MUSIC OF WEST AFRICA
The Mandinka and their Neighbors

A collection of films by Roderic Knight and David Gamble depicting traditional music in the late twentieth century in The Gambia, Guinea, and Mali.

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The highlands of West Africa from Loma Mansa, or Mt. Bintimani, in Sierra Leone. At 6,391 ft. it is the highest point in Africa west of Cameroon (see small blue blaze on map, next page). The Niger River rises in the Loma mountains, and the Koranko people (see selection 5) live here.

WEST AFRICA

A portion of West Africa showing the filming locations (The Gambia, Guinea, Mali) and surrounding countries. Hammond Scholastic New Headline World Atlas, 2004, p. 44.

The music and dance events in this video are historic—they were filmed in 1970 and 1987—but at the same time they may be considered contemporary. One or two of the events are "only history" today, but for the most part, the cultural ways seen here continue in the present day. The majority were filmed in The Gambia, and represent four of the major ethnic groups of the country: the Mandinka, Fula, Balanta, and Jola. Also included is a short glimpse of the Super Eagles, a popular Gambian dance band from the 1970s, a Koranko xylophone ensemble from Guinea, and an hourglass drum demo by a Serahuli performer with the national troupe of Mali. Eight of the ten scenes were filmed at actual events; two were organized especially for filming.

The scenes, totaling 33 minutes, are as follows:

1. A *kullio* (child-naming) at the Gambian State House, with Mandinka and Fula musicians
2. A Fula ensemble of flute, rattle, & calabash
3. Mandinka musicians, the Super Eagles band, and the Gambian president at a political rally
4. The Balanta xylophone
5. A Koranko xylophone and drum ensemble at a wedding in Conakry, Guinea
6. The *tama* hourglass drum, Serahuli style, in Bamako, Mali
7. Mandinka women hoeing and singing. Filmed by David Gamble.
8. Jola men plowing and singing. Filmed by David Gamble.
9. The Jola *kumpo*, a "whirling haystack" masked dance
10. The Jola *bugaarabo*, a drum dance for celebratory occasions

All of the scenes were filmed with a single Super 8 movie camera, and those from 1970 were made without synchronized sound. With the benefit of digital editing, the footage has been brought to a standard that allows presentation to a wider audience. (The actual technical details of this process are covered below.) Some scenes are all too brief, others perhaps too long, but all are genuine, and are presented as viable documentary material for the study of African music.

The Gambia Today

Gambia is the smallest country in Africa, and perhaps the only one in the world with the definite article officially in its name: The Gambia, or in the long form, Republic of The Gambia. Presumably this appellation derives from the fact that the country is actually little more than the flood plain of The Gambia River, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean for about 150 miles inland. A comparison of size given on the CIA.gov website is "slightly less than twice the size of Delaware." The ethnic makeup, according to the 2003 census is Mandinka 42%, Fula 18%, Wolof 16%, Jola 10%, Serahuli 9%, other groups 4%, and non-Africans 1%. The population is about 1,735,464 (July 2008 est.) David Gamble, leading expert on The Gambia, notes that this also makes it the most densely populated country in West Africa. ("Gambians," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, Detroit: Gale, 1998, v. 1, p.177.)

The country, surrounded by French-speaking Senegal, was formed when a small British colony and protectorate were given independence in 1965. It was vaulted into world attention by Alex Haley's 1974 book and the subsequent television series, "Roots," which grew out of Haley's research into his own ancestry. The people who assisted Haley in his quest were the griots, or oral historians and musicians of the Mandinka people.

A griot, or *jali* in Mandinka, is a person born into a hereditary profession of verbal and musical arts. The *jali* families have been providing essential historical, genealogical, diplomatic, and entertainment services to the nobility of the Mandinka (and the larger Mande) culture for centuries. Although they might not be called "royal musicians" today, this is their heritage, and, usually dressed in traditional elegant finery, they are decidedly professional freelance musicians, and are much in demand for the same services they have always provided. The *jali* traditions of the Mandinka, known as *jaliyaa,* are covered more extensively in the earlier DVD in this series, *Mande Music and Dance* (Lyrichord LYRDV-2001), but they are represented here as well.

The Mande/Fula Cultural Area

The Mandinka are the westernmost branch of a larger cultural entity known as the Mande, which, at 20 million, is the largest ethnic group in West Africa (Wikipedia). The Mande, better known by their regional names (see more on this below), are spread over The Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. The ancient Mande were among the first to develop agriculture in the savanna of West Africa some four thousand years ago, and are still known today as highly successful farmers, but also as cosmopolitan merchants, business-people and administrators. The mercantile bent of Mande culture is not new; it stems from the 13th- and 14th-century empire of Mali, which commanded the trade routes from the highlands of northern Guinea to the fabled city of Timbuktu in the Malian Sahara, and west to the Atlantic coast. Medieval Mali's wealth in gold was legendary during its own time.

Today there are over twenty ethnic groups identified as Mande on the basis of language, but many of these are distant both culturally and geographically from the heritage of Old Mali. The

people of the Mande heartland today are the Maninka in northern Guinea and southern Mali, the Bambara of the Bamako region in Mali, the Soninke or Serahuli in western Mali and Senegal, and the Mandinka, farthest west, in southern Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. The Mande area is part of the western *sahel*, or savanna, where the deep forests of the West African coast give way to a light forest cover and to vast expanses of fields and farmland south of the Sahara. The population is predominantly rural, living in villages and towns, growing rice, millet, and peanuts (known locally as groundnuts), but increasingly, people gravitate to the cities, seeking opportunities in government, business, and artistic organizations. Islam is the dominant religion thoughout Mande culture and the area as a whole. Represented on this video are three peoples of the Mande heartland: the Mandinka of Gambia, the Koranko (related to the Maninka or Malinke) of Guinea, and the Serahuli of Mali.

Intermingled with the Mande throughout this area are the Fula (more properly, the FulBe, also known as the Peul in French-speaking areas). In the popular imagination, the Mande are the landed nobles and farmers, while the FulBe are the cattle nomads, but today the nomads are largely sedentary also, and even in traditional times, wielded great power from regions such as the Fouta Djallon in Guinea.

Mande and Fula societies are hierarchical, growing from the specialization of roles in the culture. Families who developed trades to serve the leaders and warriors, such as blacksmiths and leather workers (for weapons and shoes, as well as farming implements), and those who served the leading families with musical, historical, and genealogical specialties, developed as distinct segments of the hierarchy, by virtue of the natural tendency to regard their skills as family secrets, and to keep them through cross-cousin marriage (your father's sister's children, or your mother's brother's children).

As noted above, in Mandinka the last of these groups, the performing or verbal artists, are known by the term *jali* or *jeli*. *Jalolu* (to use the Mandinka plural) typically play the *kora* (harp), the *balo* (or *balafon*, a xylophone), or the *kontingo* or *ngoni* (a plucked lute). They also sing, especially the women (who don't play the instruments), in an elaborate and heroic praise song style intended to inspire pride in one's ancestry.

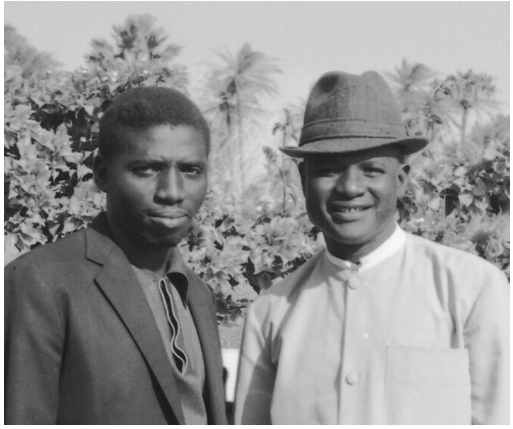
In Fula society, several terms describe different ranks of musicians. David Arnott identifies the groups, known by the instruments they play: the *maabo*, *bammbaa'do* and the *gawlo*. The first two play the *hoddu*, a three-string plucked lute similar to the Mandinka *kontingo*, or the *nyaanyooru*, a monochord bowed lute with horsehair strung on both the instrument and the bow. The *maabo* and *bammbaa'do* are court musicians with a role and status similar to that of the Mandinka jali. The *awlu'be* (pl. of *gawlo*) play more often in groups and for a general audience rather than select patrons. (Arnott, "FulBe music" in *Grove Music Online*)

The other ethnic groups in the video are the Koranko, Serahuli, Balanta and Jola. The first two are Mande groups. The latter two are cultures that do not share the hierarchical structure of the Mande, Fula (and the Wolof, not represented here), but even though their musicians are not afforded a specific status by the culture, their performances are no less musical and spectacular. These cultures will be profiled in the selections below. [Eric Charry's article "Senegal" in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (see References) is an excellent source of further information on the ethnic groups of this area.]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 1970 films were made while conducting dissertation research supported by a Fulbright-Hays grant. Later trips to Africa and the video production costs were supported by internal Oberlin College grants. These sources of financial support are greatly appreciated.

Naturally the performers who appear in these films deserve the greatest vote of thanks. Without exception those who were participating in events where the filmmaker merely happened to be present were always welcoming, eager to make room for the camera in their midst. Those in the pre-arranged sessions performed with zeal and enthusiasm. Their names are included in the on-screen captions and in this booklet. Others who do not appear in these films but were essential to the research as guides and music teachers were Suntu Suso, Jali Nyama Suso, and Aliu Dabo, the last for his assistance in transcribing and translating song texts.


Suntu Suso and Aliu Dabo, 1970.

In the U.S., Alhaji Papa Susso, Gambian Mandinka musician, assisted with further song translation work and explanations of many details in the films; David Gamble, anthropologist and renowned expert on The Gambia, provided general advice and collaboration; and Mantle Hood, founder and director of the UCLA Institute of Ethnomusicology, gave the original encouragement and instruction in the use of movie-making as a documentary tool. In the field in 1970, my wife Gisela and daughter Jennifer (at the time only one year old), by their very presence with me, enhanced the success of the entire endeavor. For assistance with music notation software, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my colleagues Brian Alegant and Jan Miyake.

Alhaji Papa Susso in Oberlin

Many others have been directly involved in the physical production of an end product. First was Matthew Ballo, Oberlin biochemistry student, class of 1991, who urged the transfer of the films to video, both for their preservation and to enhance their in-class presentation. He also piloted the first video editing. The transfer to video was done by Lenny Stitak of Creative Video, and Diane Lee did the original titling work. In 1992 Fred Zwegat, Director of Audio Visual Services at Oberlin College, contributed his patience, knowledge, and video editing skills to the creation of Super VHS master tapes. John Storm Roberts inaugurated the first release of some of the videos through his company, Original Music in the mid 1990s.

Elio Trabal and Roderic Knight, 2004

The final production for the DVD was accomplished in the summer of 2004 with the assistance of Oberlin anthropology student Elio Trabal, class of 2004. His loyal and relentless

work, using his own equipment, has enabled the creation of this edition. Finally, the actual DVD production owes its existence to Stephen McArthur of Multicultural Media, who proposed its release, and ultimately to Nick Fritsch of Lyrichord Records, who does the actual production. To all of these people, I am most grateful.

TECHNICAL NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION OF THE DVD

These films were not made on a high-budget film expedition, but rather as supplementary—one might even say casual—documentation during field research for a doctoral thesis on Mandinka music. The primary activities were sound recording, music lessons, interviews, and song text collection and translation. Nevertheless, the Anscomatic ST/111 was always in the equipment bag, and when filming opportunities arose, out it came. This was a Super 8, silent film camera. It ran on four AA batteries and the film cassette lasted only three minutes. Since audio recording was a primary activity, while filming, the tape recorder was also running. It was state-of-the-art: a Nagra III, generously loaned to me by the UCLA Institute of Ethnomusicology. Ironically, this large but portable open-reel machine, running on 12 D cells (see still photo #30), was the machine of choice for making sync-sound movies, but only with a properly-equipped 16mm camera or the larger format cameras used in the film industry. Thus the films were shot "wild," as the expression goes—no connection between camera and recorder. Without sync, the films were of little use beyond the occasional screening of a few clips in the Music of Africa class. The dawning of the digital age has enabled what was impossible before—to sync sound to picture for longer than a few seconds, and because of this, the films may now emerge from the limited exposure they have had.

David Gamble's approach to filming was the same—turn on the tape recorder (he was using a Sony 800B open-reel machine), run the camera. His camera was a regular 8mm camera. (The difference between the older regular 8 and Super 8, newly introduced in 1970, is that the latter had a larger picture and thus provided a clearer projected image, but the difference is insignificant when transferring from film to video.)

In the early 1980s the film industry introduced Super 8 film with a magnetic stripe and cameras with microphones. This achieved sync without effort, just as one takes for granted with a video camera today. Selections 5 and 6 were filmed with such a camera, the Canon 514 XL-S.

The progression from film to DVD involved many steps, detailed here for those who may be interested. First, the films were projected using a dedicated projector with a 5-blade shutter to bridge the frames-per-second difference between film and video (this is necessary to eliminate flicker). A video camera was simply pointed at the screen to record the projected image. This process was done in 1992, before the advent of mini-dv tapes, and thus the original video masters are on VHS tape. The next step, adding titles and assembling the scenes into a final sequence, was also done with VHS equipment and saved to a Super VHS master tape. The third step, not begun until 2003, was to dub these tapes to mini digital videotape. The mini-dv tape was then uploaded to a computer via a mini-dv camera (a step familiar to many in the present day). Only then could step 4, the digital editing process, begin. In addition to the crucial micro-adjustments to sound or picture to enable synchronization, this process also included the creation of new title screens and an occasional subtitle. The DVD master was then created to complete the process.

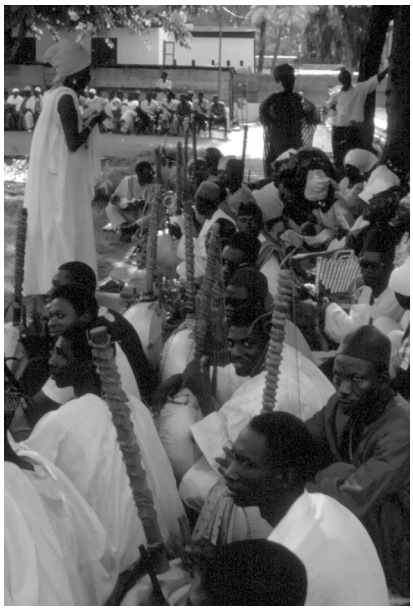
THE SELECTIONS

1. A Gambian State *kullio.* Banjul, The Gambia, October 10, 1970.

The date was October 10, 1970. The Gambia had just celebrated its accession to the status of Republic a few months earlier, and the presidential family was celebrating the birth of a daughter. President Sir Dawda Jawara and Lady Chilel hosted a *kullio* (lit. "head-shaving") on the grounds of the State House. The *kullio* is one of the most common event for musicians throughout The Gambia. It is held a week after a child is born, and the purpose is to announce the name of the child. It is a bit like a birthday party, held typically in the morning, with friends and family of the parents invited. The *imam*, or prayer leader of the mosque, presides. He shaves a patch of hair from the baby's forehead to be kept as a good luck charm, announces the name, and leads prayers.

At this *kullio*, these events took place in the presidential mansion instead of outdoors in the courtyard, as is more typical, and thus they are not recorded on film. But spread out on the state house lawn was a large contingent of musicians, Mandinka and Fula, and some Wolof as well, who had either been invited or simply came along. The event was not highly organized. Instead, various groups of musicians performed at random, one dominating at one time, another a few minutes later.

Photo by David Gamble



As the scene opens, a large group of Mandinka performers may be seen assembled in the shade. They are performing "Kura," one of the stately old songs associated with Sundiata, whose surname was Keita. It is appropriate for anyone named Keita, and for other leaders of note, especially if their lineages can be traced to past grandeur. A *jali* ensemble always spotlights one or more solo singers who are answered by a chorus, usually the instrumentalists themselves, plus a women's chorus. As noted before, women do not play the melodic instruments, but they do play a tubular iron bell called *newo* or *karinya*, and this adds a loud and festive clangor. In this scene, Alhaji Tamba Suso (in the red cap) and Amadu Kanuteh are the soloists (also see still photo #25). The solo role is taken up by different singers in turn as the song progresses.

"Kura" as performed by the ensemble at the State House kullio:

Simbong mbe jata le ma; awa, mbe jata le ma, jata kuntigiyata
Simbong, I am calling to the lion; yes, I'm calling the lion; he has become head of all things.

Siba Daniyang, Nyagamba Daniyang
Siba Daniyang, Nyagamba Daniyang [names]

Wo le bota Nare Maghan Mandinka, a kutigiyata
He descends from Nare Maghan Mandinka; he has become head of all things.

Wo le bota Jamba muso to, a kutigiyata, Sibao
On his mother's side, Jamba; he has become all powerful, great lion.

Ma Buraima Konate
Ma Buraima Konateh

N hakilo janka bula, Sirimangkang na Ture fanang ma
My thoughts also go to Turay Sirimangkang [honorific]

La Gine manso, nda be 'la
King of Guinea, I'm singing for you [lit: "my mouth is on you"]

E, yoro senumang, fanka senumang, madi senumang
Eh, a proper place, legitimate power, good people,

Nafulu ye foro seniyala.
[and] wealth; these things make a nobleman noble.

N hakilo janka bula Njai; Kuli Njai, Tara Njai, Baka Njai
My thoughts also go to Njai: Kuli, Tara, Baka Njai [praise names]

N hakilo janka bula Lasena fanang ma, Njai.
My thoughts also turn to Lasena.

Wo le ye South Africa *ke, a kumbengo diyata.*
He went to South Africa and was successful there.

Ali m'a long, Kiliya Musa aning Noya Musa, mbe kumala.
Don't you all know, Kiliya Mus and Noya Musa [praise names], I am calling you.

[cho] *Simbong mbe jata le ma; awa, mbe jata le ma, jata kuntigiyata*
Simbong, I am calling to the lion; yes, I'm calling the lion; he has become head of all things.

As their performance trails off, a Fula *gawlo* group comes to the fore. Two men play the *serndu* transverse flute (one of them playing "left-handed"), accompanied by two others on *horde,* a half calabash with jingling plates inside. As with the *jali* ensemble, the musicians spotlight a vocal soloist. In the typical praise song fashion of the griot, he is singing about President Jawara; his name can be readily heard in the chorus.

The Mandinka ensemble sings again, this time the song "Lambamba," another song suitable for heads of state. A leading female vocalist of the day, Kani Kuntu, can be seen heading the ensemble (see still photo #25). The last line of the song includes well-known words in praise of the profession of *jaliyaa* itself:

Nga nying fo Jane ngana Manding mori
I have said this for Janneh, respected and learned Manding

Koma ngana ning Berete mori
Respected Koma, Learned Berete [praise names]

Haji Sambu la lonsonna, a barika
Great person, descended of Alhaji Sambu, thank you.

A, jaliyaa, Alla l'e ka jaliyaa da
Ah, *jaliyaa*, it was Allah who created *jaliyaa*.

This is followed by another *gawlo* group, this time women playing gourds, called *bollo*. Two women, each with gourds of two sizes, rap them on the ground to produce a four-tone rhythmic ostinato to accompany their singing.

In the distance, a group of *jali musolu* (jali women) can be seen. They are listening to an announcement by one of the *jali* leaders, Kemo Kuyateh (not on camera), speaking on behalf of the President:

A ko, mansa keo, Presiden ko, a kontanita bake.
He says, the king says, the President says, he is very content.

A ko, dalasi keme lulu le be jang; a ko n s'a di jalolu la.
He says, there is 500 *dalasi* here (£100); he says I shall give this to the musicians.

[One of the women can be heard in an aside]

Ali na nga ta ka na ta; i fang batandi.
Let's not raise a complaint about the amount; it will get us nowhere.

[prayers are offered]

Ali nga fa tio ta, nga dua nyo ye, fo Alla si nying si ya.
Let us gather to pray that Allah grants us these things.

[a shout can be heard]

A, a ye tonya fo!
Ah, he has truly spoken!

Jali Kani Sumano, a leading *jali muso*, can be heard singing praise in the background.

As the crowd disperses, a *gawlo* acrobat performs with his *horde*, accompanied by *serndu* flutists and a *nyaanyooru* fiddle player. He blows a police whistle (an instrument also adopted by drum troupe leaders at the time), raps the calabash, and then uses it as a tool in his acrobatics.

2. A Fula *gawlo* ensemble.
Boraba, September 5, 1970

Sori Jalloh, *laala* (rattle) and lead vocal
Bubacar Jalloh, *serndu* (flute)
Abdulai Kante, *horde* (calabash)

This short event was organized in an impromptu manner in the village of Boraba, about fifty miles upriver from the capital, on the south bank. The occasion was a research visit for the purpose of recording several renowned Mandinka *jali* performers of the village.

The young Fula musicians in this scene were keen to show their skills as well, so a hasty filming session was organized. Sori Jalloh plays the *laala* and leads the singing. The *laala* is a sistrum or frame rattle made of forked branches with discs of calabash skewered on the upright

arm. Bubacar Jalloh plays the *serndu* flute, and Abdulai Kante plays the *horde*, a half calabash with metal jingling plates inside. He raps the outside of the calabash with fingers and palms, and the jingling plates vibrate in sympathy. Several young women also join in, adding handclaps and singing.

The clip includes a brief *serndu* solo by request, and with the camera still running, a moment of amusement as the flute player hears himself on playback.

3. Musical activities at political rallies for the PPP (People's Progressive Party) at Kwinella and Brikama

In August 1970, President Jawara was touring the country in his motor launch, the Mansa Kila II. He was promoting the policies of the People's Progressive Party. On August 11, village chiefs and other dignitaries converged on the small town of Kwinella for the event. As people awaited the arrival of the launch at Tendaba, the nearest wharf to Kwinella, a festival atmosphere prevailed, with large numbers of local musicians performing in clusters down various lanes of the town.

In the first scene a crowd has gathered to watch Mamadu Bari, a Fula *gawlo.* He has a very large *horde* calabash rattle and a police whistle. As he dances and twirls, Malik Jalloh sings and plays the *nyaanyooru* monochord fiddle. [Nearby this group was an ensemble of *siko* drums entertaining another crowd. This popular ensemble of cylindrical drums was associated with the PPP. The film clip of the *siko* drums appears in the earlier DVD release, *Mande Music & Dance.*]

Down another lane, a cacophonous sound emerges from one of the houses. Looking inside, we glimpse a visiting dignitary (in blue, with sunglasses) with a large number of musicians and admirers saluting him. There are two Mandinka *kora* players and two Fula *nyaanyooru* players, but it seems that everyone is avidly singing their own praise song for this man, with a chaotic but festive result.

As a rain storm blows in, the president's launch approaches the Tendaba pier. The events that followed took place inside a community center and were not filmed.

On another occasion (it was actually earlier than the scenes from Kwinella), a PPP rally animated the town of Brikama, not far from the capital of Banjul. The president was scheduled to speak, and again musicians and dancers had assembled in various venues. (Two events from this day are featured separately in the video: #4, the Balanta xylophone, and #9, the Jola *kumpo* masked dancer.)

In this scene, an ensemble of Mandinka *jalolu* has assembled in a pavilion, with some Wolof musicians as well. Abdulai Samba, the leading Wolof *xalam* player of the day, joins the group with his plucked lute, the equivalent of the Mandinka *kontingo* (not visible in the photo at right). Fabala Kanuteh, leader of the Gambia Griots Unity

Society, plays the *balo* beside him. Behind Kanuteh to his right, visible only briefly, is Bamba Suso, senior *jali* of the assemblage, renowned for his knowledge of family histories. To Kanuteh's left sit two *kora* players flanking the *bolon*, a deep-toned harp. Many other *kora* players and a guitarist were also present for the event. Outside the pavilion, Kunye Saho leads the singing with a microphone. The song is "Sori," dedicated to the legendary Samori Turay, the last Mandinka leader to resist the French in the late 19th century. Here the song is infused with praise for President Jawara as well. Fragments of the song may be deciphered:

Mo ye kele ke, Ture si kele ke; mo mang kele ke, Ture si kele ke.
When people are fighting, Turay will be fighting; [even] when people are not fighting, Turay will be fighting.

Jawara, Jawara; Mama Fatti la lonsonna, nda be 'la.
Jawara, Jawara; Mama Fatti's praiseworthy person, about him I am speaking.

Ate le bota Tabusa Jawara to; wo le tilo banta.
She (Mama Fatti) was born of Tabusa Jawara; she is long gone.

Ate le fanang bota Damang Gile Jawara to.
She in turn was the descendant of Damang Gile Jawara (King of Mema in Old Mali, and ally of Sundiata).

Wo le keta manso ti Kinki.
He became the leader of Kinki (a village in Mali).

In the background can be heard a Fula group with *serndu* and *laala* clattering.

In the same pavilion, but fitted out with massive amplifier and speakers, thus overshadowing the *jali* ensemble with their single mike for the singer, is the popular dance band, the Super Eagles. This band was riding a wave of international fame at the time, with one LP recording out, and others coming. At this rally they were performing one of their most famous songs, "Gambia Zambia—African Unity."

Viva, President Kaunda, Viva, Zambia.
Viva, Sir Dawda, Viva, Gambia.
*Viva, Sékou Touré, Viva, R. P. G.**
Viva, Sedar Senghor, Viva, Sénégal.

*The on-screen caption says "R. D. G.," but upon closer listening and research, it is clear they are singing "R. P. G," an acronym for Rassemblement du Peuple de Guinée. David Gamble notes that this organization, founded by Alpha Conte, was much favored by the Malinke people of Guinea (pers. comm.).

President Jawara arrives and delivers a speech to the assemblage. In the days before public address systems, whenever a leader spoke, a *jali* or other griot performed an important role: it was considered unbecoming for the leader himself to shout; thus, he spoke softly while a griot standing beside him shouted the pronouncements in loud voice for all to hear.

Now with a microphone and an audience composed of speakers of many languages, the role of the griot is to translate. President Jawara speaks in Mandinka, while the griot at his side translates into Wolof:

A si Gambia bondi.
We need to bring Gambia out.

A si joya bondi Gambia nkolu kunna.
There is no bondage for Gambia's people.

N si wo tewo siti, nga na Gambia doku.
We need to tighten our belts and work for Gambia.

Fo Gambia fanang silo no banko dolu tema,
To map out our course among other nations,

A si ke banko timaringo ti nya wo nya ma.
To mark our sovereignty by all means.

Wo le a kendi,
That is why,

Gambia nkolu ye majority *ta ya karafa PPP ma.*
The majority of Gambians support the PPP.

4. The Balanta xylophone. Brikama, April 5, 1970

Amadu Biaye, low keys and voice
Ousman Manneh, high keys
Salifu Manneh, clappers and voice

This brief clip was filmed at the same rally in Brikama as the previous selection. The Balanta people, like their neighbors the Mandinka, play a xylophone that is commonly known as the "Balanta balo." This wonderfully appealing instrument has received little attention, but in 1996 Village Pulse released a CD devoted entirely to it: *Balanta Balo: Talking Wood of Casamance*. The author of the notes,

Adam Novick [although he remains anonymous in the notes], reports that the true name of the instrument is *kadj*. The Balanta began to play the xylophone only after 1800, when they migrated to Casamance, the region of Senegal south of The Gambia, where they adopted various aspects of Mandinka culture. According to Malang Mané, leader of the group featured in the Village Pulse recording, the invention of the *kadj* can be traced to a specific individual:

> [Our] version of the instrument was invented in the village of Samin, when Njamakoto Kibigili enlarged the [Mandinka] *balo*, added a second player, and perfected the use of interlocking counter-rhythms.*

*Village Pulse VPU-1006. This is the sixth in a series of high-quality digital recordings with excellent notes and photographs of traditional drumming and other ensembles from the Senegambia region, produced by Carl Holm and Adam Novick. See www.villagepulse.com.

The two instruments are indeed similar. They are both frame xylophones with the keys lashed to a bamboo frame with resonating gourds mounted under each key. The Balanta instrument differs in several ways, however: the Mandinka instrument, in common with all other frame xylophones of Africa, has lateral holes on the resonators covered with cigarette paper (or more traditionally, a certain spider's egg case), to produce a kazoo-like effect on the tone quality of the instrument. The Balanta instrument does not have these membranes. Another principal difference is that the instrument has a much deeper and wider range than the balafon, with 26 keys spanning a full three and a half octaves of a heptatonic (7-tone) scale. Finally, the fact that one instrument is played by two people, usually one on either side, is unique in West Africa.

In addition to the two players, a third person keeps a steady metronomic beat on a pair of palm wood clapsticks called *pati*. There are two distinct parts, the upper one consisting of the melody line, frequently in parallel thirds, the lower an active, leaping bass line. As is true throughout Africa, instrumental music is generally for vocal accompaniment. In this ensemble, the *pati* player leads the singing, and the low-range player joins in.

Balanta musicians are not griots, but they are still specialists, called upon to perform for festive occasions. Their songs do not commemorate the notable deeds of important figures in history. They are more topical, about people and places of local importance, but they do focus, as do the griot songs, on praise, commemoration, and sometimes satire. An example borrowed from the many in the Village Pulse CD gives the general sense: "No village has seen a person more generous than [this woman], who gives food and shelter to anyone. Wherever she goes she has a place. Every village welcomes her."

The Balanta are migrants into Gambia and Senegal from Guinea-Bissau to the south, where, numbering about 400,000, they make up one quarter of the population. Their society is egalitarian, with no particular social status conferred for any career specialization, including music. The Wikipedia article on the Balanta notes that their extreme egalitarianism has had a certain negative effect on their welfare, since even though they are the dominant ethnic group in Guinea-Bissau, they are not well represented in the government.

5. *Manyo debero,* or bride's hair-braiding party, Koranko people
Modulai Syllah, leader. Conakry, Guinea, January 3, 1987.

The Koranko and Susu people are Mande groups who live along the southern border of Guinea and in neighboring Sierra Leone. George Peter Murdock identifies them as among the "Nuclear Mande," in his landmark book [still valuable after 50 years] *Africa: its peoples and their culture history* (1959:79). As forest dwellers, they have shed the hierarchical social structure of the groups closer to the Mande homeland. Guy Arnold describes the Koranko and Susu (among several other well-known West African groups) as having emerged from intermarriage between the Sudanese (savanna) and Guinean (forest) branches of the peoples of West Africa (Arnold, 2005:18).

Koranko *balafon* players know the core Mande repertoire as played in Guinea, Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, but they have a regional repertoire as well. A distinguishing feature of the Koranko ensemble is the inclusion of drums and bells. As seen here, a typical ensemble consists of two *balafon* players and two drummers. Each drummer plays a kettle drum called *kunang* with a hooked stick in the right hand, while at the same time holding a large clapperless bell called *nenge* in the left. He has iron rings on his thumb and fingers, which he clangs against the bell.

Modulai Syllah and his group

The event seen here is called *manyo debero*, or a bride's hair-braiding party. It is the eve of the wedding, and the bride, her friends, and her female relatives have invited the *balafon* group to play for their enjoyment as her hair is braided. (She can be seen sitting at the far side of the compound at one point when the crowd of dancers and singers thins out a bit.)

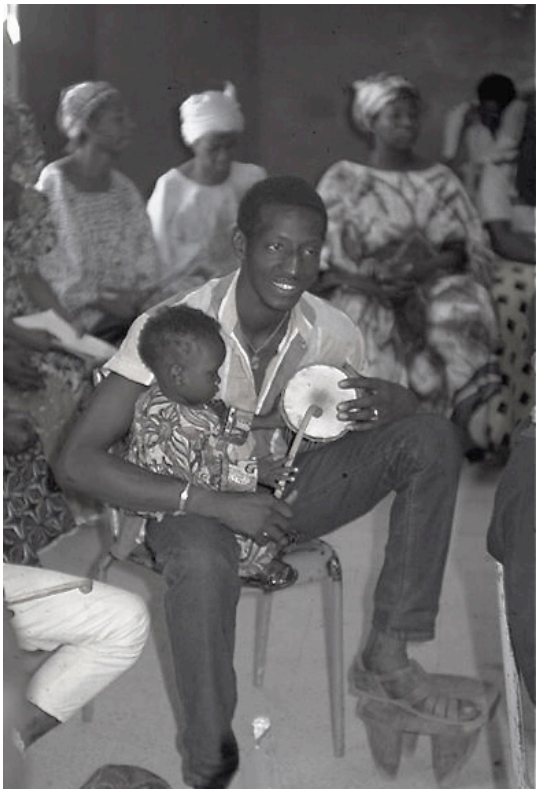
The *balafon* players respond to the revelers. As one or another of the women prompts them with the beginning of a song, they launch into it, continuing until another is requested. The dancers drop bills into a tray in front of the ensemble. Unlike the Balanta *kadj* seen in the previous scene, the two *balafon* players do not have clearly differentiated parts. Instead, both play a basic idiomatic rendering of the song, each adding variants or improvised solo passages. Modulai Syllah, on the left, was the leader of this group, but the other player can be seen soloing as well. It is a free-wheeling kind of cooperation between the players.

Technical note: This film was made with a sync-sound camera, but to save film and provide varied angles, it was shot is short segments; hence the occasional interruptions in the sound track.

6. The *tama* hourglass drum. Hamadi Kone demonstrates the Serahuli style. Bamako, Mali, January 21, 1987.

The Serahuli (Sarakole, Seraculeh, Soninke) are another of the Nuclear Mande as identified by Murdock. As the founders of the ancient empire of Ghana, which dates back perhaps as far as the fourth century, they figure prominently in Mande history: it was the Soninke leader Sumanguru Kante who was defeated at Soso in 1235 by Sundiata Keita. This decisive battle marked the final unification of the Mande people and the beginning of what became the legendary Mali Empire. The Serahuli homeland is in northern Senegal, but they are scattered about the Mande region (Murdock 1959:72). A 2005 population estimate puts their number at about one million (Wikipedia).

The hourglass drum is widespread across West Africa, with the *tama* being the westernmost and smallest of them all. The hourglass drum is often nicknamed the "talking drum," because the cords joining the two heads are squeezed to vary the pitch of the head and thus mimic the tonal features of African languages. In Mande culture the instrument is not as prominent as in some other areas, such as the hourglass drums of the Ewe of Ghana, and the Yoruba of Nigeria, but in the present day, a *tama* player is usually included in large ensembles to add its distinctive sound.


Hamadi Kone at an ensemble rehearsal

Hamadi Kone is a member of the National Ensemble of Mali, and in this scene, sitting outside the rehearsal hall, he demonstrates the capabilities of the instrument. He is playing in Serahuli style, with the instrument braced against his knee as he sits with his leg drawn up close to his chest. The more familiar playing style is to clamp the instrument between upper arm and body. Either way, the technique is to vary the tension, hit the drum head with a curved stick, and add patter sounds with the fingers of the left hand.

Film purchased overseas came with a mailer for processing, eliminating the possibility of a follow-up session with Kone and a translator that might have elucidated some of the phrases and expressions that are typically spoken with the *tama*. Nevertheless, this demonstration shows the remarkably wide range of sounds and expressive techniques that typify this drum.

Technical note: the extraneous static sounds in this selection are caused by the impending failure of the microphone mounted on the sync-sound camera.

7. Mandinka women hoeing and singing.
Filmed by David Gamble. Keneba, Gambia, 1970.

The Mandinka are agriculturalists. Men plant and tend millet and peanuts; women plant and tend rice and vegetables. Families have their own plots of land, but they like to work them communally. Thus, looking out over the farmland at planting time, one does not see an array of plots, each with its owner working alone in it. Rather, friends get together and work their plots one by one until the job is completed. On this occasion, the women are breaking ground in a peanut field, to be planted later by the men. The Mandinka hoe is about the same length as a western hoe, but the blade is mounted on a long fork at the end of the handle. This means the workers do not have to bend low and the work is not nearly so back-breaking. In addition, the women sing almost constantly as they work, lightening the load of the work and synchronizing their hoe strokes as they move down the field.

Photo by David Gamble

This scene was filmed by David Gamble with a regular 8mm movie camera. There are eighteen women wielding hoes together. The words in this recording are not clear, but Gamble notes that songs sung on such occasions tend to be topical commentaries on friends and events of local interest. Extemporized lyrics are composed by anyone in the group who is inclined and able, and the group picks up the refrain and repeats it.

Mark Hudson, in his book *Our Grandmothers' Drums* (1990), a narrative about his field research experiences in the small village of Dulaba on the south bank of the Gambia River, devotes several pages to the subject and style of these songs. He notes:

> They sang about the MRC [Medical Research Center], the doctors and the staff. They sang about the school and the headmaster. They sang about marabouts [learned Muslims], heroes and politicians. They sang the songs of their children, and the songs of their grandmothers. They sang songs that were just meaningless collections of words strung together for effect, and they sang songs which were so private that only they knew what they were about. They sang songs about each other and they sang about themselves.
>
> They seldom stopped singing, and when they did the air was filled with argument, laughter and discussion. (p. 55-56)

Hudson quotes several of the songs, such as this fairly generic one, although directed at a particular individual (p. 56):

The world is like this;
Things are not any other way;
I said, you repay kindness with kindness,
And you repay wickedness with wickedness.

I will not forget you, Kemeseng Sanyang.
I've come to repay the kindness,
For us to be united.

Here is another, more obscure and perhaps infused with some double entendre (p. 57):

You, the fishermen of the dancing place,
Who cast your nets for love
-Move back! [refrain]

I'm going to start work.
If I don't stop to think I'll clear the bush
With my big skirt.
-Hey! [refrain]

The tonality of the song presented here sounds familiar yet somewhat unusual. There are two ways the Western ear might try to interpret it. Some of the women sing a descending line while others hold an unchanging ground note. If this ground note is called "1," the scale would be the unusual "Locrian," with all notes flat. In cipher notation, the descending line (with flat notes underlined) would look like this: $\underline{6} - \underline{5} - \underline{3} - \underline{2} - 1$. On the other hand, one might assign "1" to the top note of the song, in which case the sound could be perceived as a more familiar flat-7 pentatonic without the pitch 1 at the bottom: $1 - \underline{7} - 5 - 4 - 3$. Of course these interpretations are of no consequence to the singers. The sound happens to be similar to the popular "Seruba" songs sung at dance events staged by women's clubs who hire a drum troupe to celebrate various occasions.

This work song is a good reminder that even in the context of the professional *jali* culture of the Mandinka, there is room for grass-roots musical expression as well. [Another video of women's farm work is included in the DVD, *Mande Music and Dance* (LYRDV-2001). It was filmed during rice planting and includes a drum troupe hired to come out to the paddy with the women to entertain them as they work.]

8. Jola men digging and singing.
Filmed by David Gamble. Brikama, Gambia, 1970.

The Jola (Joola, Diola) people are also agriculturalists. Murdock identifies them, along with the Balanta and the Wolof, as Senegambians. The Senegambians are long-term inhabitants of the coastal region, and at one time reached north into Mauritania, but over the centuries they have been pushed into more confined areas, first by Berber expansion, then by Mande expansion, and finally by Fulani rule from the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea (Murdock 1959:265).

J. David Sapir, noted authority on the Jola, writing at the dawn of independence, observed that the culture was very much village-based: "Aside from the French administration, replaced recently by the Senegalese, there is no political organization more inclusive than a village" (Sapir 1965:1). Despite their non-hierarchical social organization, there is a growing awareness among the Jola of their political clout. They are the dominant ethnic group of the Casamance region of Senegal south of The Gambia, and they figure prominently in Gambian society as well: the current Gambian president, Yahya Jammeh, is a Jola. David Levinson noted that in the late 1990s there was a growing movement among the Jola of Casamance to secede from Senegal and become part of The Gambia (1998:135).

Even though their social structure differs, the day-to-day lifestyle of Jola farmers is essentially the same as that of their Mandinka neighbors. They farm rice and peanuts, and prefer to work the fields communally, although for some steps in the process, they may work alone. In this film, made by David Gamble, a group of men is preparing a field for peanut planting. Each man has a long-handled, long-bladed shovel called *kajando*. With this tool, held low to the ground, furrows are dug and ridges of earth thrown up between them.

The words are indistinct in this recording, but David Sapir released a recording of this genre including ample documentation. The lines below, drawn from Sapir's notes, are good examples of the type of song being sung. The lines are typically extemporized, focusing on friends and neighbors and local events. These are lines by Bakari Badji (only given in English translation):

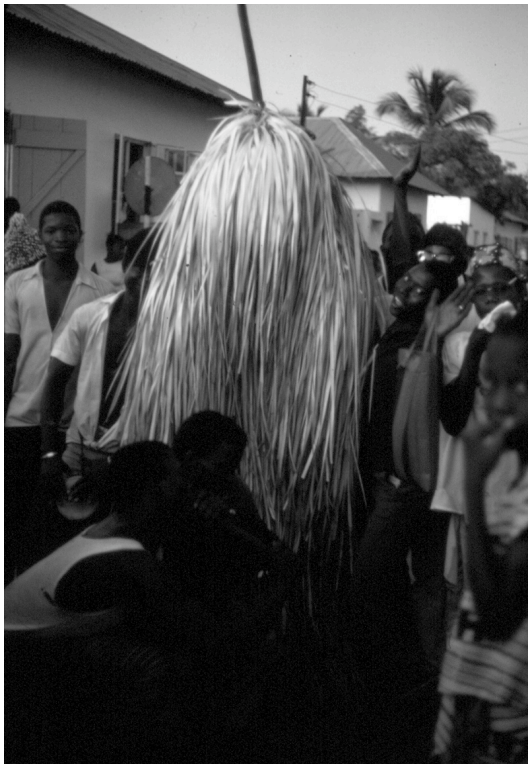
Sing for me straight. Aisetu Juje Bure, call her.
(Sing the chorus for me clearly, i.e., he bids his comrades to sing well.)

Balamang, death kills her and leaves slaves.
(A stock phrase meaning that if anything happens to Balamang her friends will be 'slaves to their misery'.)

The difficult one; his friends gossip about him without seeing him.
(His friends gossip behind his back.)

In the film, the men are singing in unison, but Jola singing typically breaks into two parts and returns to the unison, as may be heard in the next examples from the Jola *kumpo* masked dance.

9. The Jola *kumpo*, a faceless "whirling haystack" masked dancer. Brikama, April 5 and Banjul, December 26, 1970.



Masked dances are a mainstay of many African cultures, and they serve many purposes. Typically, a mask represents a supernatural force. It might be a deity or an ancestor; it might be a witch or other feared being (missionaries typically dubbed them "devils," and the term has unfortunately stuck in many cases). Some masks are for infusing humor in an event, but even these, especially for small children, can evoke fear, with their huge size and elaborate outfits. One of the most common uses of masked figures is to play the role of enforcer of doctrine learned in initiation school. Then, when the initates graduate and a great festival is organized to celebrate the event, the masked figure comes out and puts on a public display.

In the present day, traditional bush initiation schools are becoming a thing of the past, or at least greatly diminished in significance. One result of this is the appearance of masked figures at other events, to raise money for a youth club or political party, for example. This footage is an example. It was filmed in Brikama at the same political rally as seen in Selection 3.

The *kumpo* mask creates a major attraction when it appears. According to David Gamble (pers. comm.) the mask originally belonged to the Bainunka (Bagnoun), a small ethnic minority on the south bank of the Gambia River, and in neighboring Senegal. The Jola assimilated it some time ago.

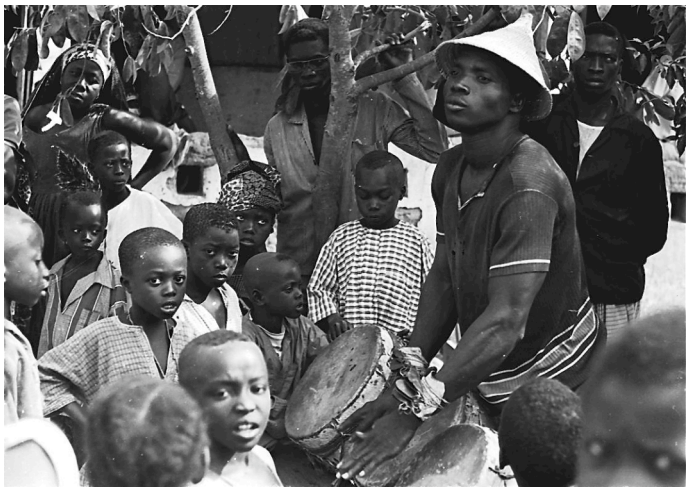
The *kumpo* mask is not a mask at all, in the usual sense. There is no carved wooden face representing a supernatural being. Instead, the entire body of the dancer, head to foot, is masked by long palm leaf streamers. Sticking out of the head at a rakish angle like the crest of a blue jay is a long wooden pole with a kerchief attached. Music for the *kumpo* dance is provided by a drum troupe. The instruments are identical to the three-drum set played by the Mandinka for celebratory events and entertainment—two short conical drums and a longer drum, all played with the stick-and-hand technique. [Numerous events with these drums, known collectively as the *tantango* drums, are included in the *Mande Music and Dance* DVD.] In addition, at this event, a mixed chorus has assembled as well. The women, clanging iron bells, sing in unison; the men answer in a phrase that breaks into thirds.

Merely standing still, shifting from foot to foot, the *kumpo* is an imposing figure. Then as it begins to move, the crowd assembled usually moves back, since it advances with large steps and parades up and down. If the circle is not big enough, it sweeps its crest down and forward, as if to mow the crowd and make them jump back. Then, as the drummers play their relentless barrage of rhythms drawn from the related Mandinka *kankurang* dance, the *kumpo* makes its

trademark move: down comes the crest again, this time firmly planted in the ground, and the entire mask whirls on its axis, still revealing nothing but palm streamers twirling. To children, it is magical, to adults, impressive; for the performer, it is an acrobatic physical feat.

The second clip was filmed on Boxing Day (a British holiday the day after Christmas), when the streets of Banjul swarmed with masked dancers, drummers, and other musicians in a free-for-all carnival. On this occasion there were two *kumpo* dancers, the usual drum set, and two flute players with a whistle flute called *elit.* As the dancers whirl, the flute players bob up and down, alternating the tones of their flutes. Note that the crests of these *kumpo* dancers are fitted with a steel point, an adaptation to assure a firm grip in the asphalt of the city street.

10. The Jola *bugaarabo*, a celebratory dance. Musa Gujabi, drummer. Bakau, Gambia, March 26, 1970.



To celebrate a milestone event, such as a wedding or the birth of a child, a Jola family might hire a drum troupe to put on the *bugaarabo* (as it is known in Gambia), or *bugaar.* The troupe actually consists of only one drummer playing three tall drums, also known as *bugaar*. The rest of his troupe consists of a male chorus, identifiable by their flowing goat's beard headdresses, to lead the songs and encourage the dancers. It's a party—the attendees, men and women alike, do the dancing and singing. Women add hand-clapping, sometimes amplified with clapsticks. They keep a steady beat coordinated to the drum rhythm, but mark the entrance of a dancer by breaking into double-time with alternating claps. Dancers spring into the circle spontaneously. Often it is a man and a woman together, seeming to compete for the most dust kicked up by their energetic footwork. There is clearly an air of friendly competition and flirtation. David Sapir recorded this genre, and describes the scene:

> Throughout the dance there is a continuous exchange of kerchiefs, handkerchiefs and hats between young men and women. If a girl admires a young man, she will throw her kerchief at his feet. While he is dancing he will pick it up and either return it immediately if he is not interested, or wait until the girl herself is dancing and in turn throw it at her feet. If he wants to make a rendez-vous with her at a later time, he will keep the kerchief. (1965:4)

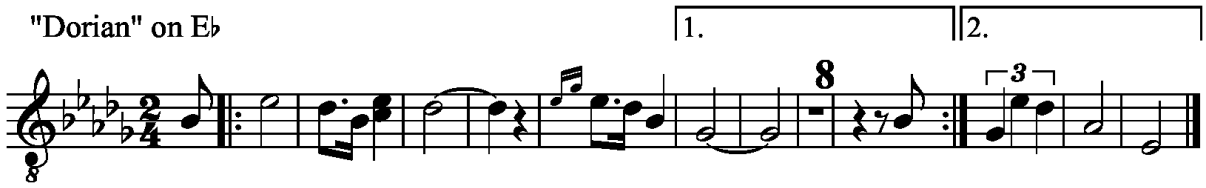
The content of the songs is similar to that of the peanut farming songs—topical commentary on friends and neighbors and local events. Participants often request songs for this or that person, tipping the lead singer to do so.

In *Bougarabou: Solo Drumming of Casamance,* another 1996 Village Pulse CD, author Adam Novick provides some information on the history of the genre. According to Saikouba Badjie, the drummer featured in the recording, before the 20th century the event had been accompanied by a single drummer with a single drum, played stick-and-hand. The switch to two drums, then three (or even four) and finally to purely hand drumming occurred some time mid-20th-century, and seems to have resulted from the wave of popularity of Cuban dance music at the time. (Village Pulse VPU-1005)

The *bugaarabo* in the film took place one morning (the typical hour for a birth celebration, much like the Mandinka *kullio* in Selection 1) in Bakau, a suburb of Banjul. The drum troupe had been invited from Serekunda, the next town. This event was short-lived, but a *bugaarabo* event can last far into the night or even continue for a second day, depending on the nature of the celebration.

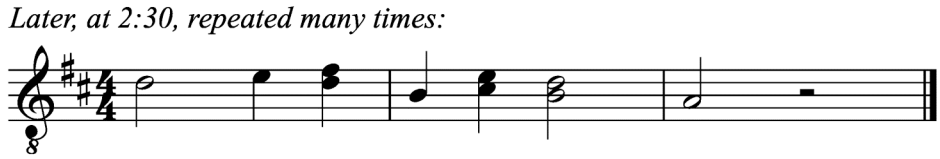
The flurry of hands and feet is unending as one dancer follows another into the circle. The singers, meanwhile, sing a line, pause, sing another, at a more leisurely pace. Commenting on the vocal style of the Jola, Sapir observes that "[Jola] music has a strong foreign quality to it; a quality particularly sensed in harmonic and melodic patterns" (1965:2). [In a 1976 article in *Ethnomusicology* (see References), Sapir collaborated with Judith T. Irvine to explore some of these features.]

In the film, the singers dwell first on one melody, then another, repeating each several times, and thus offering an opportunity to study the style. There is a certain familiarity to the sound—the two songs could be described as tracing the familiar scale patterns of "Dorian" and "major"—and the singers occasionally split into thirds. But it is the fleeting nature of these harmonies, and their unexpected progressions that catch the Western ear. In addition, even though words are sung, the predominant choral sound is on syllables such as "wo-eh." To elucidate, two transcriptions are presented below. The first melody is repeated with some variants during the first two and a half minutes of the clip. The transcribed segment occurs at 1:00 into the clip:



Ex. 1. *Bugaarabo* song, Bakau, Gambia, 1970.

The second melody begins at 2:30 and continues for many repetitions:



Ex. 2. *Bugaarabo* song, Bakau, Gambia, 1970.

Conclusions

In this video, several music and dance traditions of West Africa have been featured, some well-known, others less so. Many of the performers are no longer with us; the Super Eagles band later became the group known as Ifang Bondi ("Bring Yourself Out"), but that group is now also disbanded. Mechanization has come in a limited way to farming techniques, but generally speaking, a traveler to these areas today should not be at all surprised to see events and groups such as those depicted in these films. The Mande *jaliyaa* tradition continues to flourish, not only in Africa, but in diasporic settings, wherever there are concentrations of Mande peoples, such as London, Paris, and New York. Big community events such as weddings and child-namings bring together ensembles such as those seen in the opening event in the video, and in every country where the Mande live, national ensembles use *jaliyaa* as a mainstay of their repertoire. The Jola traditions, too, especially *kumpo* and *bugaarabo*, are the sorts of traditions that are favorites for touring troupes because they translate well to the Western stage. Even though the traditional contexts for some of these events suffer a diminished significance in today's Africa, they have taken on new meaning as expressions of the high entertainment value that Africa brings to the world.

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