



## Music, identity and national cohesion in Mali: The role of music in the post-colonial era

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### Abstract

*This article analyses the function music has played in the construction of identities in Mali, arguing that these constructions have directly impacted the process of national cohesion since independence in 1960. The link between this idea and the implications of the 2012 crisis - involving the prohibition of music under Shari'a law - will then be explored. The absence of music, a crucial mechanism for social cohesion, contributed to the complete breakdown of social relations and brought into question the concept of a "Malian" identity. Therefore, amidst ongoing Islamist activity, music's ability to reconstruct national cohesion has been impaired.*

**Keywords:** music, constructivism, fundamentalism, Islam, Mali, cohesion

### Introduction

Despite being a small and landlocked West African nation regarded as one of the poorest in the world (UNDP, 2015), Mali is internationally renowned for its rich musical culture. The country has produced such famed artists as Ali Farka Touré, Tinariwen and Oumou Sangaré, each of whom have been Grammy Award winners. As testament to this, when in April 2012 an ethnically motivated conflict evolved into a religious one as Islamists captured Mali's Northern Region, reports of the crisis in international media centred on narratives of musical loss (Skinner, 2016, p. 155). Music was banned under Shari'a law and the country's vibrant musical culture was silenced, as it became a target of religious attacks. The uniqueness of this specific target in a situation of conflict merits analysis as to *why* music was perceived as a threat by the Islamic fundamentalists, thereby entailing an evaluation of the historical role of music in Mali since its independence in 1960.

This article seeks to analyse the function music has played in the construction of identities in Mali, in order to understand better the implications of its proscription during the 2012–13 conflict. It will be argued that musical constructions of identity have been a central means of building a national identity and propagating unity among the diverse population of Mali. Music has, therefore, made an important contribution towards cementing national cohesion. Such music-based constructs, however, have also been used as a tool of division in certain contexts by reinforcing notions of detachment among marginalised groups in the North, and promulgating a competing Tuareg national identity. The most recent manifestation of this was the unilateral declaration of the independent Tuareg state of Azawad in Northern Mali in April 2012. Prior to this date, though, Mali had been widely regarded by western aid donors as a successful and stable low-income democracy since its transition in 1991 (van de Walle, 2012, p. 1). Though an ethnically diverse population, the vast majority of whom practise Islam, Mali remained committed to its constitutional secularism, and extolled the values of religious tolerance and cultural diversity. Thus, focus must be drawn to the effectiveness with which music-based constructions contributed to at least a fragile cohesion in Mali. As Morgan (2012, p. 15) states, there are many Tuaregs, Arabs and Songhoi who have become accustomed to the idea that Mali is one nation that can include all its diverse peoples. This



observation will be substantiated by arguing that the prohibition of music in 2012–13 contributed to the complete breakdown of social relations, due to the questions of identity raised during the crisis. In the context of ongoing Islamist activity and instability in the Northern region, it will be concluded that the role of music in reinforcing national unity since the crisis has been impaired.

This argument is premised on the constructivist notion that identities are not “given” but are rather a mobile phenomenon, produced by processes of construction. Musical performance and the act of listening provide one such means by which identities can be constructed and mobilised (Stokes, 1994, p. 5). An identity is ‘how one understands oneself in relationship to another’ (Hopf, 2016, p. 5). Frith (1996, p. 110) argues that music – through the act of music-making and listening – is key to identity because it offers a strong sense of both self and others. The significance of music for scholars of international relations, however, has been a peripheral topic of study, only receiving particular attention in recent years. This article is not to suggest that music was the sole component in the construction of identities and the development of the crisis in Mali. It will attempt to bridge the gap between the considerable attention that Malian musicians have been given by the international media following the music ban, and the absence of scholarly work analysing how music has actually contributed to the dynamics of unity and division in Mali.

Since this study seeks to analyse the role of music for national cohesion in particular, research has been delimited to the post-colonial era, starting with independence in 1960 and the construction of a national identity. The media’s focus has been almost solely on internationally acclaimed Malian musicians, many of whom reside outside Mali. Such representations, however, are insufficient to understand the position of music in the country today. As stated, this observation has largely informed the direction of this article. The qualitative research methods employed here, therefore, reflect this effort to discern the role of music in Mali itself, in order to understand better the implications of its proscription. Primary resources, especially documentaries and short films involving interviews with Malian musicians, have provided valuable on-the-ground insights into the crisis. Further, throughout this study, excerpts from song lyrics will be given in order to demonstrate the role of music. Lyrics are of value to substantiate arguments claiming music’s importance in identity-construction, since they constitute a vital medium of expression for artists seeking to describe their experiences. In order to gain an insight into the role of Malian musicians in the spotlight, an interview was conducted with Aliou Touré, lead singer of Malian band Songhoy Blues, who formed whilst in exile from the North of Mali. Predominantly secondary sources were employed to analyse the period between 1960 and 2012, during which a substantial amount of literature – particularly drawing from the disciplines of anthropology and ethnomusicology – provided detailed insights into how music has become entwined with the Malian social fabric. Regarding the period during and after 2012, the existence of scholarly work dealing with music’s position in Mali has been largely absent, owing to the recent and ongoing nature of the crisis. In this respect, newspaper articles have provided details on certain aspects of post-conflict musical life and security in the North.

## *Background to the 2012-2013 conflict*

Mali is a multi-ethnic nation consisting of a great diversity of peoples and cultures: there are over twelve ethnic groups, each speaking a different language (Schulz, 2012, p. 3). Owing to the high mobility of the Malian people throughout history, ethnicity as a marker of social and cultural identity is highly fluid in Mali (Schulz, 2012, p. 4). A general divide, however, is often drawn between the identities of the country’s North and South, consisting of nomadic or semi-nomadic people and sedentary agriculturists respectively. The largest and dominant ethnic group, the Bambara, reside in central and southern Mali and speak Bamanakan, a language which has been promoted as the



country's *lingua franca* since independence. This reflects the political and cultural dominance of the South, as the majority of the country's Northern population either do not know or refuse to speak Bamanakan, which they associate with the South's political and cultural hegemony (Schulz, 2012, p. 7). Indeed, this mirrors the construction of a "national" identity based on the traditions of the dominant Southern ethnic groups, from which minority groups of the North are excluded.

There are numerous ethnic groups in the North of Mali, including the Fulani, the Moors and Berbers, such as the Tuareg. Although there are deep diversities between and even within these groups, there has been a historical general divide between the 'North' and the 'South', whereby the Northern desert regions are seen as problematic and unwilling to embrace the concept of Malian national unity. Historically, the Tuareg in particular have shown resentment towards their political and cultural marginalisation within the central state. In their longstanding struggle for autonomy, a fourth Tuareg rebellion against the Malian state was launched in Mali's Northern region in January 2012 by the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). In March 2012, the MNLA declared the independence of Azawad in Mali's Northern region. Despite this, the ethnic groups of the North do not collectively recognise this as their common land, and they possess differing political agendas, cultures and identities. It is therefore difficult, given these divisions, to construct the 'North' as one general identity marker. The MNLA soon began to lose influence and the nature of the rebellion transformed when the Tuareg separatists formed an alliance with Ansar Dine, an armed Islamist group. While Ansar Dine, however, had initially supported the MNLA with the shared desire to push the Malian Army out of the North, fractures emerged as the Islamists sought to implement Shari'a law (Lecocq et al., 2013, p. 348). Aided by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine rapidly took over control of the rebellion, abandoning the nationalist claims to Azawad and instead advocating the implementation of Shari'a law across Mali (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015, p. 11). A French-led intervention in January 2013 ousted the Islamists from their control of the North and uplifted Shari'a law; however, armed groups retain a presence and the region remains highly insecure.

## ***The politics of culture and identity***

Questions of identity were at the core of the emergence of the conflict in Mali and remain crucial in its complex and destabilising aftermath. The interplay of competing identities – ethnic, national and religious – undermined official representations of a "Malian" national identity leading up to 2012, allowing for the manifestation of alternative visions of belonging in this multi-ethnic state. In order to understand the development and intersections of multiple identities in Mali, this article will use constructivist theory as a framework, arguing that national identity is not innate or "given" but rather constructed through ongoing processes of interaction.

Anderson (1991) conceptualised the nation as an 'imagined community' – a social construction – since members of a nation will never know most of their fellow-members 'yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). This concept, however, stipulates that the nation is an ideological, top-down construction. Critical of the assumption of 'congruence between the political and national and often the cultural unit', Askew (2002, p. 9) finds fault with this focus on the political elite, especially in the context of the post-colonial state where ethnic identities retain significance within arbitrarily imposed borders. Rather than assuming the passivity of the citizenry, Askew contends that nationalism is a dialectic construction involving the state and its citizens. Askew's work underpins this article's argument, as it accounts for the simultaneous construction of multiple, often opposing identities within the nation. Therefore, the construction of



national identity is characterised in terms of how citizens respond to state-orchestrated visions of the “nation”. In particular, this approach accounts for the vital role of culture in the construction, articulation and mobilisation of those identities; for example, Askew focuses on the role of musicians in ‘performing the nation’, placing great importance on how musical performance is used to articulate national representations. This theoretical approach, thus, allows for an in-depth exploration of the musical constructions of identity in Mali. Further, this will offer important insights into how such constructions have impacted the political process of national cohesion, by virtue of the population’s adherence to state-orchestrated ideas of the nation.

## *Music and nation-building*

The following section will provide an account of the ways in which music has been used by political regimes in Mali as a vital tool to construct narratives of the nation. Such an analysis is key to understanding how music has shaped visions of the nation, with implications for the current crisis, since it underlines the role music plays in giving substance to, or offering critique of, relations between the state and its citizens (Skinner, 2012, p. 512). The importance of music in cementing national unity during nation-building will be highlighted, as music was a crucial means through which a national narrative was constructed and a nationalist sentiment disseminated.

Immediately following independence, the cultural policies of President Mobido Keita’s “First Republic” (1960–68) were primarily focused towards nation-building efforts, and music in particular was a salient means of propagating national unity. In order to understand *why* the creation of a national identity was engaged primarily through music, one can trace the historical political role of the musician in Mali. The tradition of the *jeli* – a noble caste of oral historians and praise singers – played a crucial role in the articulation of the new nation. Since the founding of the Mali empire (c. 1230), the *jeli* have acted on behalf of their rulers and wealthy patrons to ‘maintain and support the values which underlaid [...] the political structure of society’, thereby legitimating authority (Cutter, 1968, p. 74). They did so by acting as the oral repository for customs, traditions and the principles of government. Following independence, Keita sought to create a national identity through the valorisation of “traditional” culture, drawing from a celebration of the distant (pre-colonial) past and the downplaying of the immediate (colonial) past (Cutter, 1968, p. 76). The prestige of the *jeli*’s historical knowledge, therefore, endowed them with official authorisation to narrate the history of the new nation following independence, acting as ‘emblems of an unbroken continuity with the past’ (Schulz, 2007, p. 194).

The desire to affirm national cohesion by evoking historical continuity with the pre-colonial past meant that colonisation was presented as ‘a short and disturbing interlude to the natural course of history’ (Lecocq, 2010, p. 72). As such, musical repertoires were permeated with the symbolism of traditional legends, particularly Sunjata Keita – founder of the Mali Empire. For example, the *jeli* celebrated President Keita as a descendant and namesake of Sunjata Keita, thus legitimising his authority with ideas of primordial ties and an ‘imaginary timeless antiquity’ (Rowlands, 2007, p. 132). Charry (2000a, p. 41) notes that ‘the role of the Sunjata epic in forming [...] the national identities of Mali cannot be overestimated’. The centrality of the *jeli* tradition and the musical recounting of the Sunjata epic in the nation-building project, however, fundamentally privileged a narrative that excluded parts of Mali’s Northern population (Rowlands & de Jong, 2007, p. 26). The story of Sunjata, of which the tradition of the *jeli* forms part, concerns the struggle of the Mande people against oppression (Suso, 1999, p. vii). The Mande, comprising several linguistically and historically related groups including the Bambara and Malinke, are the largest ethnic group in Mali. Most elements used in the nation-building process were taken from Mande culture and history (Lecocq,



2002, p. 72). The construction of a national identity was, therefore, based on a historical myth that favoured the dominant ethnic groups of the Southern region, formulating a national past based on the silencing of alternative political imaginaries (Schulz, 2007, p. 195). In sum, the construction of a Malian national identity by political elites related to the historical and cultural concepts of the country's largest ethnic groups (Lecocq, 2002, p. 66). Therefore, nationalist sentiment was adhered to by a substantial portion of the population, fostering a strong sense of national cohesion among this majority whilst fuelling resentment among a minority.

Under Keita's socialist regime, musicians became subject to state patronage through the formation of national ensembles and orchestras whose role was, to borrow Askew's phrase, to 'perform the nation'. In this way, music was one of the primary means adopted for the propagation of this new national identity. One example is the *Ensemble Instrumental du Mali* (EIN), a state-sponsored national group whose function was to preserve and validate the past 'through selection and adaptation, for the exigencies of the present' (Cutter, 1968, p. 75). As such, the ensemble's compositions were imbued with nationalist themes "borrowed" from the *jeli*, aiming to evoke national pride and a shared identity. The repertoire of the EIN was mostly propagandistic, for example, *Maliba* (*Great Mali*) compared the modern nation-state to pre-colonial Mali (Skinner, 2014, p. 250). Another example is the formation of local *troupes artistiques* by the regime to perform "national" music. To the Keita regime, however, "national" folklore equalled Mande folklore and, thereby, the Tuareg *troupe artistique* of the Kidal region was forbidden from singing in their Tamasheq language (Lecocq, 2002, p. 73). It is, therefore, evident that the role of music under the socialist regime was to foster a nationalist sentiment based on Mande idealisation. Further, as the ruling party obtained greater control over music-making, all musicians became subject to the cultural politics of nationalism. For example, Afro-Cuban influenced orchestra *Pionnier Jazz* were recruited by officials to compose songs in support of the nation-building project, such as *Exile Is Bad*, whose lyrics state: 'Dearest! Come back to our Mali' [...] 'There is unity in the homeland' (Skinner, 2016, p. 47). Musicians in the "First Republic" were, therefore, clients of the state as crucial proponents of nationalism, and music was a salient means of reinforcing national cohesion as widely as possible.

The complexities underlying this official nationalism in Mali echo Askew's observation that nationalism is a dialectic process. As O'Flynn (2007, p. 24) reiterates, the socially constructed relationship between music and national identity does not entail that all people in a particular society will respond in the same way to music that is deemed "national". The cultural manifestations of the nation facilitated cohesion among the dominant ethnic groups resonant with those "national" musical traditions, though it simultaneously fostered notions of detachment among minorities who were not represented. It is undeniable that this discourse did foster a strong nationalist sentiment, owing to the invocation of Mande traditions to which the majority of the population could adhere. Parallel and in response to the "official" national identity, however, at least one competing national idea was being constructed among those who did not resonate with the Malian nation. Although this marginalisation was not specific to the Tuaregs, the most vociferous dissent has been that of Tuareg nationalism, a by-product of the official nationalism 'that threatened the newly found and still unbalanced political order' (Lecocq, 2010, p. 29). Thus, the promotion of a Malian national identity, largely through the medium of music, simultaneously contributed to antagonism against the state. The manifestation and spread of a distinct Tuareg political identity, in which music played an absolutely central role, will be discussed in detail later on. The following section will outline music's role under the democratic regime from 1992, which espoused an alternative vision of the nation.



## *Music and the politics of belonging*

With Mali's transition from a one-party state to a multi-party democracy, President Konaré's "Third Republic" (1992–2002) sought to distance itself from the highly centralised, socialist ideals of the preceding regimes, with ramifications for the renewal of a national narrative. National culture again became a priority, as the democratic government was implicated in the deconstruction of a nation characterised by Mande ethno-political hegemony, and the construction of a new national narrative that embraced 'unity in diversity'. Mali's political landscape was significantly restructured with the implementation of decentralisation and liberalisation measures from 1992 onwards, facilitating an upsurge in the prevalence of discourses of local and cultural belonging. It will be argued in this section, however, that music fundamentally provided an important means for Konaré's regime to cement national unity within the context of a fragmented political landscape. This was enacted by embracing expressions of local identities and appropriating them in the national context.

Decentralisation policies – entailing new structures of political clientage and resource acquisition – encouraged claims to rights and entitlements based on ethnic or local identities. With competition for shrinking resources, greater significance was placed on both symbolic and material claims to local identity. Further, with the onset of multipartyism, the freedom of Malian citizens to create political groups and the explosion of associational activity coincided with the ability to express those diverse interests and political opinions. This is demonstrated by the proliferation of independent radio stations throughout the country, broadcasting in diverse local languages and musical traditions, and attenuating the uneven representation of cultural diversity on national radio. The overwhelming success of local radio stations in Mali was conducive to the growing importance of local identities, since they constituted ideal platforms for self-expression and the articulation of listeners' changing perceptions of belonging in the nation (Schulz, 2012, p. 62). Further, as the media landscape was privatised, the state no longer held a monopoly over musical output, and a greater variety of musical genres gained exposure on both state and private radio stations. As a result, regional musical traditions, such as that of the *Wassoulou* genre, gained popularity and challenged the privileged position of the *jeli* as the linchpin of "Malian" music (Maxwell, 2002). The process of democratisation, therefore, disrupted the highly centralised and controlled policy of promoting a single unified national culture, and encouraged the manifestation of local identities as the regime came to embrace cultural diversity.

In order to integrate the newly centrifugal socio-political landscape, various cultural initiatives were organised by the state to facilitate the narrative of national unity. The rich musical traditions of the country mean that music is seen as something beyond entertainment, since it carries complex social and moral meanings (Schulz, 2012, p. 160). Thus, musical performance served as an ideal medium for intercultural understanding and, in turn, for facilitating national cohesion in service of the government's 'unity-in-diversity' narrative. One example is the organisation of the *Biennale Artistique et Culturelle* by the Ministry of Culture. This involved competitions between ethnically or regionally based music groups to perform their local traditions at a national festival, facilitating encounters and exchanges among the youth of different regions (De Jorio, 2016, p. 16). Rather than hosting the national festival in the capital, Bamako, rotating the finals between regional cities reflected the government's commitment to decentralisation and the rhetoric of unity. Another example is a television programme, *Terroir*, which displayed local musical traditions on a national platform and proved a remarkable success. Schulz (2007, p. 185) notes the great importance viewers attributed to the national broadcast of their local traditions, arguing that the programme fostered the notion of communal belonging in the nation via references to 'authentic traditions' (Schulz, 2007, p. 185). Thus, these government initiatives to foster a collective identity through the celebration of local musical traditions served to bolster national cohesion, not by invoking a communal past as Mobido Keita's socialist regime did, but by embracing Mali's cultural diversity.



## **Music, Tuareg identity and competing nationalisms**

Following on from section one, which demonstrated the inability of “national” culture to represent all segments of Malian society, this section will outline how this contributed to the intensification of a distinct Tuareg identity. The emergence of a revolutionary Tuareg music in the 1980s, *al-guitara* (‘guitar music’), will be discussed, as it directly crafted a Tuareg national identity and propagated visions of an autonomous nation, culminating in the rebellion of the 1990s. It is important to note that such nationalist aims did not represent all Tuaregs. Many did not support the rebellion, and some felt more integrated into the sedentarised farming communities of the South (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 638). Since Tuareg separatists have proved a principal threat to Mali’s national cohesion, however, the means of constructing this separate national identity are of utmost importance to understanding the role of music as a contributor to divisions.

The Tuareg are a nomadic pastoralist tribe inhabiting a vast area of the Saharan desert in North Africa. Once controlling the trans-Saharan caravan trade routes, the Tuareg prospered and acted autonomously. The impact of colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century, however, profoundly changed their social, political and economic structure (Kohl & Fischer, 2010, p. 4). The imposition of colonial frontiers restricted the nomads’ freedom of movement, thereby compromising their traditional economy and fostering antagonism against the central government. The process of decolonisation cemented this economic hardship, as the Tuareg automatically became marginalised minorities within the newly created states. Since Mali’s independence in 1960, the relationship between the central state and the Tuareg people has been characterised by periodic uprisings against Malian authority by Tuareg nationalists. At the heart of these insurgencies has been the desire for cultural recognition and autonomy.

The Tuareg people have a distinct musical culture that is deeply rooted in historical traditions, occupying a prominent position in social, political and ceremonial life. Tuareg instruments, including a one-stringed fiddle (*anzad*) and a mortar drum (*tende*), each provide the focal point for particular social events (Card Wendt, 2000, p. 207). Verbal arts and oral history, of which epic poetry is a central component, are seen as an extension of music. Themes of such poetry uncover the ‘past and the inner workings of [Tuareg] society’, and explain values, customs, ideals and sentiments (Gattinara, 2006, p. 32). The poetry is, thus, a reflection and expression of cultural identity, and its transmittal through the medium of music is a crucial means of expressing a unique Tuareg identity. Such musical styles, however, never became a component of Mali’s “national” musical traditions. For example, the National Instrumental Ensemble comprised only “traditional” instruments monopolised by the *jeli*, such as the *kora* (a 21-stringed harp). Further, many Tuaregs saw injustice in the fact that their musical traditions were rarely represented on national television, and in the absence of Tamasheq language programmes (Morgan, 2014).

The refusal of the central government to recognise Tuareg culture during the nation-building period heightened resentment and feelings of detachment towards Mali’s central powers. Indeed, the lack of Tuareg representation on national media reflected their persistent exclusion from positions of political influence and economic advantage (Schulz, 2007, p. 191). As a society proud of their culture, striving to demonstrate this pride to each other and to outsiders (Seligman, 2006, p. 28), the inability to do so served to intensify notions of difference vis-à-vis Malians, reinforcing a separate Tuareg identity. In sum, the policies of the Malian government posed a threat to the authenticity of the unique Tuareg culture, thereby leading to efforts to ensure that their identity would not be subsumed. It will be demonstrated that music, as a means through which ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilised (Stokes, 1994, p. 5), was vital in this pursuit.



## *A revolution in Tuareg musical culture: Al-Guitara*

The period following Keita's "First Republic" and before the second Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s was marked by radical transformations in Tuareg society, which in turn informed a transformation of musical culture. The marginalisation of the Tuareg by the central government was exacerbated by severe droughts in the 1970s and 80s, resulting in the collapse of the pastoral economy and the migration of much of the population to Southern regions or neighbouring countries (Lecocq, 2002, p. 173). The new way of life for those labour-seeking migrants in Libya and Algeria became known as *Teshumara*, and its adherents were mostly male youths called *ishumar* ("unemployed"). Many of the *ishumar* accepted Libyan ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi's offer of military training, which was deceptively advocated as a means towards creating an autonomous Tuareg nation named Azawad (Morgan, 2011). It was within such "rebel camps" that a new political Tuareg identity was forged, and a formal nationalist movement was created directly through the music of the *ishumar*. The origins of this music lie in 1979 when a guitar was gifted to one of those exiles, Ibrahim ag Alhabib, who began transposing traditional Tuareg music onto this new instrument. He was joined by other musicians in the Libyan training camps, thereby forming the band *Tinariwen* ("people of the desert") and pioneering the revolutionary genre of *al-guitara*.

What was so revolutionary about this music for Tuareg society was the shift from lyrics concerning traditions and history, to lyrics about current political issues and the problems facing their deteriorating culture. A prevalent theme of *al-guitara* was *egha*, a concept roughly translating as hatred and revenge. This was particularly in relation to the First Tuareg Rebellion of 1962–64, which was brutally repressed by the Malian Armed Forces (MAF) in a campaign involving the massacre of civilians and livestock. ag Alhabib witnessed the execution of his father for taking part in the rebellion, which is reflected in 'Soixante Trois':

1963 came, and goes on...

It killed the elderly and the newborn children

...Only graveyards and loneliness came of it (ag Alhabib, 2007a)

An important feature of the lyrics here is the invocation of memories, linking the events of 1963 to the moment of composition by asserting that 1963 'goes on' (Lecocq, 2010, p. 269). In doing so, the song serves as a potent reminder of the barbaric acts of the MAF against the Tuareg, inciting feelings of *egha* towards the state of Mali and encouraging action. By conveying such memories and the courage of resistance, *al-guitara* initially served to foster mutual encouragement and cohesion among the early rebel performers (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 645). The impact and reach of the genre, however, soon increased exponentially, as expressions of *egha* became justification for lyrical calls to arms:

Together, let us rise and let us join up

Please my brothers; let us unite in order to uprising (quoted in Belalimat, 2010, p. 163)

This capacity for mobilisation constituted the greatest revolutionary impact of *al-guitara*, as rebel leaders realised the benefits of the music to promote their cause and began providing money for guitars and equipment. *Al-guitara*, thanks to tape recorders and cassettes, soon spread beyond the intimate circle of rebel fighters, becoming the 'musical cult' of the youth in exile, spreading to the migrants' native Mali (Belalimat, 2010, p. 163). With no Tamasheq newspapers, radio or television stations in existence, the songs of the *ishumar* carried messages of hope, struggle and exile throughout Tuareg society (Morgan, 2011). Essentially, the music became 'a political news bulletin for propaganda and mobilisation' among the Tuareg (Borel, 2006, p. 132). In fact, the cassettes were so influential in rousing Tuareg youth to rebellion that the possession of one was deemed an act of sedition (Gill, 2007). Accordingly, due to its political critique, *al-guitara* was officially banned





by the Malian government during the early 1990s, giving rise to a clandestine circulation network. *Al-guitara* music, as a highly efficient means of disseminating Tuareg nationalist discourse, was a pivotal tool for the construction and propagation of a Tuareg national identity. Thus, these musical constructions of identity undermined Malian national unity and intensified societal divisions.

By 1990, the Tuareg rebels in exile had become disillusioned with Gaddafi and his unfulfilled promises, and returned to Mali to pursue their aims of independence. The political nationalist movement, propagated by the music of the *ishumar*, then found expression with an uprising against the Malian state. It can therefore be said that *al-guitara* directly shaped Tuareg political identity and planted the seeds for the "Second Tuareg Rebellion", disrupting Mali's fragile national cohesion. In the context of the rebellion itself, *al-guitara* constituted a 'locus for resistance' (Castelo-Branco, 2010, p. 245), as a space for the Tuareg to critique the political hegemony. For example:

We are mangled [...] by Mali against whom we fight  
I have a question for my brothers in my nation  
Consider the situation you are in (ag Alhabib, 2007b)

These lyrics reflect the Tuareg nationalists' view that central government policies threaten their culture and identity, and that only independence can guarantee a future for the Tuareg people and their culture (Morgan, 2014). The political aims of the *ishumar* were transposed to Tuareg society through *al-guitara* music, thereby providing the cultural space for the articulation of a Tuareg national identity. These musical constructions of identity impacted Malian national cohesion by propagating Tuareg detachment from the central state and advocating a competing nationalism.

Ultimately, internal divisions hindered the Tuareg nationalist insurgency. Agreements between the Malian government and Tuareg leaders in the Tamanrasset Accords of January 1991 and the National Pact of April 1992 laid the groundwork for the cessation of hostilities and decentralisation efforts in the North. The political position of the Tuareg then markedly improved, and decentralisation served to deflect calls for independence (Seely, 2001, p. 516). With these developments, *al-guitara* performers lost their clandestine and subversive character, new groups were formed, and guitar music became a popular musical genre among Tuareg youth (Belalimat, 2010, p. 165). Rasmussen (2006, p. 647) discusses such changes, demonstrating that many performances became oriented toward peace and reconciliation efforts. This can be seen in the advent of the *Festival au Désert* (FID), an annual event located in the remote outskirts of Timbuktu organised by Tuareg Manny Ansar, members of *Tinariwen*, and various other French and Malian funders and supporters (Morgan, 2013a, p. 42). The Festival, it will be argued, emphasised notions of belonging and collective identity through musical performance, thereby contributing towards the sentiment of national unity in the post-conflict environment.

### *The festival in the desert: peace and reconciliation*

The FID was originally organised to further the goals of the post-rebellion peace accords: reconciliation, revitalisation and "development" of the Northern region, as well as to promote international awareness of the Tuareg predicament (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 646). Ahmed ag Hamama (2009), the Festival's co-founder, stated that after the war ended, there was need for a forum for peace and a place of exchange between the communities in order to re-establish trust. The Festival served as an important symbol and means of reconciliation and unity: an explicit aim was to 'celebrate "La Flamme de la Paix" (The Flame of Peace)', the ceremony held in 1996 where over three thousand firearms were set alight, symbolically marking the end of the rebellion. Modelled on traditional nomadic gatherings, it was precisely the culture of the Tuareg that was harnessed to



extricate themselves from years of rebellion and under-development (Morgan, 2006). The Festival was attended by local inhabitants, Malians from the South, as well as foreign visitors. It showcased Tuareg music and culture to an increasingly global audience, as it garnered international renown in the decade after its inception. As such, Tuareg participants saw the Festival as 'a way of reaching out to the global community, creating intercultural dialogue, and building bridges between cultures' (Montague, 2016, p. 19).

The FID can, therefore, be seen as an alternative means toward pursuing the wider aims sought in the rebellion itself: gaining recognition of the Tuareg culture, as well as better integrating the Tuareg in Mali. The integral role of *Tinariwen* in organising the FID is crucial, since it demonstrates how ex-fighters turned to music to pursue their goals. As their spokesperson stated:

In the past they did fight with Kalashnikovs for the recognition of their cultural identity, but today they use guitars to try and promote the cause of their people and to promote peace (Dicko, 2009).

At the core of this transformation is *al-guitara's* divergence from themes of militancy and political critique, to broader themes including social issues, love and friendship. With this, many performances sought to promote a shift from protest to dialogue (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 634), therefore aiding the FID's goal of reconciliation. Gray (2015, p. 64) states that music can function as a 'bridge between the past and reconciliation' since it allows for the understanding of society in terms of its own interpretations of reality. Indeed, the presentation of Tuareg musical culture provided a platform to dissociate *al-guitara* from its militant and subversive nature, towards interpreting it as an assertion of Tuareg identity in a changing environment. Certainly, on a higher level, the Festival allowed the Northern desert region to be perceived not as a sinkhole of "bandits", but as a peaceful and tolerant asset (Morgan, 2006).

For the local performers themselves, playing on stage served to legitimise their cultural and musical practices, but for the Festival's attendees, listening to the music essentially created a space for encounter (Amico, 2014). One of Mali's most famed musicians from the Timbuktu region said of the Festival:

Every group in West Africa is here [...] With this spirit, people will not be divided again, but united (Farka Touré, 2003)

Thus, the Festival created a space in which cultural differences were overcome. By creating new forms of social cohesion and cultural exchange through music, the FID enabled participants to achieve a sense of collective Malian identity, envisioning a community unbound by divisive identities. It can, therefore, be concluded that the FID yielded a symbolic power, serving as an indicator of tolerance in the Northern region and, on a national level, contributing towards the goal of national unity in the aftermath of the rebellion.

With the imposition of Shari'a law in the North of Mali in 2012, however, the annual festival was forced into "exile". In the context of ongoing insecurity, the Festival in its original form has not been held since. The symbolism of FID's absence vis-à-vis the dynamics of national unity will be discussed in the final section. What follows will examine the impact of music's prohibition in Northern Mali and its detrimental implications for social cohesion in the country.



## **‘We do not want Satan’s music’: the imposition of Shari’a Law in Northern Mali**

Since the post-independence nation-building period, music has been a vital tool in the construction of a national identity and the propagation of national unity, with varying levels of adherence among the population. Musical constructions of identity also highlighted divisions, as they shaped concurrent opposing national identities, which culminated in the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s. Following this, music was at the core of reconciliation efforts and served to foster a collective identity in the context of the FID. Focusing on Mali as a subject of study poses an interesting case for wider debates about the relationship between religion and democracy, in which liberal democracy’s perceived requirement of secularism is deemed incompatible with Islam (Hashemi, 2009, p. 1). Indeed, the acceptance of music is one component of debates about religiosity in the Islamic world; thus, its proscription under Shari’a law in Mali can be analysed as part of this wider debate. It has been demonstrated that music is a vital device through which Malians have come to understand and express identities, and it has been instrumental in fostering inter-cultural exchange. How, then, would Malian society be impacted in the event of music’s absence? This section seeks to answer this question by discussing the issues of identity that came to the fore when Islamists captured the North and imposed Shari’a law, banning music. Before doing so, the co-existence, even intertwinement, of music and Islam in Mali prior to 2012 will be demonstrated. Prohibiting music, therefore, fundamentally raised questions regarding Malian identity, situated within a wider debate about religiosity and secularism.

On 22 August 2012, the following announcement was made by a spokesperson for MUJAO:

We, the mujahedeen of Gao, of Timbuktu and Kidal, henceforward forbid the broadcasting of any Western music on all radios in this Islamic territory [...] We do not want Satan’s music. In its place there will be Quranic verse. Shari’a demands this. (quoted in Morgan, 2013a, p. 21)

Despite a secular constitution, Islam is integral to Malian national identity and has been one of the few unifying factors among the population. The complex and gradual spread of Islam in Mali goes beyond the scope of this discussion. In broadly simplistic terms, Le Vine (2007, p. 77) states that it was not until the twentieth century under French colonial rule that Islam became the religion of most Malians. At this time, the cross-pollination of religious practice with local cultures and traditions resulted in a broad range of Islamic interpretations, and while most Malians broadly identify as Sunni (Bell, 2012), such practices have been substantially shaped by animism, as well as by loose affiliations to major Sufi brotherhoods (Peterson, 2012). Indeed, certain practices closely tied to Sufism remain key to what it means to be Muslim for many Malians (Soares, 2007, p. 79). Of significance is the centrality of music in Sufi religious practice, particularly in the context of the *dhikr* (remembrance) ritual – the rhythmic chanting of the names of God – which can include singing, dancing and musical instruments (Charry, 2000b, p. 556). Here, religious music is emphasised as a means of becoming closer to God (Denny, 2016, p. 252).

In fact, Skinner (2016, p. 110) speaks of how musical expressions of Islamic praise in Mali have been popularised and consumed through a variety of media. Further, he emphasises the influence of Islam on Malian popular music, and further argues that ‘the broad appeal (or call upon) Islam is part of what makes music “popular” in Bamako’. Musical forms of religious expression can be seen in the frequent insertion of Qur’anic verses or the inclusion of praise, into popular song texts. Skinner (2016, p. 116) uses the example of live performer Tata Diabeté, who at a wedding party sang ‘God! Who created the earth, The almighty’. As such, the combination of sacred themes with secular popular music is evident. We can, therefore, see the use of music as a major platform for Islamic expression and identification, and the intertwining of a “Malian” and “Muslim” identity.



Significantly, this prevalence of Islam in the public sphere is emphasised by Soares (2005, p. 238) as being instrumental in fostering a 'supralocal sense of shared Muslim identity' in Mali. Thus, it is evident that music has been a vital mechanism through which Malians have practised Islam and expressed religious praise. Crucially, music has also contributed to the construction, among the majority of Malians, of an identity including being both Muslim *and* Malian. Why, then, did the Islamists ban music?

The music ban can firstly be situated within the wider debate about Islam, secularism and politics in Mali (Soares, 2007, p. 212). Such a debate came to the fore in the 1990s, when political liberalisation allowed for an explosion in Muslim voluntary associations. Many of these were supported by Middle-Eastern interest groups, who were particularly focused on proselytising a specific interpretation of Islam – Salafism – to counter the Sufis' syncretic innovations, which they abhorred. One of these was the Pakistani Da'wa al-Tabligh, with whom Iyad ag Ghali – a key proponent of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s – is reported to have become involved in the early 2000s, leading to his adherence to the fundamentalist cause (Lloyd-George, 2012). Salafist groups follow the original path of Allah, as set down by the Prophet Mohammed in the Qur'an and the *hadith* (Morgan, 2013a, p. 107). Such a strict interpretation vastly differs from the majority of Muslims in Mali, who practise a form of Islam that is characteristically moderate. Thus, the espousal of Salafist doctrine in Mali, 'provoke[d] Malians to ask fundamental questions' about religion, morality and society, and the extent to which religion should govern everyday life (Morgan 2013a, p. 34). On a wider scale, the ban reflects increasing questions across the Islamic world about religiosity and the correct practice of Islam (Soares & Otayek, 2007, p. 17). One aspect of this debate is the lawfulness of music in Islam, on one side of which is the discussed Sufi principle of music's spiritual qualities. On the other side of the debate is the Salafi doctrine espoused by ag Ghali and the Islamic fundamentalists, which criticises the Sufis' elaborate musical practices as "heretical", fearing the intoxicating power of music (Salhi, 2013, p. 4).

Essentially, then, musicians in Mali have been on the "front-line" of a war between two different religious philosophies (Morgan, 2013a, p. 55). The imposition of Salafist doctrine was incongruous with the "Malian" Islam of syncretism and tolerance that characterised the country's culture and identity. Especially given the religious significance of music in Mali, justifying music's proscription on the grounds of Islam ultimately brought the very identity of many Malians into question. Musician Toumani Diabeté expressed such confusion:

I grew up with the Qur'an and the *kora* [...] that I would be in trouble for playing a traditional Malian instrument, a part of culture, I would never have imagined this in Mali (quoted in Höije, 2016)

The general perplexity of Malians towards the prohibition of music also reflects the way in which the Islamists were perceived as "alien". Notwithstanding the locally rooted MNLA movement, MUJAO and AQIM were generally seen as "foreign" organisations, despite the fact that some of their most prominent members were Malian nationals (Lecocq et al., 2013, p. 346). The alien form of Islam that quickly took control was fundamentally not *Malian*. With religion being one of the few unifying features of Mali's diverse ethnic landscape, the diffusion of new ideologies undoubtedly added another layer of tension and misunderstanding between the country's North and South (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015, p. 9). Thus, these events unsettled Mali's fragile cohesion and further questioned its already contentious national identity.

In terms of a blanket ban of music in a country by religious extremists, the only parallel from recent history can be drawn from the Taliban's extreme censorship of music in Afghanistan in 1996. This was justified by officials who argued that music has a 'corrupting influence [...] distracting [Muslims]



from their real duties: to pray and to praise Allah' (quoted in Baily, 2001, p. 39). Attributing music's proscription entirely to fundamentalist Islam, however, raises issues since there is no clear injunction within Islam against it. Different Qur'anic verses have been cited as being implicitly for and against music, and interpretations of the *hadith* in the debate have drawn varying conclusions from the same passages (Charry, 2000b, p. 554). Accordingly, Baily (2001, p. 41) argues that in the case of Afghanistan the ban was not directly related to Islam; rather, the Taliban were against any form of enjoyment or entertainment outside the sphere of religion. Similarly, many commentators on Mali see the music ban as aiming to destroy the country's rich culture and to destabilise the society that comes together around it. Morgan (2013a, p. 55), for example, emphasises that Malian musicians are, or are perceived to be, the conjurers of love, sensuality and joy – all the emotions the Salafi Islamists most revile and fear. The uniqueness of the circumstances whereby musicians were specifically targeted by militias gives much indication as to the role and power of music in Mali, which presented a threat to the Islamists' desire to impose authority.

Islamists threatened that they would cut out the tongue of famed Timbuktu musician Khaira Arby when they captured her (Coghlan, 2013). Tuareg musician Ahmed ag Kaedi was absent when militiamen ransacked his home and said they would 'cut all those fingers he uses to play that guitar'. The militiamen then proceeded to:

...Drag all [Ahmed's] musical equipment [...] into the courtyard. Amps, speakers, mics, a drum kit [...] a mixing desk and several guitars were heaped into a pile which was then doused in petrol and set alight (quoted in Morgan, 2013a, p. 54)

This account is typical of what happened to many musicians' homes, as well as live music venues and radio stations across the North of Mali. Such testimonies highlight the particularly dangerous position of musicians in the conflict, leading to the region becoming almost entirely devoid of music, musicians and indeed, in large part, people (Morgan, 2013a, p. 51). Altogether, over 350,000 Malians were displaced either internally or to neighbouring countries as a result of the conflict in 2012 (OCHA, 2013). These profound socio-cultural changes impacted the country's social fabric and weakened social cohesion. Having discussed the integral role music has played in constructing identities in Mali, and particularly in impacting national unity, it becomes evident that with the absence of music came the loss of a major force of cultural coherence and reconciliation.

In sections one and two, the role of the *jeli* and Tuareg poetry was discussed vis-à-vis their oral repertoires through which Malians and Tuareg alike have come to know their history and identity. It was through music that these oral histories have been retained and, thus, without music, Malians had lost an essential link to their past. Indeed, Bamako rapper Amkoullé (quoted in Morgan, 2013a, p. 94) sees this as a tactic of the Islamists, to 'destroy all reference, all memory and history' in order to replace it with their proposed Salafist doctrine. Further, the use of music as a tool to foster inter-cultural dialogue in Mali was discussed earlier, with reference to government initiatives (such as the *Biennales*), as well as more local initiatives (such as the FID). Essentially, music provided an excuse for people to come together in these contexts and fostered a collective Malian identity. Musician Vieux Farka Touré highlights this:

[Music] is our meeting place, where we're happy, where there's friendship and companionship... (quoted in Morgan, 2013a, p. 95)

It is evident, then, that in such an ethnically divided country, music was one of the most effective tools of socialisation and communal cohesion. Threatening this, as the Islamists did, inhibited a primary means through which ethnic groups in Mali articulated their own identities, as well as understood the identities of others. In a conflict that involved widespread violence and human rights



violations, relationships among the population were transformed and characterised by feelings of fear and distrust, resurrecting and deepening older divisions (Allegrozzi & Ford, 2013, p. 24). By obstructing the powerful role of music as a means of dialogue and unity, the ban deconstructed vital possibilities for national reconciliation and cohesion. In fact, sociologist Sujatha Fernandes (2013) uses the music ban in Mali to reflect on the power of music itself in a more general sense, stating that the loss of music as a means of social bonding, as a voice of conscience and as a mode of storytelling has 'taught us [that] music matters'.

What emerges from this discussion is that the ban of music in Mali, by unsettling the country's core values of religious syncretism and tolerance, has ultimately raised questions as to what it means to be "Malian", thereby undermining national cohesion. Identifying oneself as Malian or Muslim now entails complexities, such as: 'Who belongs to this nation? Who represents Islam?' (Skinner, 2016, p. 201). If music is deemed "un-Islamic", yet has historically been at the core of religious life in Mali, are religious identity and national identity in the country mutually exclusive? Such complexities persist following the uplifting of Shari'a law in February 2013, when Mali's Northern territory was liberated by a French-led operation. Islamists retain a lingering presence and musical performance, therefore, remains a hazardous activity. Building on this, the final section will discuss whether music can still play a role in cementing national cohesion in the aftermath of conflict.

## ***The role of music after the conflict***

Since the French-led intervention in 2013, Human Rights Watch (2017) have reported a steady increase in abuses against civilians in Northern Mali by Islamist armed groups, as well as rising inter-communal clashes. Further, Tuareg civilians remaining in Mali have often been stereotyped as suspected supporters of Islamists, and are fearful of reprisals by the Malian army and civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 42). As one woman from the Gao region concluded, 'the crisis has made everybody afraid of other people' (Oxfam International, 2013). The previous section highlighted the absence of music as a factor in exacerbating divisions between ethnic communities. As a result, the musicians who have been at the core of this largely ideological crisis have been led to consider the role they should play going forward. Given the centrality of music in constructing identities and impacting national cohesion in Mali, what role can music play in the country today, particularly for the purposes of national reconciliation and cohesion? This section will seek to evaluate this by firstly discussing the efforts of the Malian "A-listers", the focus of the international media, who portray a positive and optimistic vision of musical life in the country today. The post-conflict musical life in the North will then be discussed, as an aspect that has been largely sidelined by onlookers and which reserves a less optimistic position for music in national cohesion.

One reaction of musicians during the crisis has been to revitalise Malian music in order to re-build a nationalist sentiment (Skinner, 2016, p. 174). Since the music ban and the widespread media attention it generated, several Malian artists gained international exposure, as Western musicians sought to bring attention to the crisis. For example, the organisers of Glastonbury Festival in 2013 invited Malian acts to open its most renowned stage on each day in an act of "solidarity" (Morgan, 2013b). In another "show of solidarity", Western music collective Africa Express travelled to Bamako in October 2013 to 'revitalise the music scene' there and source new talent (Toledo, 2013). The greatest success story to come from this has been Songhoy Blues, a band formed of four musicians from the North who met in exile in Bamako. Since being scouted by Africa Express, the band have released two critically acclaimed albums and have toured internationally. The band, much like those other Malian artists in the international music scene, have used this platform as a means to raise awareness of Mali's conflict and to promote the country's culture. When I spoke to Aliou Touré, lead



singer of Songhoy Blues, he affirmed that the band's challenge was to 'spread Malian music and the Malian culture' and 'to talk about our story'. In doing so, these musicians have ensured that the global reaction to the crisis has been a particularly captivated and empathetic one (Morgan, 2013a, p. 76). Rather than the country being defined in terms of violence and disorder, the role of music in raising awareness has helped to define the country in terms of its musical richness.

A prominent theme among popular Malian artists in general has been to urge peace and reconciliation in their home country through their lyrics. For example, in Songhoy Blues' 'Désert Mélodie', the lyrics encourage a nationalist sentiment among Malians:

Today in Mali, they want to divide us...  
We are the same people...  
Mali we are all the same (Touré et al., 2015)

In their album notes, the band state that the purpose of this song is to 'call on people not to take sides' and to 'ask people to think of peace and find solutions'. Thus, by condemning violence and encouraging unity, it is hoped that the expressions of the musicians will motivate others. Another example is the recording of 'Mali-Ko' (Peace) by a collective of over 40 of Mali's most renowned musicians – Voices United for Mali – in response to the conflict. The song, in its 'multi-ethnic and multi-lingual display of artistry' (Whitehouse, 2013) encourages cohesion among the ethnic groups and frequently references the 'fatherland' and 'our ancestors', extolling traditional values of harmony. Affirming national unity, the lyrics repeat: 'Mali United, Mali Indivisible' (Voices United For Mali, 2013).

'Mali-Ko' exemplifies what Morgan (2015) labels the 'collective altruism' among Mali's musicians in response to the crisis. It carries a message of defiance, demonstrating their willingness to defend their country and its values (Whitehouse, 2013). The song also highlights the effort to revitalise Malian music in order to foster a sense of nationalist urgency. 'Mali-Ko' and other such examples of musical activism, however, gained their popularity from a 'new location of culture' (Skinner, 2016, p. 174), namely social media. Further, Aliou Touré told me that, since Songhoy Blues were launched straight into an international career, they do not have a large audience in Mali. At the same time, he underlined the importance of live performance in their home country, since people of all ethnicities convene to hear the music:

Music is one of the only ways that we can bring these people together and say something to them

Malian music has evidently been revitalised online and internationally, and such examples of musical activism have been the focus of international media regarding Malian music post-2012. As Aliou suggests, however, it is the ability of live music to bring people together that is of key importance for national cohesion. Indeed, as demonstrated earlier, live musical performance creates space for trust and the articulation of a collective identity. Whilst it is undeniable that these responses of popular musicians have raised the profile of Malian music and sent out powerful messages, little attention has been paid to those local artists who remain in the country. In order to determine the role of music in cementing national unity since the ban, it is important to survey the post-conflict musical culture in Mali itself.

Castelo-Branco (2010, p. 243) highlights how musical performance can provide a platform for dialogue among conflicting factions, stimulating communal feeling and, therefore, leading to reconciliation and peace. Reflecting this, and testament to Mali's rich musical culture, international and local actors in Mali have sought to utilise music to heal social relations following the 2012



conflict. One example is the concert portrayed in the documentary *They Will Have to Kill Us First* (2016), arranged by musician Khaira Arby in Timbuktu. The local population were invited, free of charge, to enjoy live musical performances to 'reconcile hearts' and 'erase the pain' of the conflict. The concert, by creating a space for people to come together and overcome differences, allowed Malians to imagine conflict resolution. It also demonstrated the role musicians assumed in the context of ongoing tensions, as Arby stated herself in the documentary that 'it's up to [...] the musicians to hold the country together'. The uncertainty and nervousness surrounding the organisation of the concert, however, must be remarked. Several security measures, such as maintaining the secrecy of the concert's time and location until the last minute, were taken in apprehension of Islamist attacks. Indeed, Morgan (2015) speaks of the Islamists' effect on local attitudes in the North, finding that there is continuing fear of outward displays of joy and music-making. Thus, the musical culture in the North remains harmed, contradicting the optimistic portrayals of the media. Music's role in rebuilding national cohesion in this context cannot be seen in such a straightforward way.

Further, as previously mentioned, the FID has been in "exile" from its desert home outside Timbuktu since 2012 due to the continuing instability in the North. Since 2013, the Festival's director Manny Ansar has reconceptualised the Festival as a travelling 'Cultural Caravan for Peace', showcasing Tuareg culture throughout Southern Mali and elsewhere in North Africa. The project seeks to provide a platform to meet and exchange ideas through music (Cultural Caravan for Peace, 2015). Optimistic of the caravan's role for national cohesion, its organisers envisioned it as being 'an important moment for national conciliation' (Maxwell, 2012). The efficacy of the original FID in achieving this has certainly been demonstrated, as discussed earlier. In fact, President Boubacar Keita – elected in August 2013 – and the UN have both named the FID as a priority in their strategy for reconciliation in the North (Morgan, 2013c). The inability to host the FID in its original form and location, however, points to the difficulty of national reconciliation following the 2012 events. Prior to the crisis, efforts to foster national cohesion involved, in very broad terms, reconciling ethnic groups. The FID was able to facilitate this goal by creating a space for ethnic groups to coalesce and imagine a collective Malian identity. The 2012 conflict has added a complex religious dimension to this, inhibiting music's ability to shape a Malian identity and, thereby, to effect cohesion. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the caravan's role as a discursive tool in the context of continuing insecurity, its stated aim in impacting national conciliation has become entangled in questions of religiosity.

To sum up the precarious position of music since 2012 in Mali, Baily's (2001, p. 45) contention in relation to Afghanistan that the absence of music was 'symptomatic and indicative of an *abnormal* life' can be transposed to the situation in Northern Mali. The FID's website (2013) affirms that the Festival will be in exile 'until the music can return to its roots with freedom of expression and dignity'. Here, Mali's musical *freedom of expression* within the context of Islam, of which the FID was a key signifier, can be labelled as a situation of "normality" in the country. In this state of affairs prior to 2012, the very *dignity* of music contributed to its importance in constructing what it means to be Malian and, thereby, impacted national cohesion. The continuing portrayal of music, however, as illegitimate or dishonourable in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, inhibiting the freedom of musical performance and resulting in the absence of the FID, indicates a situation of "abnormality" in Mali. In this context, the power of music for national cohesion is hindered due to the continued threat of Islamists. In sum, the FID represents "normality" vis-à-vis Malian musical freedom and its contribution to national cohesion.

The FID had been secretly scheduled to go ahead in late January 2017, but was again cancelled following a suicide attack in Gao two weeks before, killing at least 77 people (Maclean, 2017). Thus, there is an ongoing situation of "abnormality" as the crisis endures, and the ability of music





to foster cohesion in the North has been hindered by the continued presence of armed Islamist groups and the precariousness of musical performance. Until musical freedom can return without the threat of religious animosity, this situation will likely persist. Contrary to the media's optimism regarding Malian music, which has been largely focused on internationally famed musicians, the musical culture in the North today reveals a less optimistic role for music in cementing cohesion whilst instability persists. According to Høyer (2013, p. 4), for Mali to progress as a peaceful and democratic state, a process of national dialogue needs to take place, which can discuss the nature of the Malian nation and, in particular, the place of Islam within it. Perhaps once this has occurred, the role of music as a tool to construct identities and foster national unity could become vital once more in order to re-shape Malian identity.

## Conclusion

Throughout the post-colonial era, music has been a key mechanism through which identities have been constructed in Mali. This article has demonstrated that these musical constructions of identity have fostered national unity, and are a crucial way in which regimes have created a "Malian" identity and propagated national cohesion. The marginalised representations of Tuareg culture in this national narrative resulted in manifestations of Tuareg separatism, widely spread through the medium of *al-guitara* music, which reinforced divisions among a minority of the population. The nature of multi-ethnic tolerance and co-existence that prevailed until 2012 in Mali, however, points to the widespread adherence to the concept of national unity. Although this article has only discussed one component of these processes of identity construction, music, its position at the forefront of efforts to cement national cohesion points to its power and capacity to shape identities.

The implementation of Shari'a law in 2012 and the proscription of music restricted a vital means of national cohesion and contributed to the breakdown of Mali's social fabric. In the final section, it was concluded that the ongoing insecurity in the North following the 2012–13 crisis and the still precarious nature of musical performance has impaired music's capacity to rebuild national unity. This is due to the religious complexities underlying the conflict and the consequent uncertainty about what it means to be "Malian", restricting music's ability to shape a collective identity. Though this presents a somewhat dismal projection of music's role for national cohesion, it is not to say that music will not be a vital medium to foster unity going forward. Music remains a crucial platform for inter-cultural dialogue in the country, and can play a role in changing attitudes toward ethnic groups in the context of ongoing inter-communal tensions. An elaboration of this concept was not explored in this article, although the ways in which Tuareg music can be used as a means of education to overcome negative stereotypes is worthy of further research.

Prior to conducting in-depth research for this article, a somewhat straightforward argument was anticipated regarding music's importance for national cohesion in Mali, thereby advocating its value post-2012. Such an impression was derived from the way in which the media have optimistically portrayed the prosperity of Malian music in response to the crisis. As discussed in the final section, however, these portrayals have focused on internationally renowned musicians who have raised the profile of Malian music, rather than those musicians in the country who can contribute to national cohesion in practice. Uncovering the reality of the ongoing insecurity and inter-communal strife affecting the musical culture of the Northern region led to the questioning of this positive conclusion.

Ultimately, this article has underscored the historical importance music has held for Mali's multi-ethnic population. The events of 2012 made clear the cohesiveness that the country's music fostered, especially as the once vibrant musical culture has yet to return fully to the population who remain divided. The music ban and its effects are just one component of an ongoing debate about Islam



and secularism in Mali, in which, as Morgan (2013a, p. 48) states, musical life can be interpreted as the 'barometer of social well-being'. Indeed, when musical freedom is allowed to return to the North, this will mark the beginning of a process in which Mali's multi-ethnic cohesion and peaceful co-existence can be reconstructed.

### ***About the author***

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