

## Teaching music for communicating and sharing information in the Malian traditional society

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a review of the literature concerning music taught in Mali, which serves as a means of transmitting information and communication. In Malian oral tradition, songs were used as forms of messages shared between communities. *Jelis* or griots were particular groups of people who were selected to share knowledge across generations without writing. Although Mali is a land of music and culture, very little research has been conducted on musical knowledge for the current generations. Therefore, this paper intends to expand the current issues on music teaching and learning. The goal is to equip future educators with knowledge and skills that they can use while teaching in a multicultural society. Data in this research are sourced from document study. The results will offer future educators an opportunity to teach students the importance of music and deepen their understanding of Malian traditional music.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Music has paramount importance in everyday life situations. Many people in the four corners of the globe enjoy listening to music in different places, whether they are home, at work or at the gym. It is played everywhere, particularly in night clubs, concert places, family events, shopping malls, cafés, restaurants and so on. In addition, people frequently listen to music while travelling by plane, trains, buses and even on foot. For example, studies have revealed that the typical American listens to music for approximately 18 hours on average in a week (Rentfrow, 2012).

Eight years ago, technology made music available everywhere, which pushed people to spend much money on it. In 2010, Rentfrow (2012) argued that people spent almost 4.7 billion USD in the music industry for business reasons. More importantly, Rentfrow (2012) revealed that music enables considerable effects on cognition, emotion and behaviour for students. It develops learners' listening skills, it gives and controls emotions during times of depression, and changes the negative characteristics of people who listen to it into positive ones. It facilitates self-expression for social connection.

Besides music sounding pleasant to our ears, it is also used by people to have fun and it enables people to be very emotive. Moreover, it interprets happiness, sadness, anger or fear. In addition, when music is played, musicians manipulate specific features (loudness, tempo, timbre, etc.) to describe emotions. Therefore, all the above specificities of music show how people feel about it.

Music has developed through the years particularly in Mali where it is considered as a critical part of everyday life. Although many people enjoy listening to music, interpreting songs, spreading it to the largest possible areas in the world, research concerning music remains scarce. This shortcoming resulted in Malian music being unknown to many countries. Lack of research prevents local artists and international researchers from developing new skills. Moreover, teachers of music in Mali will not be able to teach efficiently and effectively,

while in other areas of research, things are progressing thanks to the use of technology. Therefore, any research that improves the situation is valuable at this moment. Scholars and researchers need to be present in the field for research purposes.

Combining lots of research will make Malian music stronger in the field of education. In addition, the traditional value interpreted by musicians will be strengthened so that it reaches more people in the world. It is in this perspective that the current research is going to be carried out in order to respond to the current needs of music. Given what has been said, the researcher seeks to respond to the following question: how is music used in the Malian traditional society to communicate and share information?

This paper has a qualitative research form. Data provided here stem from document study. The results of this research will be used by teachers of music, learners and performing artists all around the world to increase knowledge. In addition, the results will facilitate future researchers to conduct research to help develop music in terms of education and culture.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Definition of music*

Music can be defined as vocal and instrument sounds that are combined with each other to produce beauty of form, harmony and expression of emotion. Another definition refers to music as a pattern of sounds made by musical instruments, voices, computers or a combination of these, intended to give pleasure to those listening to it. Kouakou (2017) argued that, in reality, music is a means of communication in West Africa. People use music to share information, to have dialogues or to spread news in the community.

### 2.2 *The role of music in the classroom*

One of the best ways to put music into learners' classroom activities is to relate it to other parts of the curriculum. Music can be included in lesson plans by teachers. To do this, teachers can add song titles to the content of the lesson being prepared. According to developmentally convenient practices, song is one of the vital components of any early childhood curriculum (Jones, 2010).

With songs, learners can develop their learning skills, social and cultural understanding, emotional and cognitive skills. Music is very important for learners to show their feelings and later on, acquire basic concepts and skills (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1995, as cited in Jones, 2010). In addition, songs can be used in teaching to help students learn new concepts and vocabulary. Through listening activities, students can understand the meaning of terms and their interpretations in specific contexts. Additionally, songs enable students to learn adult roles. They develop learners' awareness of their bodies and what movements they can do. Further, music develops our feelings of self-confidence and fine motor skills. Moreover, listening to music helps to teach students about the foundations of musical properties such as loud, soft, fast tempo, slow tempo, and finally pitch (Jones, 2010). In the classroom, the music we play can help with transitions like clean-up time, circle time or from lunchtime to the end of break time.

Furthermore, North et al. (2000) argue that music can change the manner in which a learner feels, thinks and acts. Music enables students to define themselves in relation to others, their friends, colleagues, social networks and the cultures in which they live. Teaching music strengthens and extends experiences on a daily basis, also giving chance to further opportunities and making strong important links between the home, the school and other parts of the world.

### 2.3 *The notion of ngaraya in Mali*

*Ngaraya* is a term used in Mali to describe a specific breed of griots who are skilled in recounting the *Tariku* or oral recitation, which is reserved for male griots or *jelikew*. Some researchers

thought that only men can be *ngaraw* (Johnson, 1986, p. 25, as cited in Duran, 2007). *Ngaraw* are ubiquitous in Mande society. They are consulted by many people and have a high status in the society for diverse reasons: singing, telling stories, performing dance, acting as messengers in difficult situations and so on (Duran, 2007).

#### 2.4 *Ngaraya*

Duran (2007) defined *ngaraya* as when a *jeli* becomes a significant practitioner and makes a significant achievement. However, only *jeli* can be *ngaraw*. Anyone who is from a *jeli* family is classified as *jelike* (male) or *jelimuso* (female). A *ngara* has specific qualities regarding information concerning Mande history, genealogy, musical repertoire, skill, confidence and authority in performance lineage, destiny, the power to make things happen without explanation, moral behaviour, fearless character and abrasiveness. However, all *jelis* are attributed the title *ngara* when they are in their late 40s, particularly women. Some prominent Malian *ngaraw* include Bazoumana Cissoko, Kandia Kouyate, Ami Koita, Jalou Damba, Koni Koumare, and Mah Damba. Those *ngaraw* sang for their country, the brave men and women of Mali, and the great figures of the history of Mali who fought for independence.

### 3 DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 *The function of the drum for delivering messages*

In Malian traditional society, the griot's fundamental function was to inform and spread news that happened in the community. Griots were in charge of playing drums in circumstances when there was some important information to disseminate. For instance, the griot could take his drum and play it around the village with a specific message that the entire community would then embrace and relay. The message could be about a gathering, a delegation visiting, youth club meetings, annual traditional and spiritual celebrations and so on. The drum was used because the sound it produces was capable of reaching large crowds. This era preceded the telephone or any audio-visual communication system in those traditional communities.

#### 3.2 *Teaching oral tradition*

In a small village in Mali – Kela – oral tradition is taught in two forms: the first is named social general training, which covers some aspects of cultural topics dealing with social interaction with elder people. The second is professional training, which covers disciplinary subjects such as music and public oral expression for instance (Toulou, 2008).

While in formal education we can see that lessons are planned and organised, in traditional society teaching of cultural values is informal. Teaching is done orally, and does not require any written documents. Griots receive education outside schools; that is to say, in the families they are from. They are informally taught to memorise words and phrases, including the meaning of some sayings. However, education would refer to any structured lesson that offers opportunities to develop learning through transmission of information, cognition, knowledge and know-how.

#### 3.3 *Traditional role of griots*

Griots played important roles in the traditional society of Mali. For example, during wars, griots were used to motivate warriors by playing music. Griots interpreted songs which recall the courage of the ancestral parents of the people who were engaged in the fighting. When these people heard such interpretations, they go forward to fight using all means they could.

In addition to that, a griot played a key role as the king's spokesperson (in charge of delivering the speech that the kings made for the public). In addition, griots were considered as messengers during official ceremonies. They were appointed by the traditional leaders, kings, village

and religious leaders and so on. They were officially recognised by the community. Therefore, they played important roles in the society. In villages, griots were also in charge of reporting traditional celebrations like naming, marriage or mourning events (Sauvé, 2007).

Griots had the mission to tell the stories of things and events for which no written documents were available. The communities relied much on them in terms of information sharing, and also on the identification of their ancestors, their origins and their accomplishments. The roles they played were very well structured. The accuracy of the information to be given was paramount. They were not allowed to offend or demean anyone. As a result, the nobles were very kind to the griots because of the good appreciation that the griots gave them.

Traditionally, griots' voices were used to honour one or many individuals; for example, the king, the chief, or the noble. When the griots made praises, usually they are accompanied by a musical instrument called a *xalam* or the *tama*, which is a small drum placed in the armpit. Moreover, griots' songs express useful expressions that the person being praised would appreciate. During events such as naming ceremonies or other social celebrations, one individual receives praise from someone else who knows them well. That person would praise them by listing the background of the family in front of the people who do not know them very well: such a person ends up being glorified.

A griot is a messenger who organises big meetings in the villages. More importantly, the education system did not divert the griots from their traditional roles and responsibilities. A griot is a social historian, a messenger and a peacemaker. He or she can give an oral account of legendary tales, without any notes, with the goal of educating and conveying key messages to their listeners. They can always explain what happened years before in oral form. All the students who went to universities for education make sure the griot also went there.

Hale (1998) suggested that the role of the griot in West Africa is determined by praise songs, storytelling, instrumental performances and social mediation. In society, these roles are very precious because the griot always tries to create songs that fit with the culture, using traditional musical instruments such as the kora, balafon, djembe and so on, and also tries to bring peace between people who have disagreements. This role was very important for the communities living together because modern justice systems were not in existence at that time. Therefore, the griots also served as justices concerning mediation in the society in terms of traditions.

Research has shown that griots were considered to be the oral tradition specialists in West Africa. Thanks to griots, for example, the oral tradition of the village of Kela has been maintained for generations, since the thirteenth century without any documentation. All the history was memorised by the griots who have taught their children in the same way up until the present.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Music use in the Malian context is accepted by everyone regardless of their social status, ethnicity, religion or leadership. As a result, the griot in Malian traditional society plays a key role in the development of social bonding. They are storytellers and world tradition keepers, which they inherited from their parents over generations. Consequently, the griot influences society to invoke courage and peace through the songs they perform for the community. They transmit the messages of the rulers. They intervene when there are disagreements and, finally, they are decent.

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