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Ngaraya: Women and musical mastery in Mali

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of the evaluation of musical artistry in Africa, through Mali as a case study. The discussion focuses on the informal discourses of the occupational group of Mande artisan-musicians known as *jeli* (pl. *jeliw, jalilu*), concerning the ideal of musical greatness, signified by the polysemic term *ngaraya*; while there is consensus about the ideal, there is much debate about who qualifies. Drawing on extensive interviews and fieldwork with leading *jeliw* over the past twenty years, it pays special attention to the views of and about Malian women singers, who since the 1980s have – somewhat controversially, as explored here – been the ''stars'' on the home scene. The article shows how local discourses challenge the widely accepted view that only men are the true masters (*ngaraw*). Many women *jeli* singers (*jelimusow*) have a special claim to *ngaraya*, and some also seek to position themselves within the canon, as they increasingly move into centre-stage of Malian popular culture. The importance of learning directly from senior master *jeliw* remains a core issue in the evaluation of *ngaraya* for both men and women, encapsulated in the phrase ''the true *ngaraw* are all at home''.

Introduction

An important part of any musical culture is the recognition of certain artists as being exceptional in some way. This article looks at the informal discourses of the occupational group of artisan-musicians known as *jeli* among the Mande peoples of West Africa, concerning the evaluation of musical greatness, known in core Mande languages as *ngaraya*. Who are the ''inescapable figures'' of local musical life[1] – the *ngaraw* (sing. *ngara*) as they are known – and how do they reflect musical and social values in Mande society? Of particular interest here is the role of the *jelimuso* (female *jeli*) in Mali within the definitions and perceptions of *ngaraya* as a ''canon''.

Extended accounts of musicians' own notions of musical excellence in Africa are surprisingly scant, with a few notable exceptions where authors have focused on celebrated artists such as the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (Danielson 1997), known as ''nightingale of the Nile''. The idea, for example, of the ''master drummer'' is widely used in the literature but rarely elaborated on – and often simply refers to the role of the lead

1 The phrase ''inescapable figures'' is taken from Danielson's (1997) study of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.

drummer of an ensemble, whose status as leader demonstrates his prowess.[2] There are indigenous concepts of excellence, for example amongst Shona mbira players, with epithets such as *bandambira* (''mbira crusher'') (Berliner 1993: 152); in Hausa culture, the term *bakandamiya* denotes great oral poetry;[3] and *maalem* is an honorific title of respect bestowed on elder teachers and/or lead musicians of the Gnawa brotherhoods of Morocco (Chlyeh 1998: 45). But such titles and epithets are usually mentioned in passing, as a given fact of musical life, with little further discussion or analysis.

The Mande *jeliw* are an example of a musical culture in Africa with an extensive and quite specific discourse on who are the exceptional artists (*ngaraw*), and why. References to the *ngaraw* and their art, *ngaraya*, come up frequently in song texts, as well as in the conversation of elder musicians and people closely allied to them. As specialized musicians who were attached in pre-colonial times to kings and warriors, they must have developed such discourses in order to protect and enhance their knowledge and craft.

The *jeliw* (sing. *jeli*), also widely known as griots, are the celebrated occupational musicians/genealogists/historians of the Mande peoples of West Africa. Their musical traditions and oral epics have been written about extensively (see bibliography). Their discourse on mastery revolves around the term *ngara*, (sometimes spelt *nwara*), usually translated as ''master *jeli*'', at the heart of which is the notion of esoteric power or life force, *nyama*, which is ''a constant theme in traditional Mande society'' (Charry 2000: 64). It shares the root *nga* with another, complementary, term, *ngana*, meaning hero or person of action. Usually reserved for the ''nobility'' or ''freeborn'' sector of Mande society, *ngana* is incidentally also used to describe master sculptors (Brett-Smith 1994: 162).

Ngara is not a title but an informal superlative. In keeping with the patriarchal, gerontocratic order of Mande society, the term mostly applies to elder male musicians, but women singers (*jelimusow;* sing. *jelimuso*) are also claiming a place for themselves as they increasingly move into the centre-stage of Malian popular culture (see Durán 1995 and 1999a). Out of modesty, a musician is not supposed to describe him- or herself as a *ngara*, though in practice, as discussed below, some do so quite publicly.

Many writers acknowledge the importance of the concept of *ngara*, but do not discuss it in any depth. The lack of material on the subject may simply result from the fact that most scholars of the Mande oral traditions have worked with senior performers who were undisputed *ngaraw*, such as Fa-Digi Sissoko and Kele Monson Diabate from Kita, Wa Kamissoko from Kirina, and Tayiru Banbera from Segou. In other words, where there is no dispute about a *jeli*'s status as *ngara*, there is not likely to be much discussion around the subject of who deserves the accolade and why.

2 For example, in Patricia Tang's recently published book *Masters of the Sabar*, the term master is never actually defined (Tang 2007).

3 See Muhammad (1981) for further discussion of this concept.

One of the few detailed analyses of *ngaraya* is by the Malian scholar Cheick M. Cherif Keita, in his study of the Malian writer (and *jeli*) Massa Makan Diabate, whom he views as a "rebel-artist" (Keita 1995a). Eric Charry, in his comprehensive study of Mande music, refers to the *ngara* as "the *jeli's jeli*" adding: "the role of the ngara in the expansion of Mande society may be much greater than one might accord to masters of speech and music, who are neither warriors nor political leaders. In Mande ideology the *ngara* is not just a master artist but also a guide and source of wisdom" (Charry 2000: 58–9). This comment reflects the importance of the *ngara* historically, in the pre-colonial era. But there is little elaboration of how *ngaraya* as a concept relates to the contemporary world of Mande music.

By exploring the discourses around *ngaraya*, especially those on the margins of the "canon", this article aims to throw light on the dynamics of Mali's vibrant local music scene. It focuses on the controversial and contradictory status of today's women singers, who are sometimes seen *per se* as the antithesis of the *ngara*. Schulz (2001: 229) states that more than 70 per cent of musicians featured on Mali television broadcasts are women. My estimate of artists featured on *Top Etoile*, a weekly (since 1992) television programme showcasing new talent, is that women account for between 60 and 80 per cent of singers. With this unprecedented popularity, what force does the ideal of *ngara* hold for them? How does it affect the choices that they make during their performing careers in terms of their repertoire, choice of instruments, performance persona, and lifestyle?

The *jeliw* often say that "*ngaraya man di*" – *ngaraya* is not a pleasant thing (Keita 1995a: 86): it is difficult to attain the level of a *ngara*, and the responsibilities of being one are also heavy, and not taken lightly. Which *jelimusow* (female griots) are believed to merit the accolade *ngara*, and why?

Kofi Agawu, in his influential book *Representing African Music*, believes that "African oral histories have so far not been shown to be repositories of an overwhelming vocabulary for discourse about music. And yet, as research has shown … there is plenty of subtle and precise expression around performance traditions that could facilitate the development of modern critical discourses … the need to understand African musicians on their own terms and in their own languages, and to attempt to excise layers of European assumptions that might have impeded our understanding of African musical practice, remain pressing" (Agawu 2003: 20–21). This study is based on research and fieldwork conducted mainly in Bamako over a period of two decades (1986–2006) working with some of the country's most successful and celebrated musicians, male and female, who are quoted extensively here. The exploration of *ngaraya* in the world of Mande music will hopefully stimulate further discussion about the ongoing evaluation of musical artistry within different African societies.

Definitions of *ngaraya*

> I use *ngara* as the Mande equivalent of "bard" whereas *jeli* is the equivalent of "griot". Anyone born into a *jeli* family can be classified as a griot, but only the most accomplished practitioners of the griot's art can be referred to as *ngaraw* or bards (Hoffman 1990: 155).

Ngaraya (the art of the *ngara*) is a polysemic term used in song texts (and sometimes in conversation) that embraces a multitude of musical and non-musical attributes, including knowledge of Mande history, genealogy and musical repertoires; skill, confidence and authority in performance, lineage, destiny, the power to make things "happen" inexplicably, moral behaviour, and a character that is fearless, abrasive (as in Keita's "rebel-artist"), yet humble. Perhaps most important of all, though most difficult to quantify, is inspirational talent, often attributed to the presence of a jinn spirit, referred to as the "*jeliya* jinn". Age is also a crucial factor – normally, no one is considered a *ngara* until they are in their late 40s, especially women.

The comparison of the "ordinary *jeli*" with the exceptional one is intrinsic to *jeli* discourse. In their discussions as well as in their song texts, *jeliw* will often either sing or say "*ngara ni kumala té kelen ye*" (literally, the *ngara* and the speaker are not the same), or "*ngara ni donkilidala te kelen ye*" – the *ngara* and the singer are not the same, implying that while some musicians may sing or speak well, they do not have the power of the *ngara*, who represents the true art of the *jeli*.

Indeed for that very reason, at its most fundamental level, the term *ngara* is synonymous with the four Mande hereditary occupational artisans known as *nyamakala*: the *jeli*, the *numu* (blacksmiths), the *funè* (word-smiths) and the *garanke* (leather workers). This usage occasionally crops up in the discourse of *jeliw*, who describe the four occupations as the four masters (Hoffman 1990: 24), and in song (e.g. by Kandia Kouyate in *Mandenkalu*; on her CD *Kita kan*, Sterns 1999).

The fact that the term is found throughout the Mande cultural world in the core Mande languages attests that it is of ancient Mande usage. It is used mainly by *jeliw*, (though some non *jeli* musicians (e.g. the Wasulu *konow*) also occasionally use it in their songs[4]). A *jelikuntigi* (leader of the *jeliw*) or *kumatigi* ("owner of the word"), both of which are titles representing a specific elected role within the *jeli* community (conferred on men only) may not necessarily be considered a *ngara*.

The root *nga*, *nya* or *ngwa* from proto-Mande denotes eyes, way, or means, and is the core of the term *nyama* – unseen (occult) force or energy. The *ngara* manipulates *nyama* through words and music, while the *ngana* (often translated as "hero") makes his mark on society through actions (see Keita 1995a: 84). Both concepts, *ngara* (master *jeli*) and *ngana* (the great warrior, hero and patron of the *jeli*) clearly date from pre-colonial times. Much has been written about the demise of the type of honourable relationship between patron and *jeli* in the twentieth century, and its adverse effect on *jeliya* (Keita 1995b; Hale 1998; Schulz 2001). Equally, aspiring musicians lament the fact that there is no longer a true context for *ngaraya*: the subtle and refined art forms of the *ngara* fall on deaf ears. We return to this later in a song text by the Malian singer Kandia Kouyate.

4 Oumou Sangare and Coumba Sidibe both talk of *ngaraw* in their songs: e.g. Oumou in *Sabou (ja sabu ye ngaraya la)* (see Durán 2003) and Coumba in *Hee ndanani* (see Durán 2000).

The weightiness of the root *nga* is emphasized in the way in which some singers articulate the word *ngara* itself. For example, the late Malian diva from Segou, Mariam Kouyate (wife of the late *kora* player Sidiki Diabate), known for her powerful contralto voice, declared of herself in an interview on Malian television, "I am a *ngara*, ***nga nga nga***",[5] emphasizing the repeated syllable ***nga*** in an almost threatening tone. Her declaration was criticized by some musicians as improper, going against the rule of modesty, especially for a woman. Similarly, Ami Koita, a *jelimuso* who pioneered the use of electric guitar and keyboards in Malian women's music in the late 1980s, sings the phrase "I am a *ngara*" in a song dedicated to the Malian writer Amadu Hampate Ba.[6]

The root *nga* has other associations with esoteric power. *Nyagwan* is a women's secret society in Guinea, and *Nya* is also a Bamana and Minyanka men's secret society in San and Koutiala (Vydrine 1999).

The Mande *jeliw* are often described as "masters of the word". This fits in with the broad view of the occult power of speech, which, like metal, wood and animals, has large quantities of *nyama*, unseen energy. In addition to *ngaraya mandi* already mentioned the phrases "*nyama be kuma la*" (the word has *nyama*) and "*kuma man di*" (the word is difficult/unpleasant) appear frequently in the *jeli*'s discourse (see Hoffman 1990 and 2000).

Ngaraya is thus closely associated with verbal skills. Indeed the term *ngara* (also *naara, ngwara, nyara*) is translated in Bailleul's Bamana–French dictionary as "eloquent" (Bailleul 1996). Some make this exclusive: "the *ngara* [is] someone who realises prodigious feats solely though the manipulation of the word" (Kone 1990: 20). Cisse, too, defines *ngara* as the "maitre du verbe": when his main informant, the great Wa Kamissoko, became a master of the word, he abandoned the playing of musical instruments (at which he had previously excelled), and also stopped singing, only using the speech mode (Cissé 1991: 24).

We find, however, that instrumentalists may also be considered *ngara*. Keletigui Diabate, a virtuoso balafon player from Kita who has performed extensively with both traditional and dance bands, says:

> If you have mastered an instrument to the extent that your playing inspires singers to perform in *ngara* fashion, or when your playing of the great tunes like *Janjon* goes deep, then you're a *ngara* (interview with author, Bamako, 1993)

Sidiki Diabate (1922–96), widely considered one of the greatest kora players, believed that *ngaraya* on an instrument is not defined by virtuosity, but by the instrumentalist's thorough knowledge of the histories and ability to guide and inspire the singer (or narrator). His father, Bala Diabate, who

5 Mariam Kouyate is quoted as having made this statement on Mali television in 1997 by Koly Keita, who also told me about the adverse comments she provoked (personal communication).

6 The song *Hampate Ba* is on the CD *Mali: Electric and Acoustic* (Hemisphere), originally released on the cassette *Mory Djo*.

was the first to take up the kora in the family, apparently only knew one or two kora pieces, and played them in a very simple fashion. Simplicity in itself, insisted Sidiki, is an important pre-requisite of *ngaraya* (personal communication with author, Bamako, 1994). The power of the instrumentalist over singers is acknowledged in the often-sung phrase "Slow/cool down the instruments, or you'll push me into *ngaraya*". For example, one of Mali's most popular and respected young women singers of the 1980s, Kandia Kouyate (b. 1959), explained that when she sang this phrase (see song text below), it was her way of acknowledging that she was too young to be a *ngara*, but *ngaraya* was in her blood, and it might manifest itself in a performance if too inspired.

Ngaraya and gender

As with the term *jeli, ngara* is non-gendered, and can be applied to both men and women. Much of the discourse on *ngaraya*, however, emphasizes the *jelike* (male *jeli*) as providing the canon, while the *jelimuso* is often seen as straying from and actively debasing it. There are very few women singers who are held up as role models.

Elder *jeliw* agree that that true medium for *ngaraya* is the *tariku* or spoken recitation, which is a male domain. Some scholars have therefore assumed that only men can be *ngaraw* (Johnson 1986: 25), just as most scholars have until recently believed that only men can perform epics (see Hale 1998; Johnson, Hale and Belcher 1997).

Bakari Soumano, Chief of Griots of Mali *(jelikuntigi)* from 1992–2003,[7] explains that although women can be *ngaraw*, their power in society was diminished because they were not included at the original meeting between Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mali empire (*c.* 1235) and his generals when they drew up the charter of Mande society:

> There was a pact between Sunjata and his general Tiramakan … but women were not there. Sunjata, Tiramakan, Fakoli [Doumbia] and Sira Makan Ba Koita divided up the tasks between them. Sunjata wanted fame and reputation, Tiramakan wanted victory. That's why Sunjata took the glory. [At the pact] They agreed on the four *ngaraw*. This was the very first *sumu* [a ritual or informal celebration, with music] – and women should have been there. Sunjata's sister gave Sunjata the secret so he could win the battle, but women were out of the pact. When they say "*n'se*" [a phrase with which women return greetings], it means "we have given you the power". Mba [the phrase with which men return greetings] means, "my mother brought me here". It is women who have the power. Let me give you an example:

7 This is an honorific but influential position, which he took over from his father, Djamoussa Soumano, after his father's death. Djamoussa was considered a *ngara*; he was also one of the main informants of Solange de Ganay in her study of the ceremonial re-roofing of Sunjata's sacred hut *(kamablon)* in Kangaba.

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> at the *kamablon*, 27 men and one woman are in the hut, but it's the woman who runs the show.
>
> *Ngaraya* is to know the full recitation, and to know the explanation of the recitation. This comes with age, because when you're young, you don't have the authority to ask questions. … Women know the stories of Mande history as well as men. How could it be otherwise? They are always there when the men recite them. They sing the choruses, those choruses are the pillars of the histories. They remind the men about which bits to sing next. The only thing is, they are not allowed to take the spoken word in front of men. But they can sing it. (Interview with author, Bamako, 1996).

The *jelimuso* is a *donkilidala*, or singer, by definition, since song in Mande culture is gendered as female while spoken recitation (*tariku*) is male (Durán 1999b, ch. 3), and *tariku* is valued more highly than song. Whilst male *jeliw* are given the ideological freedom to modernize their music, the *jelimuso* is expected to maintain the tradition. Women who live in a city like Bamako and who seek popularity, fame or money are rarely considered *ngara*. They are criticized for being too modern, too concerned with physical appearance, too ambitious, not well-versed in *jeliya*, too independent in life-style vis-à-vis their husbands, and too populist in approach to their music. The respect for women who remain close to the tradition, and who continue to live in centres of tradition such as Kita, Kela or Niagassola, is expressed in a commonly used phrase "the *ngaraw* are all at home".

Thus the discourse on *ngaraya* and the *jelimuso* reflects fundamental social attitudes about gender. As the anthropologist Clemens Zobel aptly puts it:

> While most of their famous male colleagues work from outside their countries of origin, the griot women or *jelimusow*, have maintained a close contact with home audiences, transforming the tradition from within. In a fascinating way they combine the identity of being a star watched on television with the position of an entertainer at marriages and family gatherings in the side streets of Bamako, Abidjan, or the foyers of Paris. Thus more than men *jelimusow* symbolize the fusion of elite, or mass culture with folk culture (Zobel 1997).

El Hadj Balaba Diabate from Kela, deemed a true *ngara* because of his knowledge, status, lineage, and forceful character, cited the urban *jelimuso* as the essence of how *jeliya* has become commercialized:

> The way I perform *jeliya* is different from the way others do. I'm not like a *jelimuso* of today, who wakes up in the morning, dresses well, and goes from ceremony to ceremony. As for myself, I only perform on great days.[8]

8 Taken from an interview for a BBC TV documentary, 1995, as part of a series commissioned by the Open University for their course Human Geography. This interview was not shown in the final edit.

Perhaps some of this negative attitude towards women who are powerful singers is because the character traits of the *ngara*, when manifest in a woman, contradict the Mande ideal of feminine behaviour. A *ngara* is expected to cultivate an almost anti-feminine image. She should not, for example, emphasize her femininity with jewellery. The term *jeli kangakolon* – "the *jeli* without a necklace", is an epithet for a singer who puts her energy into her art and not her appearance, used for example to describe the late Hawa Drame, whom many considered a *ngara*. Bako Dagnon (born 1948 in Kita), who makes few public appearances outside the ritual celebrations of *jeliw*, and who is regarded as *ngara*, says:

> The *jelimuso* with dignity is not interested in demonstrating her wealth. Me, I take my jewellery off when I go to perform in public. Others pile on more and more. In their minds, wearing lots of gold will incite people to give them even more. This is getting the maximum from people by creating jealousy and competition between them. It's the opposite of how the *jelimuso* should be with her "nobles" (interview with author, Bamako, 1997).

In pre-colonial times, it seems, some female *ngaraw* even rode on horseback, carrying a musket, and went to battle side by side with their patrons.[9] They could also marry their patrons – the *ngara* could use her voice as a way of moving into another social realm. Fanta Damba *cini* ("the younger"), a singer from Segou who became one of the first iconic female stars of the 1970s, says:

> In the old days, the good women singers – the *ngaraw* – the kings would marry them, and make them stay at their side, only to sing just for them (interview with author, Bamako, 1996).

The forceful and fearless nature of the *ngara* sits rather uncomfortably with the Mande ideal of the good wife and mother, submissive to her husband and his family (see Hoffmann 2002; Brand 2001). Among those *jelimusow* who dominate the music scene in Mali today, only a very few are believed to be "on the pathway" to *ngaraya*, which puts them under some pressure.

For example, one successful *jelimuso* living in Bamako, whose identity I cannot reveal, was born into a *ngara* lineage and has a formidable voice. She aspires to become a *ngara*, but the general view of her peers, in the 1990s when I was conducting research in Bamako on *ngayara*, was that she did not conform to the moral qualities, citing the fact that her first child was born out of wedlock, and that her husband (an arranged marriage) was allegedly homosexual and they did not live together. This gave her the freedom, they alleged, to travel extensively without a chaperone and to

9 According to the female singer Fanta Damba *koroba*, who established her reputation in Mali's Ensemble National Instrumental in the early days of independence; in an interview on the cassette *Jamana sorofe* cited later on in more detail.

develop "suspiciously close" relationships with her male patrons. They also accused her of bleaching her skin, wearing too much jewellery, and courting stardom. She, on the other hand, believed that she did her best to live up to the ideal. She refused to divorce her husband because "a *ngara* does not divorce". When her husband died, despite preferring to remain single, she bowed to pressure and remarried. She constantly returned to her home town to learn at the feet of her elders, believing that a *ngara* must always study. She refused to record, despite many lucrative offers. "It's not easy to be a *ngara*", she would often say to me.

Another successful *jelimuso* was married, but there were frequent accusations that "she is from a *ngara* family, but she can never be *ngara*" because allegedly she is bisexual and her female "patrons" were in fact her lovers. Allegations of women singers' bisexuality have become increasingly common in the world of contemporary *jeliya*.

This kind of discourse resonates with the wider view within Muslim cultures that women singers are of loose morality. Many writers have linked the female singing voice with female sexuality: e.g. among the Lubavitcher Jews, where the orthodox view is that "a woman's voice is a sexual incitement" (Koskoff 1989: 217). JaFran Jones, in her study of Tunisian women, points to historical associations in the Arab world of the term *qayna*, meaning "singing slave girl", and "early mid-eastern associations of music with slavery and diverse prejudices" (Koskoff 1989: 70). Many men that I spoke to in Bamako, both *jeli* and non-*jeli*, believed that the relationship between the *jelimuso* and her patron is usually a sexual one. "Why give a woman a car, unless you're sleeping with her, and you want her to be able to come to you at any time, day or night?" complained one instrumentalist, "a true *ngara* would refuse such gifts because they are based on corruption, and not on the true nature of patronage (*jatigiya*)".

Since the *ngara* must be fearless in her criticisms, the idea is that only a woman with impeccable morals will dare to criticize others. Possibly related to this is the belief that to become a *ngara* a woman must have reached the menopause. Kandia Kouyate takes this further by saying that a woman must be 60, pointing out that a woman must be way beyond the age where her sexuality can be used as a means to attract patrons. She must be stripped of all her physical charms, so that all her power is channelled through her voice and knowledge.

Finally, her "eligibility" to become a *ngara* is also judged on the reputation of her own mother, who must have demonstrated all the same impeccable moral requisites. This complies with the general Mande ideology that "only a good mother gives birth to a good child" (Grosz-Ngate 1989; Brand 2001).

One of the roles of the *funè* (a wordsmith, one of the four artisans) is to provide extra information on either the singer or the content of the song during a performance. This he/she does through spoken interjections. Sometimes this involves reminding the audience that they are in the presence of a *ngara*. Thus during a song (described at the end of this article), by the singer Kandia Kouyate, the *funè* interrupted, addressing his words to Kandia:

> We know that where you come from, people have never been afraid. We know that you have never been afraid. Why should you be afraid? Your mother did nothing!

In short – no wonder the *jelimusow* say "*ngaraya man di*" – *ngaraya* is not pleasant. In fact, it is extremely difficult for women to obtain. What are the effects of this? Stardom becomes an attractive and much more viable option for the ordinary *jelimuso*.

Ngaraya, women and the performance of *tariku*

As is well known, the passing on of information on lineages in Mande, and the knowledge of genealogies, is one of the most prized functions of the *jeli*. In practical terms, this means that one type of musical performance is valued above all others: the historical "epic" (*maana*). A subject already widely covered in the literature, what requires re-stating here is that there are two types of recitation employed in the epic performances: spoken, and sung. It is here that gender comes into play, since spoken recitation, called *tariku* in Mali (a word that also means historical narrative in general), is the exclusive domain of men.

Scholars of oral literature tend to deny that women can perform epics (see Johnson, Hale and Belcher 1997: xviii). There are no transcriptions of a woman performing an epic, except for *Sara* by Sira Mory Diabate, described as a "poetic narrative, [that] … qualifies as an epic" but is "more melodic than the typical male bard's narrative mode" (ibid: 114). This signals the fact that Sira Mory sings rather than speaks her text. One view is that women's genres actually constitute a kind of "anti-epic",[10] focusing precisely on those elements which are embellishment to the epic. Without singing the narrative, their lyrics are opaque, containing a series of isolated and elliptical references to characters from Mande history, and this may or may not be felt to demonstrate their knowledge of the story. This involves the listener in a kind of mental reconstruction of that story and requires a familiarity with Mande history and cultural values. The ambiguity of meanings involves the audiences in interpretive activities based on the context of performance. In Drame's words: "[le *jeli*] rappelle des faits à des gens qui connaissent l'histoire" (Drame 1992: 202).

The view upheld by senior *jeliw* from the core tradition, for example from Kela, is that speech, not song, is the optimum medium for historical narrative, and that only men are allowed to perform in the speech medium. Thus the true *ngara* uses the spoken word, the only performance medium in *jeliya* that evokes clearly a sense of the masculine.

> Singing is not *ngaraya*. Because women don't go to war. Men go to war. When they come back, they tell you things. You learn these things, but they were actually present, they saw it. Where piercing [of

10 I am grateful to Annick Sy for suggesting this term to me.

> swords etc.] happens, women aren't there. (Fanta Damba *cini*, interview, 1996).

In fact, however, if one examines recorded performances by the *ngaraw* Kele Monson Diabate from Kita, and Banzoumana Sissoko from Segou,[11] they are clearly sung, not spoken.

Hale (1998: 224) comments that "women tend to learn from other women (mothers, aunts, older sisters and families)", but my research reveals that many Malian *jelimusow* have studied with men as well. This is important, because they learn both the male and female repertoires and approaches to *jeliya*, even if in public they refrain from the male performance modes of historical narration and speech. Bako Dagnon studied with Kele Monson Diabate; Kandia Kouyate studied with her uncle Toumani Kouyate in Kita and also learnt from Djeli Moussa Diabate in Kayes; Kaninba Oulen Kouyate from Niagassola learnt from her uncle Djonka Madi Kouyate, to cite just a few cases.

Bako Dagnon explains that:

> My mother was a great singer, my father played *ngoni*. I used to go to learn with Kele Monson, at the same time as the writer Massa Makan Diabate, we were his pupils. … The knowledge, the *tariku*, the *kuma koro* (old words) that I know, I learnt them all from Kele Monson. In our culture, the griot school, the oldest have the oldest words. They know better what happened in the empire. If there are several old people in the village, you go around asking all of them questions. If six of them answer the same thing, you know it must be true (interview with author, Bamako, 1996).

Kasse Mady Diabate (b. 1949), a well-known and much admired singer from Kela, nephew of El Hadj Balaba Diabate, has a broad repertoire of both historical narrative and popular genres. He states categorically that he has never seen or heard of a woman perform *tariku*, and he cannot believe such a thing could ever happen.

> *Tariku* are the stories of Mande, done only by men. Even if women know them, they don't have the right to recite them. In a big family of *jeliw*, the older brother's children have the first right to perform *tariku*. The older brother's house is called *fadugu*, the younger brother's house is the *dendugu*. Even though I'm older than some of my cousins, I am from the *dendugu* so I don't yet have the right. Women, they can do *majamuni* or *matògòni* [praising], but real *ngaraya* is in the *tariku* (interview with author, 1999).

11 See, for example, a recording of Kele Monzon Diabate held at the British Library, recorded in Kela in *c.* 1969 by Roland Scott. Recordings of Banzoumana Sissoko are now widely available through re-released CDs such as *One Day on Radio Mali* (Syllart, published 2006).

Tata Bambo Kouyate's brother Cheikh Kouyate, who plays the *tamani* (variable pitch drum), comments that:

> If a woman does *tariku* her children will be ill, or something terrible will happen. Men have even threatened to kill a woman with *kòròte* [poison], if she dares to perform the *tariku*. So no woman will do it, at least not in public (interview with author, Bamako, 1998).

Nevertheless, some *jeliw* contradict this. Sidiki Diabate was adamant that, despite the usual belief to the contrary, there have been female *ngaraw* who have performed *tariku*: he cited as examples Sona Bakoto Diabate, grandmother of Sira Mory Diabate; Moussa Fili Kanoute, his great aunt; Bogosalen Damba from Tomora, and Jali Kani Kanoute, from Nanifara, adding that, in his opinion, "the great *ngaralu*[12] were mostly women" (personal communication). As Ami Koita (mentioned earlier for her controversial modernizing of women's music) explains:

> When you learn to sing, you also have to learn true versions of songs like *Sunjata*. Women know the story of Sunjata as well as men, but men can speak the story, women can only sing it. Usually what happens is that a man will tell the story, and a woman will sing the corresponding song at the right moment. If a man is present a woman will never take the platform from him. Otherwise, she can sing it; I myself do so (interview with author, Bamako, 1991).

In the 1990s, at the height of her success, Ami Koita had effectively forfeited her pathway to *ngaraya* by such radical projects as her cassette *Sublime* (1990) recorded with the Congolese band Afrisa, for which she received severe criticism from the Malian public (see Durán 2000). This was not the case with Fanta Damba *cini*, who "qualified" for *ngaraya* on virtually every count (except that she happened to be very beautiful which undoubtedly contributed to her success); she herself was a tough critic of women singers. (She allegedly made a famous appearance on Malian television after she had retired from public performance in the early 1990s, accusing young women singers of being prostitutes.) She echoes the view that it is the public recitation of *tariku* that women are not allowed to do.

> Those who sing can't talk well. Sometimes when there are the *sumuw* [life-cycle celebrations], you see certain women who come, they say "*jama ka haketu*" (people, forgive me) [because they are going to speak in public]. I'm talking about the *funè* and the *garanke*, [leatherworkers], all those. Their role is to speak. They say "it happened like this and like this", then the women take those things, and put them into song. If you see a woman who can do the *tariku*, you'll find that she has stopped singing [i.e. she has retired from public

12 This is the Maninka and Mandinka plural form of *ngara*. Sidiki Diabate was born in Gambia and often spoke in Gambian Mandinka.

> performance]. Older women. They sit at home, people come to them to ask for information, they say "I want to know the story of so and so", the women then speak, they converse. Women can do the *tariku*, but not in public (interview with author, Bamako, 1996).

The view that *jeliya* is becoming feminized because of the increasing popularity of women is discussed by a number of scholars (Hale 1998: 332; Diawara 1996: 599; 1997: 43; Schulz 2001). Implicit in this idea of "feminization" is that the art is being debased, and therefore moving away from the canon of *ngaraya*. Bako Dagnon remarks that:

> At home, men and women, the man has all the power, especially outside the house, women have to do whatever men say. But women have more power. Anything they say, the men will do. Women observe much more than men. Men go straight for the action, women check it first, they have lots of little ways of doing things. You could say that the man is like a *ngana* [person of action] and the woman is a *ngara*. (interview with author, Bamako, 1997).

The *ngara* character

Discussions of who were the masters of the past, and who may or may not be the living *ngaraw*, always begin with an appraisal of the requisite character. Thus the concept of musical mastery goes beyond the purely musical, confirming Chernoff's view that "the essential criteria for distinguishing excellence in African music are, as we have seen, as much ethical as aesthetic" (Chernoff 1979: 153). Knight (1973: 81) quotes Nyolu Jebateh, a *jelimuso* from The Gambia whom he describes as a *ngara*, saying: "A *ngara* is a woman who is not afraid of crowds, not afraid of anything, except God…". This view is echoed by Sidia Jatta, a Gambian from upper-river Gambia where many Malian *jeliw* migrated at the turn of the century. He defines the *ngara* as a "female singer who is not only good at singing, but also has tremendous expressive power in narrating family genealogies" (Jatta 1985: 25).

The singer Kandia Kouyate, one of Mali's finest singers, says that the term *ngara* denotes greatness of character, and though associated with *jeliw* can have wider application:

> Even a noble can be *ngara*… it's not just the *jeli*. It's to have good qualities, to tell the truth, to know the past, that's *ngaraya*. And also, the *ngara* is always faithful. You must be faithful/loyal. There are nobles who are faithful, who say the truth. Even if your head is touching the sky, they tell you the truth. There are noble [*horon*] *ngaraw*. One says *horon ngara*, but if you say that, they will be angry, and yet – *ngara* means, to tell the truth. Someone who keeps his word … If you say to a griot, you're *ngara*, they're happy, but if you say to a noble you're *ngara*, he's not pleased … it's because it's an expression only meant for the *jeli*, and yet there are the *horon* who are *ngara* … *Ngaraya* always has a good meaning (interview with author, Paris, 1998).

In an extended discussion on the subject of *ngaraya*, four celebrated *jeliw* were invited to address the question "are all *jeliw ngara*?" *("Jeli bee ye naara ye wa?")* on Malian radio, later published as a cassette (*Jamana Sorofe* no. 2) by Editions Jamana (Mali's main cultural publication). The four were themselves widely recognized as *ngaraw*: *Jeli* Baba Sissoko and the late Banzoumana Sissoko (d. 1987), both from Segou, both considered authorities on Mande oral history; Fanta Damba *koroba* (Fanta Damba the elder, who used to sing with the Ensemble National Instrumental du Mali); and the late Sira Mory Diabate from Kela (d. 1989), widely held to be the greatest woman singer in living memory. Hoffman (1990: 75) describes Sira Mory as being among "the most famous and accomplished *ngaraw* of the Mande".

In the course of this discussion, in which many facets of *jeliya* are discussed, both male and female *jeliw* are cited as examples of *ngaraw*, without reference to gender as an issue. *Jeli* Baba Sissoko says:

> The first *ngara* I ever heard of was very old, she was Moussou Koura Diabate from Segou, she was in the royal court, a true king-follower … secondly there was Kele Monson Diabate [from Kita]. Third my brother *Jeli* Magan Sissoko, who died at the age of 95. The last eight years he spent in Bamako, and he was one of the few *ngara* there …

Fanta Damba *koroba* says:

> *Ngaraya* is difficult … it's not just about praising someone and expecting money. The *ngara* advised the king on how to conquer villages … since my eyes were opened I have known many women *ngara* – my mother Sere Damba from Seguela was one. She used to mount horses; this is not a joke, it's true, I saw it. She used to take a gun and follow her patron [*jatigui*] wherever he went.

In the discussion, all four *jeliw* agree on the broad attributes of a *ngara*. They possess a formidable memory and knowledge of Mande history and genealogy; they must be honest.

> If a *ngara* talks, someone will be offended, because the *ngara* always tells the truth, and is not afraid of anyone. … The *ngara* commands respect – no one will argue with or contradict them. … The *ngara* seeks neither fame nor wealth, and is modest by nature (*Jeli* Baba Sissoko, *Jamana Sorofe*).

In her most famous song, *Sara*, Sira Mory Diabate sings a line whose sentiment is echoed constantly in *jeli* lyrics: "Sara is not sung for a person with gold or silver; it is sung for the person who keeps his word" (*kankelentigi*, literally, "the owner of one voice").

> *Jeliya* is knowing yourself and knowing others. *Ngaraya*, which is the summit of honorific distinctions, refers to those who know what they

> are talking about, and behave accordingly. … That's why Sira Mory sang *Sara* only for those who keep their word and for those who are trustworthy. The word and the secret should be honoured and guarded (Kone 1990; my translation).

The *ngaraw* are thus characterized as fearless, stern, and harsh critics of others, and consequently, are both feared and admired. The *ngara* is expected to be able to criticize anyone, even in public, through song, without fear of punishment. As Hoffman says, it is the task of the *jeli* to criticize individuals from the noble class whose behaviour is "a potential source of contamination for that group" (Hoffman 1990). Of course, fearlessness and direct criticism can be seen in a positive or negative light. There is a fine line between perceptions of a *ngara* as someone who criticizes with impunity, in order to remind someone of their station in life, and the ordinary *jeli* who is seen as merely aggressive, trying to force money out of someone.

The portrayal of the *ngara* character is indeed contradictory. The Malian author Masa Makhan Diabate was reputedly abrasive and intolerant, a character which Keita interprets within the matrix of the *ngara* as "rebel-artist" (Keita 1995a). Nevertheless, he/she must be humble (in the words of El Hadj Balaba Diabate from Kela, they must be "willing to lower themselves" (*ka yere majigin*)[13] – so deferential to their patron that "if I forget my *jatigi*, may he cut my head off" sings Fanta Damba *cini*. Balancing the tension between deference and brutal honesty is a tough behavioural model for women to follow.

Age, lineage, and training

The traits of *ngaraya* are already in evidence from an early age, sometimes marked by physical signs, as was the case with Kandia Kouyate, who has one arm shorter than the other; a diviner had told her father before she was born that which ever child of his was born with this sign would have special gifts: "You are born a *ngara*. It's a gift, God doesn't give it to everyone." (See Duran 1999a).

To be a young master in any society implies that that person has knowledge and skill way beyond his/her age. The same is true of the *ngara*. Strictly speaking, according to the gerontocractic nature of Mande society, such knowledge and skill can only be obtained with many years of hard training, experience, and deference to the elders. There are exceptions to this. Cissé's informant for his brilliant study of the Sunjata epic, *Wa Kamissoko*, was "at the age of 19, recognised as worthy of carrying the title *nwara*, talented griot" (Cissé and Kamissoko 1988: 22; my translation).

Since *ngaraya* is in the hands of the elders, and one of its moral qualities is humility and respect, those who are on the pathway to it, but who are still very young, are not even supposed to comment on the subject. For

13 Quoted from his interview for the 1989 BBC 2 television documentary "Under African skies".

example, when I asked Kaninba Ouelen Kouyate (a singer from the Niagassola Kouyate lineage who lives in Bamako, and who had a hit in the mid 1990s with her cassette *Democratie*), to define the term, she gave a formulaic modest answer:

> KO – I'm just a young person, I can't answer that.
> LD – What if you're young but you have a powerful voice and words?
> KO – Yes you can have a *ngara* voice, but here in Mande, even if you have such a voice, you must have reached a certain age. I sing with my mother's style, but the generations are different.
> LD – I hear you can be very direct.
> KO – Telling lies is not good, it ends badly (*faniya fo ka ngo, laban t'a a la*). My mother is a *ngara*, but me, I'm a singer, a *donkilidala*. I'm only a child, a *denmesen*. The *ngara* are all at home. (Interview with author, Bamako, 1995).

Here, lineage plays an important role. It is associated with specific centres of *jeli* heritage across the Mali–Guinea border, such as Kela, Kirina, Kita, Segou, Khasso and Niagassola, and within this, with certain families, and certain lines within the family. Early training must be undertaken with the elders, "at home". Hence, those who were born and raised in the city do not qualify. Sira Mory comments on lineage thus:

> Not all *jeliw* are *ngara*. You can be a speaker but not a *ngara*. *Ngaraya*, it has roots. If you don't take it from the roots, and you say that for better or worse, you're going to perform *ngaraya*, you're lying, and you'll make many people angry… . The *ngaraw* I have known in my family, there are seven generations who have all been *ngaraw*. (*Jamana Sorofe*).

"*I man ngaraya tombo, i bor' a la*" [you didn't pick up *ngaraya*, you were born into it] is a phrase used when referring to a great singer.

According to the old school of thinking, the *ngaraw* should not even make a recording. They say that recording exposes the words and music to too many people, and to young artists who will "steal" their knowledge from the tape. Older musicians criticize the youth for learning just from cassettes. Bako Dagnon, for example, has only ever released two solo cassettes; the first included several songs for which she was famous in the mid 1980s, especially *Tiga* and *Nansiramady*. Though quite capable of narrating this story at great length, she only hints at the story on the cassette, moving on straight away to praise various people from Kita such as the *jamanatigi* (Canton Chief). "Why should I give this away so easily to the young musicians? I was worn out learning these stories. Let them learn the same way I did" she said to me (interview, Bamako, 1997). (She has, however since participated in an all-star recording of important pieces in the *jeli* repertoire called *Mandekalou*, released by the French company Syllart and most recently has recorded her first solo CD, Bako Dagnon: *Titati*, Syllart, 2007).

Ngoni player Bassekou Kouyate says that his mother, Yakare Damba, "is a great singer, but she's never recorded, for either radio or TV. My father used to discourage her by saying that if she recorded her voice, when she dies if someone plays her cassette, God will say 'Do you hear?' and punish her" (interview with author, 2006).

Kandia Kouyate similarly avoided the recording studio, only recording a few cassettes in the early years of her career, until 1998 when she finally agreed to record for the French-based company Syllart (see Duran 1999a). Ami Koita on the other hand, as already mentioned, has had a prolific recording career, contributing to her dubious status as *ngara*. Yet even she says:

> Personally I don't see any young women singers who can be a *ngara*, why? Because times have changed. Nowadays the young people listen to cassettes, whereas in the old days you used to have to attach yourself to a great singer and learn directly from them. It's like going to school. There are certain things that artists will never put onto a cassette, but that you can only learn directly.
>
> It must be said that young singers nowadays on the whole don't respect the old traditions and the elders, so if they're successful, it's a thing of the moment only, like a flower budding. Even me, at my age and with my experience, if I'm at a marriage or ceremony and a *ngara* is there who is older than me, I won't take the microphone, unless those very people take the microphone and say, Ami come and sing, I authorise you to do so. Then I will. But young kids today, they have no respect, and the consequences are very serious (interview with author, Bamako, 1991).

Fiery women: *ngaraya* and esoteric power

"In Mande, one says that *ngaraya* is based on sorcery – *ngaraya ye souya ye*" (Keita 1995a: 86; my translation). The association between women and sorcery in Mande culture is particularly strong, and is acknowledged in the portrayal of female characters in the epics (see Conrad 1999). The ultimate proof that a *jeli* has become a *ngara* is his or her ability to make inexplicable things happen just with the voice and words and/or music. There are many stories of Mande audiences who, when listening to the words of a *ngara*, begin to act as if intoxicated, out of control, especially if they are being addressed directly. The *ngara* can also have power over inanimate objects: leaves fall off a tree to the sound of their voice, doors split in two, instruments play by themselves. The *jeliw* explain that they have recourse to several devices for this.

Sira Mory Diabate, in her *Jamana sorofe* interview, recounts the following example of her own father's powers:

> Since my eyes opened I have seen many *ngaraw* in my own father's house: I didn't see Kela Balaba [the elder], but I did see Bintou Fama

> [Sira Mory's father]. If you hear the word *ngaraya*, it's like this: a noble who was walking into his house heard that Bintou Fama was outside. He said to his wife, "tell him [Bintou Fama] I've gone out". He went into the house and shut the door behind him. Bintou Fama came into the courtyard and saw the man's wife. He spoke, and spoke, and spoke, until the door to the house split apart in two. There was the noble inside. He came out, he gave Bintou Fama cows, he gave him money. That was *ngaraya*, but those days are over (*Jamana Sorofe*).

Kandia Kouyate refers to a device to target those patrons who shirk their duty towards a *ngara*. The exact nature of the device was not revealed, but it manifests itself as fire emitting from the mouth.

> Someone who has plenty of money, but he never gives to griots, he is a *bakilu*…[14] the name for the person who never gives to the griot, who always complains, I have nothing! But everyone knows he has something. That's the place for the *ngara*. I say, *ah bon*? if he doesn't give to anyone, he'll give to me. That comes with the knowledge of griotism, the secret of the griot.
>
> During the era of our grandparents, if they heard the name of a *bakilu*, they would be pleased. They would go to the *bakilu*, and start speaking out, loudly! But not just any old way, they would go with their griot secrets …
>
> There are things that if you eat them, and you speak out loudly to a *bakilu*, he'll fall down … there's something you put in your mouth, that's the secret of griotism. They put it in their mouths. They shout, even fire comes of their mouths. So, that's frightening! … I've seen this many times. In Kita. But only with the *bakilu* – and the *ngara*. The *ngara*, they've never been frightened in their lives. Never! If you see someone who's not afraid, you know they have no faults. If you have faults, you're always afraid! If you have faults, you can never be a *ngara*. You, you have faults, you flirt with the husbands of nobles, you go and lie to people, you put people in conflict with each other, but you can't speak to their faces? Never!

The idea that *jeliw* (and the Mande artisans in general) possess esoteric powers is well established. Functioning within the framework of Islam, Malians talk about jinns as a way of explaining musical talent, creativity and invention. Charry (2000: 119) says that "my enquiries into [the origins of] all Mande instruments led to jinns". Such associations between music and supernatural entities are not, of course, confined to the Mande. The best Blues players are supposed to have made a pact with the devil at the crossroads at midnight, and in Africa "the idea that a musician makes a pact with a dangerous spiritual being in return for phenomenal musical powers is well documented. It is even thought generally that no one can

14 *Bakilu* is a word of Arabic origin (Ballieul 1996), from *bakhayl* meaning miser.

develop extraordinary skills or attain fame without some 'medicine' or secret liaison with the supernatural" (Kubik 1999: 24). When I was learning to play the kora in the Gambia with Amadu Bansang Jobarteh – great uncle of Toumani Diabate – I was told, in no uncertain terms, never to play alone after midnight, or I would risk "being driven mad" by the jinns, who have a special liking for the kora, and who abound in the early hours of the morning.

There is, according to some, a specific "*jeliya* jinn", though this is considered one of the "secrets" of *ngaraya*. A well-known successful *jelimuso* talked to me of her relationship with a jinn, though she asked not to be identified:

> To be a *ngara* is to be born with a jinn. You pay a heavy price for this gift. Sometimes you are singing, and the jinn just suddenly appears before you. You're in public, no one else can see it but you. You feel some force come into you from the jinn, it takes you, you find yourself singing things you didn't even know you could do, your voice takes over. It's a very frightening feeling, but you can't show that you're scared. Those who are listening, they don't see it, but they feel it, that's when they begin to shiver. And every time you start to sing, you think, will the *jeliya* jinn visit me? And what if it doesn't, where will my inspiration come from? My own grandmother was a *ngara*, and she was nearly driven crazy by her jinn.

Musicians are full of stories about other musicians' relationships with jinns, but few will admit that they themselves have one. In these stories, the jinn is invariably of the opposite sex. Whether male or female, the jinn is usually very beautiful, pale, and sometimes has long straight black hair. The *jelimuso* just quoted says that her jinn is male. She believes that a woman *ngara* cannot have a happy marriage, because her true husband is a jinn.

> We have two husbands, and they're both jealous. But our husband of this world doesn't see the jinn. The jinn is stronger. We have to have very strong characters, otherwise the jinn drives us crazy.

Clearly, such views of the esoteric power of *ngaraya* fall well outside the framework of Islam, the dominant religion. Sometimes, though not always, singers give up public performance once they have done the pilgrimage to Mecca, in tacit acknowledgement of this. *Ngaraya* encompasses powers that cannot be fully explained; in fact this is part of its power: secrecy, a theme that runs through Mande culture.[15]

The *ngara* or potential *ngara* is thus both vulnerable and dangerous when performing. The need for an artist to protect him/herself from being overwhelmed by the jinn, or by spells from jealous musicians, family rivals, or *somaw* ("feticheurs"), is played out through various rituals, rarely talked

15 The notion of secrecy in Mande society is the focus of the an entire volume of the journal *Mande Studies* (vol. 2, 2000).

about. For this reason, before singing for a *jatigi* [patron], the *jeliw* prepare themselves alone in their room. For example, they wash themselves with *nasi* [water containing black ink from quranic writing washed off wooden tablets] and with roots from the bush. They may also consult cowry shells about whether the performance will be well received, or whether it will bring problems. For example, they have a special stick (*gese*) which they either chew on, or hold in one hand, while they sing. Sometimes this stick is pointed at people during a performance.[16] Equally, young singers tell how they must start their song with the phrase "may the audience forgive me, my two hands are behind my back" (a gesture of humility and asking forgiveness), because, if a *ngara* happens to be present, they could block the young singer's voice from coming out, or even damage their vocal cords permanently.

According to Zahan, "a good griot is capable, it is believed, of rendering mad or drunk the beneficiary of his *balemani* if the person does not stop the recital in time with a gift" (quoted in Hoffman 1995: 40). By "good griot", one may assume that Zahan is referring to the *ngara*. The *balemani* is here defined by Hoffman as *jelikan*, a specific type of *jeli* language, which:

> derives power from a simple syntactic structure whose meaning is made obscure … of all the verbal performance genres the griot masters, *jelikan* is the most laden with dangerous force (*nyama*), the most powerful in its impact upon the hearer, and the most empowering for its speaker (Hoffman 1995: 41).

As Hoffman points out, *jelikan* is often not understood by the listener, and quite frequently not even by the *jeliw* who use it. But *jelikan* is mostly sung. The singing voice gives it another dimension, another form of power, especially if combined with a melody that has strong associations with the past, and when performed with skill and power. The *ngaraw* of pre-colonial days – those who followed their patron into battle and could virtually perform miracles with their voice – no longer exist, but that icon of the *ngara* still remains. And the public of today still expect that the finest singers will give them some taste of the effects of *ngaraya*. It is, after all, a state of being that temporarily lifts the individual out of the realm of the ordinary, and gives a sense of "mystic power" (as some Malians refer to it). It could even be viewed as a form of spirit possession, an intrinsic aspect of indigenous belief in most parts of Africa.

Until now discussions of this "mystic power" have focused on the *nyama* (energy) of the word. But from the late twentieth century, music performance has become the central activity for the *jeli*. And so the location of *ngaraya* has shifted more to the musical experience. This has generated discourses on the relative merits of different components of song. Sidiki Diabate, the late kora player, says:

16 Clearly visible, e.g. in the Yves Billon ("Musiques de villages") documentary film *Les gens de la parole*, in the sequence filmed in Kita, and in Jeremy Isaacs' Channel 4 documentary series *Millennium – 14th century* (November 1999), where *Jeli* Bakari Soumano, the "Chef des griots du Mali", is seen chewing such a stick.

> There must be a balance between the *kumben* [the fixed melody] and the *tèrèmeli* [vocal improvization in recitational style]. Too much *tèrèmeli* takes the power out of music. That's the trouble with most *jelimusolu* today. They just rely on musique d'ambience and crying out the *Soliyo*[17] up to ten times, or saying the name of their patron like this: "Madamu Diallo" and the guitar answers with the same melody, backwards and forwards, over and over. This is music without any foundations (interview with author, Bamako, 1995).

One of the most influential accompanists to women singers following Mali's independence is the kora player Batourou Sekou Kouyate. Throughout the 1970s Batourou Sekou was the regular accompanist to the singer Fanta Damba *cini*. During this decade, she was one of Mali's best known and most successful singers, the first to travel abroad and establish an international reputation. The Senegalese singer Youssou NDour, who heard Fanta Damba's recordings in the early 1980s, travelled to Bamako to pay her homage, mesmerized by her voice; he later wrote the song *Wareff*, inspired by her song *Djadjiri*.[18]

I asked Batourou Sekou about their distinctive version of *Bajuru* (also known as *Tutu Jara*), a version which reputedly "drove people mad" and which created a whole new style of performance in Bamako from the 1970s.

> I used to listen to two kora players in Kita, when they played this piece I went crazy … my *Tutu Jara* is just how Fanta Damba sings it. *Tutu, Lamban*, *Sunjata* and *Janjon*, those are the most important tunes. People can play *Janjon* until the morning. Some women sing it until they're blind. *Ngaraya* kills you slowly. There are some *ngara* words, if they're said in someone's house, but the *jeli* doesn't receive what he deserves, that house will be destroyed (interview with author, 1994).

The aesthetic of the *ngara* voice

A great voice may be a dangerous thing. Echoing Batourou Sekou's statement that "ngaraya kills you slowly", Kandia Kouyate sings "Listen to me / because the word is going to kill me / and not because I don't know the word" (see text below). Madness or loss of ability to function normally – a stroke, depression, or loss of voice – is considered a frequent problem among great *jeliw*. This happens mostly to those who are on the margins of *ngaraya*, and there are plenty of well-known cases.

If we look at the discourses on the *ngara* voice in conjunction with analyses of the performance styles of the acknowledged masters such as Kele Monson Diabate and Sira Mory Diabate, we can begin to pin-point a certain aesthetic – and see that it is the same for men and women. This

17 *Soliyo* is a classic praise song that often occurs within another song, or as a separate unaccompanied praise song. *Soliyo* means "Horses, oh!" i.e., horses are called because a great noble is present, and horses were, in pre-colonial times, the basis of might and power.

18 See Durán (1999b).

aesthetic combines simplicity with force: "la force tranquille" in the words of Mali television producer Koly Keita. This has parallels with the aesthetic of "elegance and economy" of Mande sculpture (McNaughton 1988: 109) and echoes Chernoff's view that "in African music, expression is subordinated to a respect for formal relationships, and technique is subordinated to communicative clarity" (Chernoff 1979: 122).

The type of female voice most often associated with *ngaraya* is powerful, of middle range (a contralto) and is resonant, not shrill, with excellent pitch. It may be slightly rough in texture, and in any case, should not be too beautiful. It must be commanding – a voice that sounds authoritative. Its gender is ambiguous; it could be either male or female. Of course, it may be that the preference for a contralto voice may be because it signals age and experience, the pre-requisites of *ngaraya*; female voices usually drop in pitch as singers get older. If one compares the early recordings of Kandia Kouyate from 1980 with her most recent recordings nearly twenty years later, her youthful voice was noticeably higher.

Despite the emphasis on the importance of the word, some *jeliw* are believed to have a natural gift of *ngaraya* through the quality of their singing voice alone; their voices are capable of lifting even mediocre lyrics into the realm of *ngaraya*. The best-known example of this is the late Guinean singer, Sory Kandia Kouyate, whose powerful, almost operatic contralto voice made him one of the most important cultural icons of post-independence Guinea. His recordings made in 1974, widely available, and often played on the radio in both Mali and Guinea, of some of the core pieces of *jeliya*, featuring the kora of Sidiki Diabate, as well as balafon and bolon, are considered a pinnacle of Maninka *jeliya*. Yet many Malian *jeliw* point out that actually his words are formulaic and repetitive, reflecting a lack of real knowledge. In the view of Kasse Mady Diabate:

> Sory Kandia was a *ngara* but not a "deep" *ngara*. He had the voice but not the knowledge. He had to keep going back to people like Sidiki Diabate for information (personal communication, 1999).

Sory Kandia's lyrics may not have been inspiring, but his voice was certainly exceptional and his diction was perfect. Clear diction is important for the *ngara*. Knight reports the case of a *jelimuso* from the upper-river region of the Gambia who claims that the *ngara* can:

> split the air with singing, stand before crowds without flinching, and compose words that roll off her tongue with fluidity and clarity, so that her audience understands the context of the text and is moved by it (Knight 1973).

This statement acknowledges the way in which the *ngara* brings an important extra dimension and impact to her words through the piercing quality of her singing voice. Roderic Knight, whose work on Mandinka *jeliya* in the Gambia remains the most comprehensive study to date of this tradition, says this about the role of women:

> The people who have the most to say about singing are the women, the jalimusolu, because it is they who are recognised as the best singers. It is every instrumentalist's wish to have an accomplished jali muso to sing with him, and a jali will often describe a very good male singer as "singing like a woman", meaning that the beauty and style of his singing equal those of a woman (Knight 1973: 77).

Knight attributes this preference for women's voices to the fact that women specialize in singing and not in instrumental playing. For him the *ngara* is exclusively female: "When all of the traits that make a superior singer are found in one woman, she is called a *ngara*" (Knight 1973: 80).

The aesthetic of the *ngara* contralto with clear tone contrasts with the type of high-pitched, shrill nasal sound with a narrow, fast vibrato that has become the fashion amongst young *jelimusow*. This type of voice has been in vogue since the early 1980s, judging from recordings available; it is a type of vocal production associated with the style sometimes called "musique d'ambience" (music for dancing at weddings and other life-cycle celebrations). Many attribute it to the influence of Ami Koita in the 1980s. It may also be an aesthetic created in part by amplification using inferior quality PA systems.

The late Sira Mory Diabate from Kela is usually held up as the example of the classic female *ngara* voice – a little hoarse, and distinctly low in pitch, but very authoritative.[19] According to Jansen (1991), it was rumoured that she used to have a "normal" voice, but it only became rough because of a spell that had been put on her – possibly by a jealous singer. But actually, one can see that this type of voice is perfectly consistent with the *ngara* aesthetic. Furthermore, judging from the first recordings made of her in 1949 by A. Alberts, she already had this voice in her early 20s.[20]

As stated earlier, of the generation of *jelimusow* who were born just before independence, and who are on the pathway to *ngaraya*, the one whose voice comes closest to the *ngara* aesthetic, according to many, is Kandia Kouyate.[21] She says:

> There are people who just cry out without saying anything. Who have beautiful voices, more than me! I have a very deep voice! Not a

19 We can find similar aesthetics in notions of vocal mastery in other cultures, e.g. in North Indian classical music – Bundu Khan and Gage Khan were masters who deliberately cultivated rough vocal timbres or raw-sounding instruments to focus attention on the music.

20 Recordings made by A. Alberts in 1949 were published as a boxed set of 78 rpm discs entitled *Folk, Tribal and Cafe Music of West Africa*. None of the musicians is identified by name, but Kasse Mady and others from Kela confirmed that the singer on *Kaira* was definitely Sira Mory. Some of these recordings were reissued as a CD on Rykodisc in 1998 under the same title. There is some disagreement about Sira Mory's date of birth; Adama Ba Konare lists it as *c.* 1933, but Jansen give it as *c.* 1925 (Konare 1993; Jansen 1996). This is of interest because if Konare is correct, then she was only sixteen years old when Alberts recorded her.

21 Sadly Kandia Kouyate suffered a severe stroke in 2004 from which she is slowly recovering, but which has left her unable to perform in public.

> beautiful voice like the others. But – those who have beautiful voices cry out without saying a thing. Sometimes even, as a griot, you're ashamed when you see it. Even if you don't have a beautiful voice you must say something that is of value … there are some beautiful low voices. Me for example I can do any scale with this voice. I can go up or down in pitch as I like. I possess my voice. My voice is at my disposition. What I mean is, there are higher pitched voices than mine but they cry out without saying anything. Empty songs! It's the music which covers them. The "paralala" and the "pampampam". That covers them. You see? (interview with author, Paris 1998; see Duran 1999a).

Ngaraya and repertoire

Certain pieces of music in the *jeli's* repertoire and certain performance are considered highly powerful and should only be performed by a *ngara*, who alone can control the strong forces in the words and melody. A younger, unqualified musician who attempts to perform such pieces takes great personal risk. Of course, certain types of occasion are much more likely to invoke the powers of *ngaraya* than others, such as ritual occasions.

Probably the best known examples of this are the two pieces *Janjon* and *Duga*, because they are associated with the battlefield or the hunt, i.e. human or animal slaughter, which releases large quantities of *nyame*. *Janjon* originally commemorated Fakoli Doumbia, one of Sunjata's generals, and is also a hunters' song. "Some of the ritual songs, such as the Janjon, can be danced only by men who have made a major kill. i.e. a lion, an elephant, a bush buffalo, or a man" (Bird 1972a: 280).

Janjon is also the only *jeli* piece that may be performed at the funeral of another *jeli*: for example, it was sung at the state funeral of Sidiki Diabate in Bamako in October 1996.

The song *Duga* is, according to Bird:

> the oldest and most widespread song in West Africa, recorded in early Arabic texts. It is a praise song for warriors and hunters celebrating heroism … it was sung by Bakoroba Kone, an elderly bard in Segou, in April 1968, accompanied by two female singers, Penta Dante and Hawa Kone, who sang the song inserted at intervals in the epic recitation (Bird 1972b: 469).

Sidiki Diabate says of this piece:

> Duga Keita was very brave, his half-brothers were jealous of him. He sacrificed a cow in the village for brave men. Duga took the head, shoulders and legs because he was the head, shoulders and legs of the army.
>
> He was a great fighter, his name was Duga, at the battle of Samanyana, in the fourteenth century. In this battle all the soldiers

> were killed, only he survived, surrounded by lots of dead bodies. When older women, the *ngaraw*, sing this song, the vultures descend. This is why only certain people may sing it. It's very old, only played in battle. When it's played people don't clap, they scrape their swords together (interview, London, June 1987).

All pieces originally composed for the battlefield should be performed by *ngaraw* only because of the dangers of *nyama*.

Ngaraya and patronage

"*Ne te jatigi jugu baro*." [I don't talk/sing for a bad *jatigi*] sings Ami Koita in her recording of the song *Mamaya*. One of the themes of the *Jamana Sorofe* discussion is "What is the difference between the *jeliw* of old and those of now?" (*Mune be folo jeliw nin sisan taw ce?*) and it focuses largely on the relationship between *jatigi* [patron] and *jeli*:

> In the old days you would only sing for one *jatigi* in a song, nowadays you sing for thirty. You would only have one *jatigi*. The *jatigi* would arrange the marriages of the *jeli*'s children and vice versa. I *Jeli* Baba have more than ten jatigis. Can that many people be your real *jatigi*? *Jeliya* of old and of today are not the same. In the old days if another *jatigi* wanted your *jeli* for a wedding, he would approach the *jatigi* directly, not the *jeli*. In the old days, the *jeli* did nothing without the approval of the *jatigi*. (*Jeli* Baba Sissoko, *Jamana Sorofe*).

From the same series of Jamana interviews about *jeliya*, Fanta Damba *koroba*, says:

> The *ngara* of today and of old are not the same. The *ngara* of old followed his/her[22] *jatigi*. He would have only one *jatigi* … there are many more *jeliw* today who destroy more than do good. Who is *Tinyali*? [the destroyer]. She is a woman sitting there with arms crossed, claiming she is going to be a singer. Or else, she is begging. That shouldn't happen. … nowadays if you don't move around, you won't have any money. The *jatigi* no longer comes to you, so you have to go out and get what your own feet can. Now, what should and shouldn't be said, you say it all, what should and should not be done, you do it. If the *jatigi* has nothing to give you, what are you going to do? That's what has destroyed everything for the *jeli* … now, we just say anything we feel like saying. As if it were a tale [*zirin*].

This view of the *jeli* as a *tinyali* [destroyer] is argued against in the traditional song *Mory Djo*, recorded by Ami Koita amongst others. "People criticise *jeliw* for asking for things, and for begging; but the fact is,

22 The Mande pronoun "a" is genderless, and it can mean either he or she, or his or her.

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people pray to Allah for things all the time, so why condemn *jeliw* for this?'' explains Ami Koita about the meaning of the song.

It is clear from these stories how such changes have impacted on the life styles and the psychology of *jeliw*, hence the frequent saying ''the *ngaraw* are suffering''. But how does this affect *jeliya* in terms of the actual music? Under the old-style patronage, the individual patron's taste largely determined what the *jeli* played. The patron might like three or four tunes, especially those associated with his/her family lineage, and his region. Equally, the *jeli* could also introduce the patron to new pieces, sometimes greatly influencing the patron's taste.

Performing for a number of different patrons with different backgrounds is one important way in which musicians have been led to diversify styles and repertoires. This is a process that has greatly accelerated even since the early 1980s. For example, on Tata Bambo Kouyate's album recorded in Paris in 1984 (*Jatigi*, released on Globestyle Records), each song is dedicated to a different patron, each melody is chosen carefully to match that patron's taste or background.

Patrons provide the context and motivation for the skills and behaviour of the *ngaraw*. The good patron is a connoisseur of the highest level of *jeliya*. As has been discussed by many authors, patrons of today are no longer what they were in pre-colonial days. There are no more kings, instead there are businessmen, politicians, and heads of leading families such as the Niare, the founding family of Bamako. Not all seek to have close relationships with *jeliw*. But there are a number of interesting developments as a result. One is that increasingly, it is the *jeliw* themselves who are the patrons of their own *jeliya*, and the recipients of praise songs. They also praise themselves, and sing their own genealogies. Who knows better how to judge *ngaraya*, than the *jeliw* themselves? Who can appreciate the value of the art of the *jeli*, more than another *jeli*?

The patron and *ngara* should know each other well. This is far more important than the financial aspects of the relationship. Indeed the *jeli* may well find herself giving the patron money, as Kandia Kouyate explains:

> For example, I have money in my bag. I go to your house, Lucy. You are my noble. I know that there's another griot who visits you, who comes to ''sing you'' [''te chanter'']. I know that you have nothing. I say to you, let's ''see each other'' [i.e., privately] … I take money from my bag, you give it to the other griot. The other griot will never know. I will say [to them], Lucy is so pleased to see you. You came to see Lucy. Lucy descends from so and so and so. Truly, Lucy is someone who has always had griots, so if she gives you nothing, it's because she has nothing, she told me to give this to you. The griot will never know that, that it was me who gave the money. That is the real griot, the *ngara*. That griot, if you have a real noble, you will die together. But today, it's not like that (interview, Paris, 1999).

Ami Koita has a more optimistic view, when she sings, on her first cassette, recorded *c*. 1980:

> If you say that kings have vanished, kings of trust have not vanished
> If you say that kings have vanished, kings who are considerate have not vanished
> Kings of actions have not vanished
> Kings who give things to *jelis*, have not vanished[23]

Both patron and *jeli* should each remind each other of the values they are meant to symbolize. The difficulty of becoming a *ngara* lies in the fact that there is little incentive to uphold moral values, because there are no heroic patrons who can match the status of *ngara*, or appreciate their art. Bako Dagnon says, echoing a well-known saying amongst *jeliw*:

> I hear the sound of footsteps, but no one of any importance comes. If you want to sing for the important people, go to the cemetery and sing there.

Ngaraya in a song for a patron

The richness of the discourse surrounding *ngaraya* is encapsulated in a song performed on a January afternoon in 1987 in Bamako by Kandia Kouyate, then only 28 years old. The song text presents almost all the themes explored in this article in almost textbook manner, by a young woman singer brought up in a *ngaraya* lineage from Kita who had already made a name for herself with a number of solo cassettes recorded in Abidjan (see Duran 1999a). On this occasion, she had brought together her group of young accompanists – consisting of some of Mali's most celebrated young *jeliw*, such as Toumani Diabate on kora – to record a number of songs dedicated personally to one of her patrons, Djeli Mory Soumano. This performance was for a custom-made "cassette locale", a one-off recording (though copies usually find their way on to the market), a kind of aural portrait of a person and his/her family, friends, genealogy, and great deeds.

The cassette locale is one way in which a *jeli* can seek out new patrons or enhance existing relationships with patrons. Djeli Mory was one of Kandia's patrons at the time, and as his name indicates, he himself was a *jeli*. Kandia knew well that he would appreciate a deep exploration of *ngaraya*, thereby encouraging him to live up to this ideal, and also subtly suggesting that she too was on the pathway to becoming a *ngara*.

Sometimes the musician makes a cassette locale on her or his own initiative, then sends or gives it to a patron in the hope that it will please, and that some payment will be made to acknowledge this; but more often, it is in response to a request. In these cases, the patron may ask for particular tunes, styles and instruments; otherwise the *jeli* may already know the musical taste of the patron, or may simply record the pieces from the old

23 From the song *Hine mansa*, to the tune *Bajourou*, on the cassette *Ami Koita*, dating from *c*. 1980.

jeli repertoire long associated with the patron's family lineage. Sometimes the entire cassette, on both sides, consists of a lengthy performance of one piece of music only. The patron is free to give whatever gift to the singer that he/she deems the cassette merits. Therefore, the musicians put a lot of thought and preparation into the recording.

The "cassette locale" exploits the medium of the recording to add a new dimension to the private, informal performance at the house of a patron. It provides a similar type of space for musicians to go deep into their knowledge and skill and cater individually for the musical tastes of the patron, unhampered by the concerns of the commercial market. It is one way in which modern technology can be seen to keep alive and, very occasionally, provide a showcase for great artistry.

As I was to discover from the proceedings surrounding this event, within the discourse on mastery, the "cassette locale" is viewed differently from the published cassette (or any other form of mass duplicated recording). Kandia had been rehearsing her ensemble for some days. Her musicians represented the cutting edge at the time of the *sumu* (life-cycle celebration) world, part traditional, part modern. They consisted of Toumani Diabate on *kora*, (then only 21 – this was before he had begun his international career), renowned guitarist Bouba Sacko on amplified acoustic 12-string guitar with pedal effects,[24] (the height of fashion in Bamako in the mid-1980s) plus two *ngòni* (one with five and one with eight strings). There was also a man who interjected spoken commentary continually: Bainy Camara, a *funè*, a branch of the *nyamakala* sometimes described as wordsmiths (Conrad 1995).

Normally, at a life cycle ceremony (*sumu*) or at any public performance, during that period in the mid-1980s, Kandia's ensemble would have been larger than this. It would have included a *balafon*, and a chorus of two or three young *jelimusow*. But today's music was intended to have an informal, intimate sound, in accordance with the patron's taste.

This was the first time I had met Kandia and heard her sing live. As we came into the room she was extremely gracious but there was indeed a distant aura about her. There was business in hand and she was absolutely in control of her musicians. The centrepiece of the recording was performed to the accompaniment of *Bajuru*. This melody has been one of the favourite pieces in the *sumu* repertoire of Bamako since at least the 1970s in a version supposedly created by the kora player Batourou Sekou Kouyate and Fanta Damba *cini* (as discussed earlier). That day, the musicians started to play the Batourou Sekou way, but Kandia stopped them. "No no, not like that. Take it the old way, the Segou way, like this", and she snapped her fingers to indicate a very slow underlying pulse. After an instrumental introduction, once the musicians had set up the main four-bar accompaniment, she sang the following phrases, before moving on to the real business of the cassette locale: genealogies and praises of Djeli Mori Soumano and his family from the Bafin region of the Maninka heartland, but more

24 This was before the electric guitar replaced the amplified acoustic guitar in *c*. 1989 and drum machines became commonplace in such ensembles.

importantly, a series of reflections of the nature of *ngaraya*, her status within it, and the obligations of both patron and jeli to each other:

Eh, nna, Yammaru-wo!
Oh mother, yammaru-o [I call on you, my master!]
ngaralu nianita[25]
The *ngara* are miserable,
ngaralu torata, jeli manso dogoyara
they are suffering, the *jelis*' kings are few.
i ngara sònna,
You who give to the *ngara*,
i la jalo lamè dooni
listen to your *jeli*.

Bainy Camara, the *funè*, interjects a spoken line:

"*I ngara sònna, jeli Kandia lamè –*
you who give to the *ngara*, listen to *jeli* Kandia"
Kumala nin ngara te kelen ye
The speaker and the *ngara* are not the same.
Jeli Mori, kan'i la jeli ke wandi jeli ye
Jeli Mori, don't allow your *jeli* to become someone else's *jeli*
Mari Jata Konate, alu denw ye ngaraya tinya
You, the children of Mari Jata Konate [i.e. descendants of Sunjata], you have destroyed *jeliya*.
parceque anw ye ngara kuma di jama ye, nga ngara kuma man di mògò bee ye
because we give the *ngara*'s word to many, but the *ngara*'s word is not suitable for everyone
nyin donkili te fo la, fo n'ii kera lahidutigi ye
This song is only for people who keep their word
fèntigiw be na ngaralu ni torola
Wealthy people make the soul of the *ngara* suffer.
N na kuma lamè, katu kuma be na n fa, a sabu te m man kuma don
Listen to me, because the word is going to kill me, and not because I don't know the word.
Kirina ngaralu dogoyara,
The *ngara* of Kirina are few
jeli ngara musolu fana dogoyara
The women *ngara* are also few
Hani ni n te ngara ye, ne bora ngarayala
Even if I'm not a *ngara*, I come from a *ngara* line
ngaralu bunya be jeliya ro
The *ngara*'s respect is in *jeliya*

25 Kandia sings in the Maninka of Kita; sometimes it comes very close to Khassonke and even Gambian Mandinka. This is reflected in the mixture of languages in her song text.

(Baini interjects: *Kandia i man ngaraya tombo, i bor'a la* – Kandia you didn't just pick *ngaraya* up, you were born into it. [Followed by praise names of Soumano and Konate])
jeliya man di
Jeliya is not easy
mogo bee kera mansaden ye
Everyone has become the son of a king [everyone is a noble]
Kirina ngaralu torata
Kirina *ngara* suffer.
Bilahi, n te donkili laa mansaden ye ko wari b'a bulu, fo n'i kera yere-don-mansa ye
I swear to Allah, I won't sing for a king because he has money, but for a king with self-knowledge.
[Soumano's genealogies]
Ngaralu, jeli kuma ye nani ye, i be kèlèmansadenya lamè, i te ngaradenya lamè
You the *ngara*, the *jeli* has four types of word; you hear about the fruit of warlords but not about the fruit of the *ngara*.
folikelalu-yo, aw kana m bula ngaraya la
oh, musicians [i.e. her accompanists], don't push me into *ngaraya*,
ngaraya man di, ngaraya man di, jeliya man di
ngaraya isn't easy/pleasant, *ngaraya* isn't easy, *jeliya* isn't easy
An ka jeliya ke, duniya ye doni ye
Let us do *jeliya*, the world is brief
duniya ye fuyi ye
the world is nothing
i mèna nya-wo-nya duniya kono, lun kelen dugu b'i jamfa la
no matter how long you're on earth,
one day the ground will betray you.

Conclusion

The concept of *ngaraya* represents an ideal of greatness amongst Mande hereditary musicians, a concept that is rooted in values dating back to the pre-colonial era, that none the less continue to be part of contemporary discourse. This article has presented a rare glimpse of the way that Mande musicians living in urban Mali, male and female, young and old, inside and outside the canon, talk about greatness, and the constraints that it places them under. Because women singers are currently more successful locally than men, yet their art is less valued by the canon, the discussion that surrounds the *jelimuso* is particularly detailed and gives insights into the choices that they make as artists and in their personal lives.

The importance of understanding local discourses on musical aesthetics and values is underlined by recent debates surrounding the world music industry, in which some African promoters have accused the "professional cabal of world music agents, record labels and journalists [of] misguided attitudes, biases and prejudices which … are completely at odds with what

African fans want to hear'' (Williamson 2005). While global versus local ''popularity'' or commercial success does not, of course, signify that one is better than another, it does highlight the need for insights into why certain artists are treasured within the country, while remaining unknown by wider audiences. This is very much the case for Mali's women singers, who enjoy popularity at home on a scale that is unprecedented elsewhere in Africa, and yet they are poorly represented on the world music scene, their importance ignored or misunderstood. The parameters of *ngaraya*, such as age, lineage, performance style, and whether or not to record commerce CDs, are increasingly being challenged by today's artists. One thing, however, seems to remain constant: the importance of learning directly from senior *jeliw*, which may partly account for why the tradition has continued to survive in Mali to this day, because ''the true *ngaraw* are all at home''.

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