Paris: Nouvelles du Sud/Arsan.
Conrad, David
2005 *Empires of Medieval West Africa*. New York: Facts On File.
Dargie, David
2005 "Xhosa Overtone Singing." in *The World of South African Music,* Christine Lucia, ed. 152–155. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub.
Diamitani, Boureima T.
2008 "Observing Komo among Tagwa People in Burkina Faso: A Burkinabe Art Historian's Views." *African Arts* 41(3): 14–25.
Durán, Lucy
1995 "Birds of Wasulu: Freedom of expression and expressions of freedom in the popular music of Southern Mali." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 4(1): 101–134.
2000 "Women, music and the ''mystique" of hunters in Mali" in *The African Diaspora: A musical perspective*, Ingrid Monson, ed. 13–86. New York: Garland Publishing.
2005 "Nahawa Doumbia – no ordinary woman." *fRoots Magazine*, 261: 23–29.
2007 "Ngaraya: Women and musical mastery in Mali." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70(3): 569–602.
Fales, Cornelia
2002 "The Paradox of Timbre." *Ethnomusicology* 46(1): 56–95.
Fales, Cornelia and McAdams, Stephen
1994 "The Fusion and Layering of Noise and Tone: Implications for Timbre in African Instruments." *Leonardo Music Journal* 4: 69.
Gell, Alfred.
1998 *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Gell, Alfred and Hirsch, Eric
1999 *The Art of Anthropology*. London: Athlone Press.

Greated, Clive
1994 *The Musician's Guide to Acoustics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Helmholtz, Hermann von
1885 [1954]) *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music.* 2nd English edition. New York: Dover Publications.
Herbert, Eugenia, W.
1993 *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African societies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Holl, Augustin, F.C.
2009 "Early West African Metallurgies: New Data and Old Orthodoxy." *Journal of World Prehistory* 22: 415–438.
Jackson, Anthony
1968 "Sound and Ritual." *Man* 3(2): 293–299.
Jessup, Lynne
1983 *The Mandinka balafon*. La Mesa, CA.: Xylo Publications.
Jespers, Philippe
1995 "Mask and Utterance: The Analysis of an 'Auditory' Mask in the Initiatory Society of the Kòmò. Minyanka, Mali." in *Objects: Signs of Africa*, L de Heusch, ed. 37–56. Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon.
Junius, Manfred, M.
1974 *The Sitar*. Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen.
Kubik, Gerhard.
1966 "Ennanga music." *African Music: Journal of the African Music Society* 4(1): 21–24.
1985 "African Tone-Systems: A Reassessment." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 17: 31–63.
2000 "Central Africa: An Introduction." in *The Garland handbook of African music*, Ruth Stone, ed. 260 – 290. New York: Garland Publishing.
LaGamma, Alisa and John Pemberton
2000 *Art and Oracle*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Lamp, Frederick, J.
2004 *See the Music, Hear the Dance*. Munich: Prestel.
Leach, Andrew
2006 "Kazoo." in *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, E Komara, ed. 560–561. New York: Routledge.
Lifschitz, Edward.
1988 "Hearing is Believing: Acoustic Aspects of Masking in Africa." in *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*, SL Kasfir, ed. 221–229. Tervuren, Belgium: Musee Royal de L'Afrique Centrale.
Mack, John
1994 *Masks and the Art of Expression*. New York: H.N. Abrams.

Matuire, Perminus
2009 *The Relationship between Mbira Dzavadzimu Modes and Zezuru Ancestral Spirit Possession*. MA Thesis: University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.
McNaughton, Patrick
1979 *Secret Sculptures of Komo*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
1982 "The Shirts That Mande Hunters Wear." *African Arts* 15(3): 54–91.
1988 *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1991 "Is There History in Horizontal Masks? A Preliminary Response to the Dilemma of Form." *African Arts* 24(2): 40–90.
1992 "From Mande Komo to Jukun Akuma: Approaching the Difficult Question of History." *African Arts* 25(2): 76–85, 99–100.
2001 "The Power Associations." in *Bamana*: *The Art of Existence in Mali,* J Colleyn, and M Arnoldi, eds. 167–74. New York: Museum for African Art.
O'Brien, Dara
2014 "The Endless Search for SA: Spiritual Ideology in Hindustāni music". PhD Dissertation. Cork: University College Cork.
Peek, Philip
1994 "The Sounds of Silence: Cross-world Communication and the Auditory Arts in African societies." *American Ethnologist* 21(3): 474–494.
Praetorius, Michael
1985 "Syntagma musicum, parts I and II". *De organographia*, Volume 2. D Crookes, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Richards, Dona
1981 "The Nyama of the Blacksmith: The Metaphysical Significance of Metallurgy in Africa." *Journal of Black Studies* 12(2): 218–238.
Rothenberg, David
2013 *Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
Scholtz, Clarke H. and Mansell, Mervyn W.
2009 "Insect Biodiversity in the Afrotropical Region." in *Insect biodiversity*. R Foottit and P Adler, eds. 69–82. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
Turino, Thomas
2015 "The mbira and some general principles of African music." in *Excursions in World Music, Sixth Edition*, T Rommen, B Nettl, C Capwell, I Wong, T Turino, P Bohlman, and B Dueck, eds. 201–206. New York: Routledge.

Tyler, James
2007 "Mixed Ensembles." in *A Performer's Guide to Renaissance Music*. J Kite-Powell, ed. 238–249. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Vassilakis, Pantelis N.
2005 "Auditory Roughness as a Means of Musical Expression." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 12: 119–144.
Weisser, Stephanie and Quanten, Maarten
2011 "Rethinking musical instrument classification: Towards a modular approach to the Hornbostel-Sachs system." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 43: 122–146.

Internet
Barrat, Emma and Davis, Nick
2015 "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A flow-like mental state." *PeerJ* 3: e851 [online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851 [Accessed 2 August 2016].
Dargie, David
2008 "Some recent developments in Xhosa music: Activities of the Ngqoko Traditional Xhosa Music Ensemble, and at the University of Fort Hare." [online] Available at: http://tranquanghaisworld.blogspot.co.uk/2008/01/dave-dargie-some-recent-developments-in.html [Accessed 7 August 2016].
Durán, Lucy
2008 "The kora: Tales of a frontier instrument." *World Circuit Records.* [online] Available at: http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/15829/1/Toumani_Diabate_The_Kora_Tales_of_a_Frontier_Instrument.pdf [Accessed 13 August 2017].
Fonte-Navarrete, David
2011 "File Under "Import": Musical Distortion, Exoticism, and Authenticité in Congotronics." [online] *Ethnomusicology Review* Available at: http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/16/piece/460 [Accessed 6 August 2016].
Terhardt, Ernst
2000 "Auditory roughness". [online] Available at: http://www.mmk.ei.tum.de/fileadmin/w00bqn/www/Personen/Terhardt/ter/top/roughness.html [Accessed 13 August 2017].

Discography
Weisser, Stephanie
2014 *Kenya: L'obokano, lyre des Gusii (Kenya: The Obokano, Lyre of the Gusii)*. [CD] VDE-GALLO. [Liner notes] 29.

Interviews by author
Diabaté, Toumani. Wiltshere, UK, 30 July 2016.
Kouyaté, Kadialy. London, UK, 25 August 2016.

Personal communication with the author.

Brett-Smith, Sarah. 26 August 2016.
Dutiro, Chartwell. 4 June 2016.
Durán, Lucy. 2016 and 2017 [various dates].
Hussein, Temesgen. 14 June 2016.
Impey, Angela. 9 July 2016.
Keita, Cherif. 19 July 2016.
McNaughton, Patrick. 12 August 2016.
Murungu, Solomon. 4 August 2016.
Terhardt, Ernst. 21 August 2017.
Tracey, Andrew. 26 August 2016.
Weisser, Stephanie. 11 July 2016.
Widdess, Richard. 3 June 2016.