

## RESEARCH REPORT

# Conserving the Archives of a National Broadcaster in Africa

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The archives of Radio Télévision de Guinée (RTG) constitute one of the most important collections of cultural material from Africa's independence era. The archive holds thousands of audio and video recordings which date to the early 1960s, and which feature some of Africa's most acclaimed singers and musicians. In 2008 and in 2009 I was given unique access to the archives as part of a Major Research Project funded by the British Library. An overview of the projects and a report of the archive's holdings follows.

In the era of independence in the 1960s, many African nations introduced policies and initiatives designed to promote nationalism and pride in African cultural identity. Upon independence from France in 1958, the government of Guinea pioneered this movement and advanced a new cultural philosophy called *authenticité*. As the successor to *négritude*, *authenticité* rejected the cultural values of the West and promoted traditional African values as appropriate to the newly independent African societies. In the post-colonial era of the 1960s, *authenticité* blossomed into a cultural policy that swept Africa.<sup>1</sup> In Guinea, under President Sékou Touré, the government enacted the principles of *authenticité* by disbanding all of the orchestras in the country and banning the playing of Western music on the radio. Guinean musicians were then instructed by their government to modernise the traditional musical styles, and new state-owned orchestras were created in all of the major towns and cities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Graeme Counsel, *Mande Popular Music and Cultural Policies in West Africa: Griots and Government Policy Since Independence* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For further reading see Graeme Counsel, 'Popular music and politics in Sékou Touré's Guinea,' *Australasian Review of African Studies* 26.1 (2004): 26–42.

The musicians of these new groups received from the government new electric guitars, brass instruments, microphones and amplifiers, were paid a salary and received musical training. Once established, Guinea's *authenticité* policy resulted in an explosion of musical activity. Each year the government organised national arts festivals held in the capital, and the best groups competed against each for prizes. Over sixty orchestras performed regularly throughout the country, and Guinean music began to have a major influence on the development of popular music in West Africa and in the rest of the continent. President Touré sent his orchestras on tour throughout Africa, where they spread the *authenticité* policy and gave many African musicians the inspiration to modernise their traditional musical styles. Guinea's orchestras also toured the world, in particular the Eastern Bloc nations, and they were extensively recorded by the Guinean government. Between circa 1966 and 1983, over seven hundred songs were released on vinyl discs by Guinea's state-owned Syliphone recording label.<sup>3</sup> Many other recordings, however, remained on their original reel-to-reel tape format, and these recordings constitute the bulk of the sound archive at the RTG.

The RTG archives are located in the basement of the RTG broadcasting building in the suburb of Boulbinet in downtown Conakry. RTG 1, as it is known, is still used to broadcast and record radio and television programmes, but most of these tasks are now performed at the new RTG headquarters in Koloma, known as RTG 2. The Boulbinet centre is somewhat run down and showing its age, but the archives are in good condition thanks to generators that provide twenty-four hour climate control through air conditioning units. The building can be a somewhat daunting place to work, having seen off various full frontal attacks by insurgents intent on gaining control first of the building, and then of the nation. The facility is heavily guarded by armed soldiers who maintain a road block at the entrance, and a military camp is next door. All visitor and entry permits must be arranged through the nearby Ministry of Communication. I first visited the archives in 2001, when I was conducting research for my PhD at the University of Melbourne. At that stage I was not given direct access to the archive itself, but the staff would play a few audio reels of orchestras that I requested and I was shown a hand written catalogue of some fifty reels of recordings. This catalogue, I gathered, was the archive's complete holding.

The RTG catalogue helped fuel my interest in Guinean music, which had grown through my earlier fieldwork in 1994 and 1997. I incorporated the research into my PhD, which explored the music of the independence era in West Africa and focused on the role of governments. Through my research and fieldwork I became a collector of Syliphone recordings (see, for example, Figure 1). I purchased the original vinyl releases in West Africa from local music vendors in the markets or from private collections. For most local people vinyl discs were worthless: the audio cassette had supplanted vinyl as the medium of choice long ago, and the record players required to play the old discs had long since broken and were impossible to repair. Many of the Syliphone vinyl recordings were therefore fairly easy to obtain. Several discs though were very rare, and a few took more than ten years to become available on the international market. These I purchased from record collectors around the world for several

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<sup>3</sup> A complete discography of the Syliphone catalogue and other West African recording labels is maintained at the author's website, <[www.radioafrica.com.au](http://www.radioafrica.com.au)>. The website also features discographies of complete recordings by regional orchestras.

hundred dollars each or, if I was lucky, for just a few dollars. Ebay and similar online outlets feature sellers with Syliphone recordings available for purchase. However, I knew of no archive, library or private collection in the world that could claim the complete Syliphone collection of all eighty-two 33.3 rpm vinyl discs and seventy-eight 45 rpm vinyl discs. Not even the Guinean government possessed them all, for in 1985 the building was attacked by an Air Force jet in a coup attempt, and part of the archive was destroyed.

**Figure 1.** A Syliphone LP recording of the regional orchestra of Faranah–The Tropical Djoli Band, 1980



In 2007, I applied for Major Research Project funding through the British Library's newly established Endangered Archives Programme.<sup>4</sup> My project proposed to gather the complete collection of Syliphone vinyl recordings, transfer them to compact disc and present them to the government of Guinea. I also proposed that I survey the recordings held at the RTG sound archive and preserve what remained by digitising the material to compact disc. My project proposal was accepted and I arrived in Guinea in August 2008.

The Syliphone project proceeded well and after a few months I had gathered all of the vinyl catalogue and transferred it to CD format. The complete Syliphone collection was then exhibited at Guinea's national museum during the nation's fiftieth anniversary of independence celebrations (see Figure 2). The Guinean government was very pleased with my efforts and honoured me with a gold medal, the *Palme Academique en Or*, and a *Diplôme d'Honneur*.

<sup>4</sup> See the Endangered Archives Programme website, <[eap.bl.uk/](http://eap.bl.uk/)>.

**Figure 2.** The Syliphone exhibition at Guinea's National Museum



During the project I had contacted the Ministry of Communication requesting access to the RTG sound archive. The process took many weeks of negotiation, and if my Syliphone project had not been such a success I doubt if my proposal would have been seriously considered. Eventually the Ministry granted me complete access, and I remember vividly the first time I walked into the archive. I had expected to see a few dozen reels of recordings. What I saw, however, was an Aladdin's Cave of thousands of audio reels and videotapes. I set about work immediately and began to digitise as many reels as I could, commencing with the oldest recordings that I could locate. Given their fragility and the time it took to repair them, it was difficult to preserve and digitise more than five reels per day. It was certainly an impossible task to preserve them all, but in my remaining time I digitised 129 reels containing 1189 songs. Most of the material I preserved featured recordings by Guinean orchestras from the late 1960s and 1970s. Many of these songs were overtly political in their content and featured lyrics which espoused the Guinean leadership and its policies—hence the sensitivity of the archive's holdings. The material was nonetheless very significant and in effect traced the history of Guinean popular music. The recordings from the early 1960s featured Cuban songs from the era, for example, for at this stage modern Guinean music was still in its infancy and the orchestras were just starting to forge their own styles. As the decade progressed, and as the archive's recordings indicate, national orchestras such as Bembeya Jazz and Keletigui et ses Tambourinis began to incorporate indigenous musical material into their compositions. The national orchestras were pioneers in transposing the melodies of the *kora* (a 21 string harp-lute) or the *balafon* (a hammered dulcimer with 19 keys), for example, to electric guitar or brass section.

In 1968 a Cultural Revolution was declared by President Touré, and during this era the archive's recordings show a marked increase in propagandist themes. Guinea's musicians found themselves at the forefront of the government's campaign to unite the nation and assert its independence, for President Touré had stated that these goals would be achieved through

music.<sup>5</sup> With their roles now elevated, Guinea's musicians pioneered and forged new styles of African popular music. In 1968, for example, Bembeya Jazz National recorded 'Regard sur le passé,' their twenty-seven minute opus to Samori Touré, a nineteenth century anti-colonial rebel leader. Their composition was based on the epic narrative performed in honour of Samori Touré by traditional singer-historians known as *griots*, but the orchestra presented the epic in a modern style with guitars and electric instrumentation. No African popular group had released anything that was so adventurous or bold, and its performance earned a silver medal at the First Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers in 1969. In 1970 the Académie Charles Cros awarded its international *Grand Prix du Disque* to the Guinean tenor Kouyaté Sory Kandia for his first Syliphone LP (SLP12), which presented traditional songs from West Africa's *griot* tradition and contemporary compositions performed with a Guinean national orchestra. During this era Guinea's orchestras were at their artistic height, with new musical directions being explored and embraced through fusions of jazz, Cuban music, funk, and indigenous Guinean and African musical styles.<sup>6</sup> The RTG archive contained thousands of recordings from this and other eras of Guinean music, with the vast majority of songs never broadcast outside of the country. In order to preserve the archive's entire holdings I proposed to the British Library that I apply for further funding in 2009, and this, my second Major Research Project proposal, was accepted.

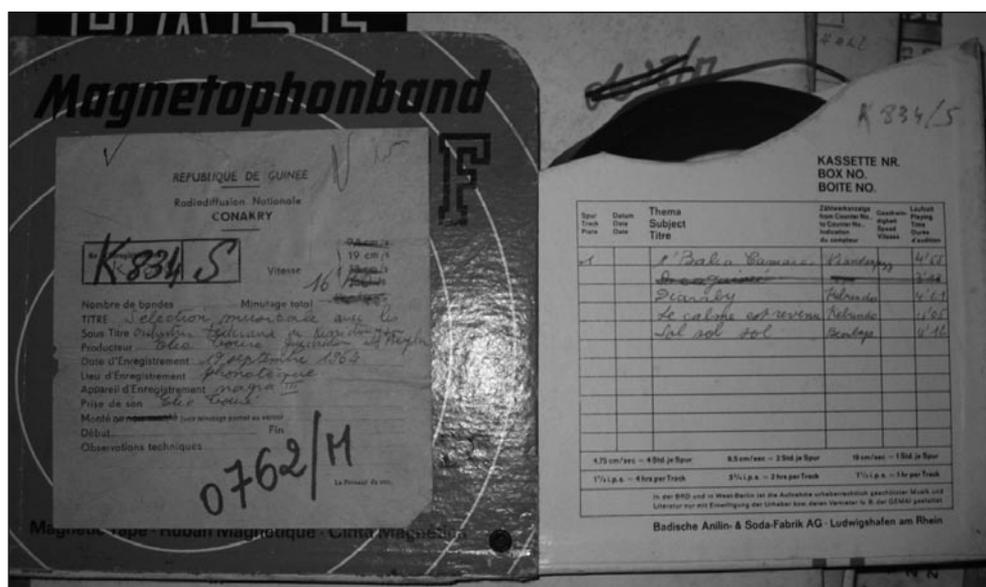
I returned to Guinea in July 2009. Since my last trip, Guinea's ageing President, Lansana Conté, had died, and a coup had installed Capt. Moussa Traoré as interim President. Initially popular with Guineans over his refusal to stand as a Presidential candidate in future elections, the population became increasingly disenchanted with its new President as his overtures towards a future candidacy became plain. Guineans had suffered under fifty-one years of military/one-party rule, and were tired of corruption and rhetoric. The political atmosphere grew very tense, and I was working as many hours as I could in the archive to preserve the audio reels. A major rally for democracy on 28 September 2009 turned into one of the bloodiest days in Guinea's history, when the Guinean army massacred nearly two hundred people and injured over two thousand. Amidst global condemnation, crimes against humanity charges, threats of violence and a counter-coup, it was impossible for me to continue my project. All of downtown Conakry had closed, embassies were evacuating staff, and working in the nerve centre of government was the very worst place to be. I made plans to leave the capital and return later, hopefully when the situation had calmed down. However, an assassination attempt on the President (in the military camp next to the RTG) a few weeks later by his own Presidential Guard meant that Guinea had become too unstable,<sup>7</sup> and I had to abandon the project before its completion. In a few months, however, I had preserved 2238 songs from 335 reel-to-reels by digitising them to compact disc format (see Figure 3).

<sup>5</sup> Leo Sarkisian, 'Voice of America. Promoteur de la musique guinéenne moderne,' *Webguinée*, accessed 19 July 2012, <leydi.webguinee.net/culture/music/modern/sarkisian\_interview.html>.

<sup>6</sup> I have compiled and annotated four double-volume compact discs of Syliphone recordings from this era. See Keletigui et ses Tambourinis. *The Syliphone years* (2009), Balla et ses Balladins. *The Syliphone years* (2008), Bembeya Jazz National. *The Syliphone years. Hits and rare recordings* (2007), and *Authenticité. The Syliphone years. Guinea's Orchestres Nationaux and Federaux 1965–1980* (2007), all released in the United Kingdom by Sterns Music.

<sup>7</sup> For a description of how the military junta used the electronic media music to promote their leadership, see Graeme Counsel, 'Music for a coup—"Armée Guinéenne": An overview of Guinea's recent political turmoil,' *Australasian Review of African Studies* 31.2 (2010): 94–112.

Figure 3. A typical audio reel held in the RTG archive



I estimate that my archival projects of 2008 and 2009 preserved more than sixty percent of the RTG sound archive. The projects revealed a great many rare and significant recordings by some of the greatest names in Guinean and African music. I have created a brief list below of what I consider to be some of the more important recordings:

- Orchestre Honoré Coppet. Seven untitled tracks. 2 February and 24 March 1963.
- Syli Orchestre National. In concert at the First Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers in 1969.
- Syli Orchestre National. In concert at Festpac 1977, the Second World Black & African Festival of Arts, held in Lagos.
- Orchestre de la Brigade Feminine (later known as Les Amazones de Guinée, Africa's first all female orchestra). Five untitled tracks. 7 November 1964.
- Numerous live performances and concerts by Bembeya Jazz National, Horoya Band National, Keletigui et ses Tambourinis, Balla et ses Balladins and Miriam Makeba.
- A 1989 unreleased studio album by Balla et ses Balladins.
- Many early unreleased studio recordings by Guinea's national orchestras, commencing in 1963.
- At least one studio recording session from every regional orchestra in Guinea, usually containing ten or more tracks.
- Several unreleased recordings by Kouyaté Sory Kandia.
- Recordings of traditional music and narratives from all of Guinea's ethnic groups.
- Numerous examples of *griot* songs such as 'Soundiata,' 'Kémé bouréma' and 'Alpha Yaya' performed by *griot* ensembles and modern orchestras.

In 2010 Guinea held its first free and democratic elections since independence. The new Culture ministry, however, was not named until January 2011, which prevented me from applying for British Library funding that year. I am pleased to report though that the British Library have funded my proposal to return to Guinea later in 2012, to complete the preservation of the audio reels held at the RTG. I estimate that up to six months will be required to archive all of the reels held in the RTG's Conakry archive, and I will also travel to Guinea's regional centres to survey the rural RTG radio stations' archives and any additional material held there. I hope that in the future I will be able to archive the holdings of other sound archives in West Africa, in particular those of Sierra Leone, Senegal and Mali, which have important collections of audio material in urgent need of preservation.