

# Identities in ‘Greater Senegambia’ and beyond

## History and music in dialogue

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It was early in December 2014 when I heard of the ‘British Academy Rising Star Engagement Awards’ (BARSEA) scheme. It was the end of a long term, and making a swift grant application was not top of my to-do list. But the scheme offered the chance to develop something that no other scheme I knew of might allow me to work on, and so I decided to try and make the mid-January 2015 deadline. On 1 December 2014, alongside Lucy Durán of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), I had co-chaired an event featuring the Gambian scholar and musician Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta. Jatta had discussed the remarkable research he had conducted on the African roots of the New World banjo, which were to be found in the *akonting* instrument of the Jola people who now reside in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and The Gambia. After the event, Durán and I had discussed the possibilities of building a more ambitious interdisciplinary project around the larger theme of identities and integration in the region on which we both work in West Africa, defined by the Senegalo-Guinean historian Boubakar Barry as ‘Greater Senegambia’.<sup>1</sup> A workshop supported through the BARSEA scheme would allow both public engagement and scholarly discourse to take shape around a key world region.

This is a region of West Africa with historically deep cultural and historical interconnections. The empire of Mali (*fl.* 1250-1470) integrated the cultures of many different peoples in one political space, and although political crises and pressures fragmented the space

Hunters travelling with *donsongoni* (‘hunters’ harps’) to a celebration of the hunters’ association in Bamako, Mali, showing the intersection of history and music in the past and the present. Photo: Lucy Durán.

1. B. Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1998). The region is generally seen to encompass what are now the Republics of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia.

subsequently, there are many cultural commonalities. Cultural frameworks in music and performance, in traditions of oral histories and performances, and in rites of passage, provide many interconnections which make the artificial nation-state boundaries and present linguistic barriers seem all the more unfortunate. As a Gambian headteacher once said to me, the only languages which The Gambia does *not* share with its neighbour Senegal are the official languages of governance – the old colonial heritage of English and French. What Durán and I wanted to do, therefore, was to bring together people from across the region in a genuinely interdisciplinary framework to focus on the core of Greater Senegambian culture and its significance in the 21st century.

This seemed all the more urgent given that this is a region where perilous migration across the Sahara and the Mediterranean to the shadow economies of Europe is growing year on year. The villages of the hinterland are emptying, as everyone who conducts research there knows. Earlier in 2014, I had set off by road from Banjul in The Gambia to Dakar in Senegal, a journey of around 12 hours. One of the people travelling with me from Banjul was a young man called Oussainou, who soon told me that he was making for Libya and then, he hoped, to Europe. Oussainou was wearing a thin red shirt and carried a small money belt, and nothing else. He told me he had felt as if he had no choice; all his friends had left and if he had stayed he would have been seen as a coward, treated as the young boy who would always make the tea for his elders. Ultimately, without constructive work to develop an appreciation both in the region and outside it of the depth and values of the cultures and histories of Greater Senegambia, this is a process which will be hard to reverse.

## Invitations and visas

Gradually, Lucy Durán and I assembled a list of possible invitees, and when the grant was awarded by the British Academy we set to work. We had to work very fast: we had four months from the outcome of the bid process to the date we had set for the workshop at the end of June, and we knew that this would only be just enough time.

The core idea around which we planned the workshop was to bring the disciplines of History and Music together in their discourse on cultural identities. This suited both our own disciplinary approaches (Lucy is a musicologist, I am a historian), and also the cultural framework of Greater Senegambia, where historians traditionally were musicians – the griot caste who were the praise-singers of kings and princes and performed oral historical accounts of the great political upheavals of the distant and more recent past. We wanted to bring practitioners of these disciplines into dialogue and, from the ensuing interaction, help both to think about their craft, and also about strategies through which to revivify cultural programmes in the region itself. We also wanted this to appeal to members of the public and of the diasporas in the UK, and so cast the net very widely when it came to advertisements and participation.

Gradually, a long, eclectic and unique guest list began

to take shape.<sup>2</sup> With seven visas required for West African visitors, this was an extremely ambitious list. The visa application process to enter the UK is now such that even prominent cultural figures from Africa face an extremely demanding process to be granted a visa by the British Embassy. The system appears to be designed to dissuade all applications, even those by figures with whom it is important for Britain to develop good working relationships. The system implemented by the Home Office in West Africa required, for instance, one Malian attendee to fly to Dakar and spend two days there whilst they had their visa interview, even though there is a British Embassy in Bamako. Even where the interviews can be conducted in an applicant's home country, the applicant must leave their passport often for two or three weeks since they all have to be sent to Accra in Ghana which is the only place where visas now are issued for the whole of West Africa; for prominent cultural figures such as the ones we invited, being without a passport for such a long period of time can of course be extremely problematic.

Nevertheless we were lucky that all our proposed delegates were willing to undergo this ordeal. Even then, there were many crises. One visa was refused with the reason given that the Home Office did not believe that the applicant would leave the UK after the conference; given that he is the leader of a political party in his home country, this was a curious line of reasoning. In another case, tickets had to be changed (at a cost of £700) on the very morning the workshop was due to begin in order to allow the attendee to make it, even though they had paid a large sum for a priority application. As the organisational process continued and the workshop took shape, therefore, one of the subtexts inevitably became just how much harder it is becoming to organise such an event. The value and importance of genuinely collaborative international workshops projects such as this is huge, for these events provide discrete space for people to discuss and create bonds across boundaries and languages around themes of real importance. Many of the contacts that are made will lead in turn to future work. And yet the space and opportunity to stage these events is becoming ever more circumscribed.

## Formats and languages

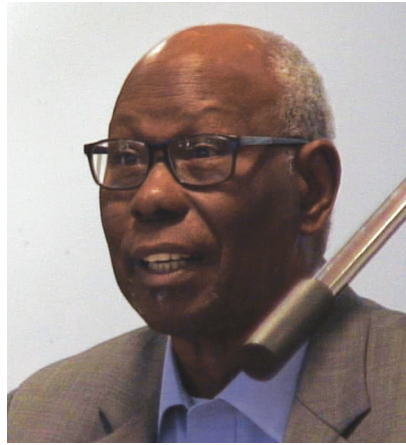
In spite of all these organisational headaches and last-minute switches, the workshop began as and when it should have done, on Wednesday 24 June 2015, and almost everyone we hoped to invite managed to make it.

2. Among those invited to present, perform and discuss were the anthropologists Marloes Janson (SOAS) and Ferdinand de Jong (University of East Anglia); historians Boubakar Barry (Université Cheikh Anta Diop – Dakar), Hassoum Ceesay (University of The Gambia), Peter Mark (Wesleyan University), José Lingna Nafané (Bristol), and Ibrahima Seck (Whitney Plantation Heritage Museum, Louisiana); the linguists Friederike Lüepke (SOAS) and Tal Tamari (CNRS – Paris); MANDE studies former chair, David Conrad; the musicians Manecas Costa (Guinea-Bissau), Lassana Diabaté (Mali – Guinea), Tony Dudu (Guinea-Bissau), Nakany Kanté (Guinea), Kadiyaly Kouyate (Senegal), and Karim Mbaye (Senegal); and the musicologists Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta (National Centre for Arts and Culture, The Gambia) and Patricia Tang (MIT).

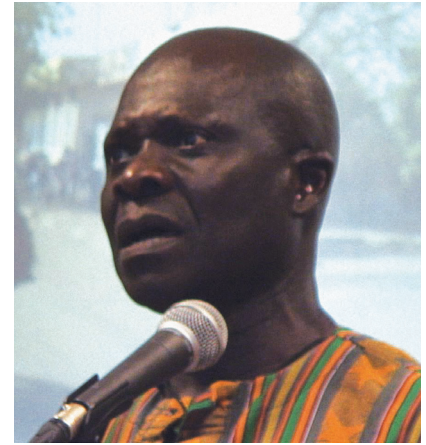




**Figure 1**  
Jordi Tomás talking about his film *Kasumàày*, about the peace process in the Casamance region of Senegal. Photo: Anna de Mutiis.



**Figure 2**  
The Senegalo-Guinean historian Boubakar Barry, who coined the term 'Greater Senegambia' for the culturally linked West African region encompassing what are now the Republics of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia. Photo: Anna de Mutiis.



**Figure 3**  
The Gambian scholar and musician Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta. Photo: Anna de Mutiis.

We devised a fluid format, which suited both the aims of what we wanted to achieve and the nature of discussion and dialogue in Greater Senegambia itself. There were six main workshop sessions, and each of them combined presentations on a thematic aspect of research, with musical performance and discussion connected to that subject. Delegates were also treated to a performer's workshop which brought together all the musicians on the Thursday evening, and produced an unforgettable *mélange* of Greater Senegambian music, while two new films were shown: Ely Rosenblum's film of a performance of the Sunjata epic by Lassana Diabaté, Cherif Keita and Hawa Kassa Mady (which was followed by a discussion from Diabaté and Keita), and Jordi Tomás's film *Kasumàày*, about the peace process in the Casamance region of Senegal (which was presented by Tomás himself – Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

A key issue which also had to be addressed was that of language. Most of the discussion was in English, not least so that those attending from the diaspora communities and the public could follow the event; but there were many delegates whose preferred language of communication was Bamana, French or Portuguese. Multilingual interventions were a feature of the event, and ad hoc translations by those who were able to move between the various linguistic zones were therefore important. This was also emblematic of one of the biggest dividing lines in the region, the official working languages inherited from the colonial period. Towards the end of the workshop, Boubakar Barry (Figure 2) made a public intervention on this point, that the early post-colonial nation-builders in Africa had made a grave strategic error when opting for the continuation of the colonial languages as languages of education and governance, cementing divisions between nation-states where ever closer integration would have been much more beneficial.

3. The Sunjata epic is the foundational oral narrative for the empire of Mali; the Casamance region of southern Senegal has been experiencing a low-level insurgency since 1981.

## Patterns and themes

As the three days of the workshop proceeded, key aspects of the discussion took shape. First was the way in which the workshop format allowed interdisciplinarity to breathe. So many different aspects of the cultural, physical and lived lives of the region were aired, and the ways in which they connected to one another were made manifest in presentations and discussion. A particularly moving example was the panel on 'cultural transmission' in the morning of the final day. This ran about an hour and a half over schedule, but no one regretted it. The anthropologist Ferdinand de Jong analysed the use of the *kankurang* masquerade in contemporary Casamance, and how it is being used to enforce gender norms and old hierarchies. The historian Ibrahima Seck discussed the role of an antecedent to the *kankurang* in shaping masquerades in the New Orleans carnival. And all this was interwoven with the question of cultural transmission of musical arts in the region today through a dialogue between the balafon player Lassana Diabaté, resident in Mali, and Lucy Durán. Most importantly, in each of the sessions, the themes that emerged did so through both presentations, dialogue and performance – in true Greater Senegambian style.

Another welcome aspect of the workshop was the way in which all the composite regions of Greater Senegambia were discussed in detail and in relation with one another. The performers' workshop saw musicians from each of the five constituent countries of the region perform together (Figure 4). And over the three days key questions relating to each of the countries of the region emerged. On the second day, for instance, the *gumbe* musicians Manecas Costa and Tony Dudú, from Guinea-Bissau, discussed both the role of *gumbe* music during the anticolonial war, and the relationship that *gumbe* musicians have to the state today. And there were many echoes in this of the discussion the previous day by Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta (Figure 3) of the loss of traditional cultural knowledge in The Gambia, and the



**Figure 4**  
From left to right: Lucy Durán, Tony Dudú, Lassana Diabaté, Manecas Costa, Nakany Kante, Karim Mbaye, Toby Green. These were all the musical performers to come to the June 2015 event. The photograph was taken after the performers' workshop. Photo: Anna de Mutiis.

need of government programmes to revive this before it was too late.

The way in which these discussions flitted from one region and theme to another was one of the things that Lucy Durán and I had wanted to encourage. It is surprisingly hard for this sort of intra-country discussion to occur in Greater Senegambia itself, owing to linguistic and political barriers; it was the sort of wide-ranging and free-flowing exchange that has to happen if these barriers can be lowered to some extent.

### Cultural integration, cultural heritage

By ranging so widely across the region, both geographically, conceptually, and thematically, many of the key questions about how to promote regional integration were addressed. Many of the countries in the region are currently undergoing some form of political instability, with a political crisis in Guinea-Bissau and Mali and the as yet unresolved Casamance separatist conflict in Senegal. One of the things that became clear over the workshop was that the finding of common political ground might well require the rediscovery and re-vivification of the rich common cultural ground which spreads across the whole region. It was indeed quite a

sad comment when one of the workshop participants noted that such an event would have been hard to host in Greater Senegambia itself, owing to tensions about where it should be hosted and what language it should be hosted in.

With the importance of the region's common culture being highlighted, another vital question posed was that of how to safeguard cultural heritage. The rise of globalising forces and the mass migration of the region's youth toward Europe were issues raised several times, and they pose serious problems for the future of the region's cultural heritage. One speaker said that at a recent event in The Gambia it had been said that there were only three expert players of the *ngoni* lute left in the country. A key issue raised was that dealing with this crisis might require some social changes: whereas musical practice was hitherto in the region the province of the griots, the safeguarding of cultural forms required a democratisation and the breaking down of old social barriers and caste systems. As Boubakar Barry said, these had been rigidified during the era of the slave trade as questions of competition and political rivalry became ever more intense, and it was therefore vital now that these learning processes could be spread throughout the population, so that everyone felt ownership of the cultural richness of the region.



## Different

With this mixture of intense discussion, the variety of languages spoken, and the interchanges between musicians and academics and thinkers, all those who were there felt that this was an event with a difference. In developing this different space for dialogue, Lucy Durán and I tried to create a space for academic discussion on issues which really mattered, where thought could emerge as performance as well as pre-cooked. For this reason, paper titles and abstracts were not pre-circulated, so that participants came to each session freshly and did not prejudge in advance what might be discussed. Workshop sessions started late and often finished later, and when the Thursday afternoon session was concluded by impromptu dancing in the lecture hall, the session chair Richard Black (Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research at SOAS) announced with a wry smile that this was 'the most unruly conference audience' he'd ever seen.

By the end of the three days of the workshop, participants were both exhilarated and exhausted. Various plots and future collaborations were hatched, including the idea of a follow-up event in Ziguinchor (the largest town in Casamance) or Guinea-Bissau, and the idea of working further with Manecas Costa to build up the Festival de Cacheu in Guinea-Bissau. Musical collaborations between the performers are also in the pipeline, so that what is most of all important is safeguarded – that this should have been the start of something and not the end. In one case it is hoped that this will lead to the construction of more musical instruments for a cultural centre being designed in The Gambia which aims to educate young Gambians on their rich cultural heritage, so that skills and techniques are not lost to future generations.

## Answers

Putting this together was a major logistical challenge, perhaps the hardest event to bring together of the half-dozen or so international conferences I have organised.

As detailed, the ever-present and increasing barriers placed around visas for African visitors created several nightmares for the organisers which were only resolved at great expense. However, in the end it was all worth it, and as MIT Professor Patricia Tang put it, this was 'truly one of the most enjoyable and stimulating conferences I've been to in a very long time'.

It was also vital that we were able to engage with an audience beyond academia. Music journalists attended, as did members of the diaspora including novelists and committed campaigners to end FGM. Lucy Durán and I also planned after the event how to present the idea of what we tried to do with the workshop to an even wider public audience through the making of a film; to this end, the remaining BARSEA funds are helping to finance this, and the film will be distributed to colleagues and centres across Africa in order for the discussions to gain more traction.

The real subject of the workshop was the holistic construct that is Greater Senegambian culture, and how that cuts across academic disciplines and nation state boundaries. This was what all workshop participants touched on in some form or other; and all were in agreement that it was through the safeguarding and revivification of this holistic culture that some of the major problems facing the area, especially youth migration across the Sahara and political conflict, might be addressed. One figure repeatedly mentioned was Amílcar Cabral, in light of his famous essay on 'National Liberation and Culture': as the workshop showed, the depths of culture offer many answers to the depths of the problems facing the region, and the world, in the 21st century.<sup>4</sup>

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The first British Academy Rising Star Engagement Awards were made in 2015. The recipients of a second round will be announced in March 2016.

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4. Amílcar Cabral, 'National Liberation and Culture', *Transition*, 45 (1974), 12-17.