

The Cultural Characteristics of the Region of Tombouctou, Republic of Mali

-- Analysis based on Popular Music of Sonrhai People --

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Research Area : Republic of MALI

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Back Ground and Objectives of My Research

In West Africa, music constitutes an important part of daily life. Both traditional and popular forms of music attract enthusiastic followings in West African countries.

The Republic of Mali, at times referred to as the "Big Country of Music", has produced a particularly large number of musicians who have gained international fame. Many of them are members of the Mandé group and come from 'griot' families, the hereditary music caste. The Mandé constitute the most populous group in Mali and live over a wide area in the western part of the country. This group has maintained the griot music culture over centuries.

Much has been reported about the music of West Africa in general, and that of the Mandé in particular, but little has been reported about the music of other West African peoples and many issues in this regard lack clarity.

The aim of this study involves clarifying the actual situations in which the traditional and popular music of the region of Tombouctou, the north-eastern part of the Republic of Mali, are embedded and, thereby, to contribute to an overall understanding of West African music.

Tombouctou has been the base of the trading between the Sahara and the Niger River. In this area, there are so many tribes --- such as Sonrhai, Tuareg, Fulbe, etc --- living together. Like the Mandé, those tribes have the social hierarchy including griot and they regard the music as some kind of taboo. But there are so many musicians from the non-griot families in Tombouctou region. And in particular, the singers in the region sing in a several languages such as Songhai, Fulfulde, Tamasheq, etc. Most singers of other regions of Mali sing in Bambara, the most popular language in their country.



pic#1

The singers of Pygmy Polyphony.

The right woman, I trust she was the best singer in this choir.

[Difolon, Cameroon]



pic#2

The popular music CDs of Cameroon I've got there.

Alas, all of them are pirate editions!

[Cameroon]



pic#3

Ms. Khaïra Arby a.k.a. "The No.1 Singer of Tombouctou" (the 3rd from the left) with her 'Family'

[Tombouctou, Mali]



pic#4

Mr. Mohamed Aga Aboch playing the 'Bidiga', a traditional instrument of Sonrhail.

Note that he is playing with his forefingers and not with his thumbs!

[Tomboutou, Mali]