



Historical Perspectives on Music of the Mali Empire and Modern Jeliya Performance Practices



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Introduction

- Historical musicology has tended to focus on western Europe and the classical tradition
 - Meanwhile ethnomusicology has historically researched contemporary world music
 - Current trends in musicology blur the lines between these disciplines
 - Aim here: add to the growing research in historical ethnomusicology
- Most African music is transmitted orally (Charry)
 - Historical records are difficult to find and recreating past instruments is almost impossible
 - Empire of Mali (13th - 17th centuries) is an exception
- Empire of Mali (Charry, Levtzion):
 - Founded by Sundiata Keita, following Keita rulers bore title “mansa” meaning king
 - Muslim empire encouraged many travelers from other Islamic areas
 - People referred to as Mande or Mandinke (various spellings)
 - Jeliya: class of high-status musicians with exclusive right to perform on kora, ngoni, and balafon and usually specialized in speech, song, or instrumentals
- Contemporary west African music (Charry, Shallal):
 - Many pop artists can trace their lineage to a jeliya family
 - This music is no longer limited to people of Jeliya lineage
 - French visitors combined all west African storyteller-musicians under the term “griot” which is still used as an umbrella term

Methods

- Examination of historical and contemporary literature
- Historical Sources:
 - ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh Sa’dī - Tarikh al Sudan, West African Chronicle
 - Ibn Battuta - Travel Diary
 - Ibn Khaldun - The Muqaddimah, Account of Arab/Muslim History
- Contemporary Sources:
 - Eric Charry, *Mande Music*
 - Nehemiah Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*
 - Musa Shallal, “Sociological Reflections on the Empire of Mali”
- Similarities and differences in historical and contemporary information on the empire
- Similarities and differences in musical descriptions
- Plans for expansion:
 - Interviews with contemporary musicians
 - Examination of musical examples
 - In-situ exploration of musical lineages and oral history

Maps & Images



Images 1-3 (left to right): Jeliya instruments; kora, balafon/bala, ngoni (koni); Image 3 shows Bassekou Kouyate performing
Source: Wikimedia Commons

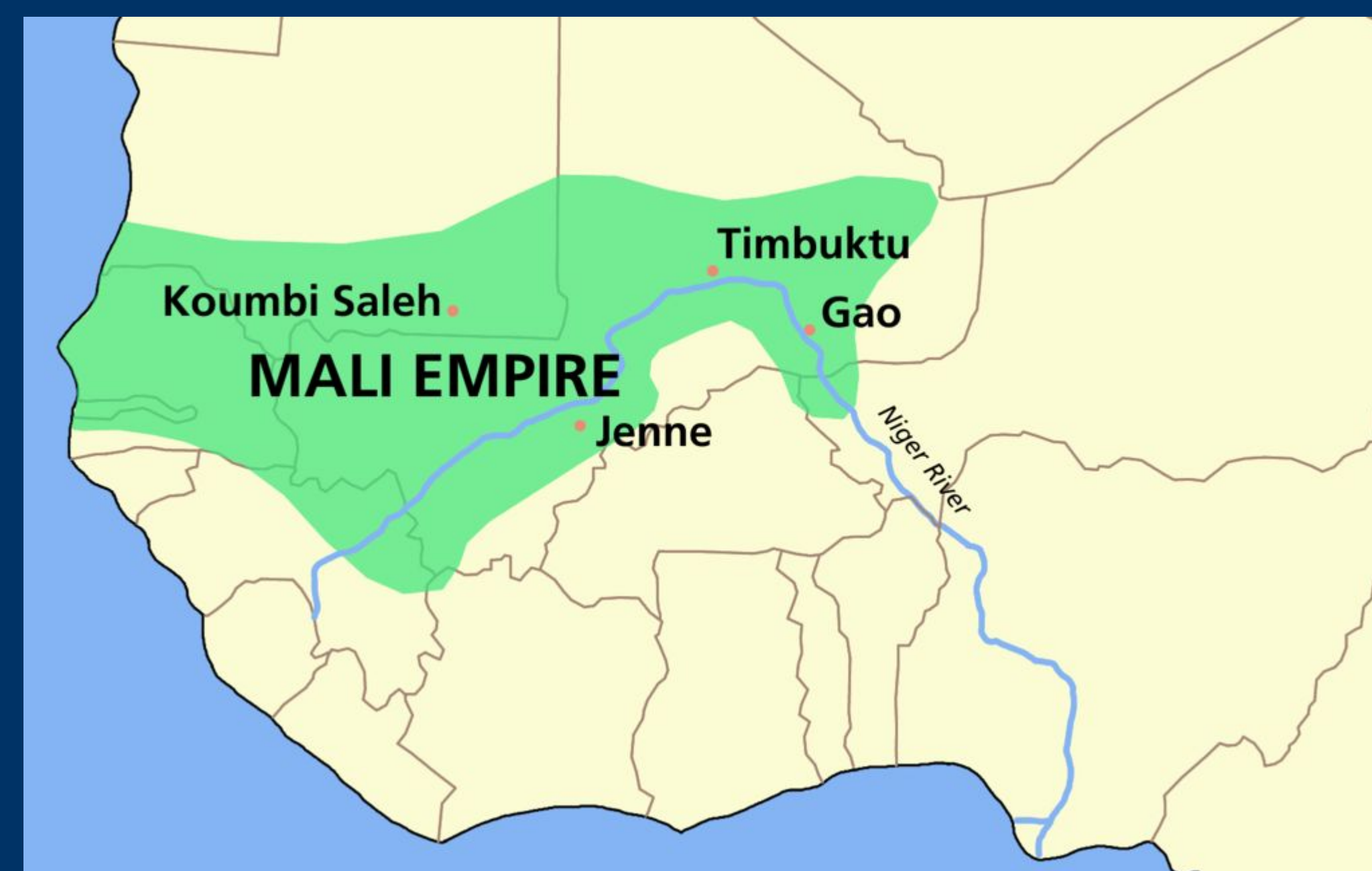


Image 4: Map of the greatest estimated expansion of the Mali Empire (13th-17th century) across modern-day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger
Source: Wikimedia Commons

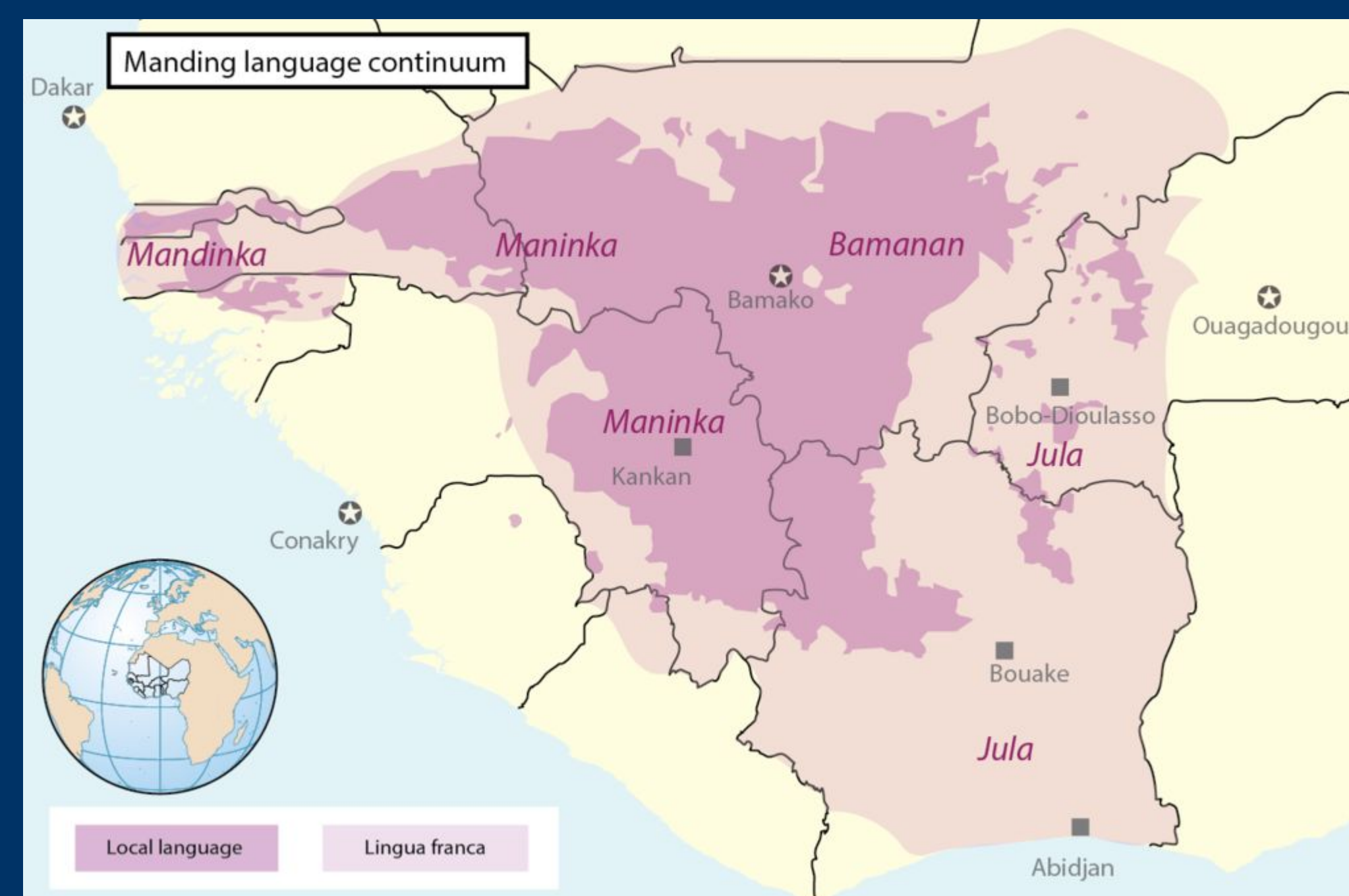


Image 5: Map of the Manding language continuum across western Africa, including the dominant languages used in the jeliya tradition (Mandinka, Maninka, Bamanan, etc.)
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Discussion

- Historical sources tend to focus on geography and governing rather than societal norms (Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun)
 - Knowledge and respect of empire still spread throughout Islamic world
 - Translations of Arabic texts may lose mentions of jeli and other cultural aspects
- While lineage is no longer a binding factor for jeliya performers, many descendants of jeliya families still actively perform in this style (Charry)
 - Surnames Diabate, Kouyate, and Sissoko (Cissoko) are particularly prominent
 - Some musicians now from Keita clan/family
- Materials used in instruments’ construction remains similar but with notable modernizations (Grove Music Online)
 - Nylon strings replace braided leather
 - Instruments are electrified and adapted for recording studio
- Modern musicians have adapted to notation while maintaining fidelity to oral transmission styles
- This era and locale are unusually well-researched
 - Many ethnomusicologists specialize in the music of Mali, which by necessity includes both modern and historical musics
 - Future explorations of African music history should continue to take advantage of the information of Islamic scholars, but can expand outwards to encompass other regions and traditions

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