

JALIYA CROSSING CULTURES: SWEETNESS, TIME AND MONEY

By Lisa Feder (January 2020)

Book Synopsis

This book brings readers deep into the remarkable culture of *jaliya*, a musical and verbal art from the Mande region of West Africa. *Jaliya* is revealed through my experience as an American student and patron of the art over the past twenty years. This culture, which has already been well described in scholarly literature, is presented in a new light, as a cultural practice whose intention is to influence its practitioners to act as members of an enlightened society. Meanwhile, the practice as it currently exists is in a state of transformation. What originated in small-scale farming communities is moving into the cosmopolitan and globalized arena in cities such as Conakry, New York, and Paris. This ancient culture, transmitted through apprenticeship from teacher to student for 800 years, is in peril, and its practitioners question its survival.

Jalis are described in literature as oral historians, mediators, advisers, and more, who are born into their trade through one of six family lineages. They are part of a greater *nyamakala* caste, those who transform raw materials into objects that have a use, meaning, and inspiration for humans. Like the smiths and masons that sculpt materials such as metal, wood, and leather, into useful and esoteric objects, the jalis sculpt sound. They skillfully compose musical patterns on balafon and kora, and use their voices to influence members of society to action. Through their music, they motivate listeners to act according to the highest of Mande values such as a sense of community, generosity, humility, courage, and cool-headedness, among others. The musical event itself, serves as a training ground that helps social members soothe and resolve life's tensions by reinforcing a sense of harmony among individuals.

Despite the major shifts that have occurred in Mande history from the Malian Empire (1235 CE) to European colonization, to national independence, to the formation of ex-patriot enclaves overseas, jalis pride themselves on their adaptability, which has ensured the continuity of their essential role in society. This book will demonstrate the

steadfast values and how they are transmitted in spite of changing contexts and challenging life circumstances. It will, likewise, demonstrate the trials, tribulations, and corruptions that the practice undergoes as a result of blending into a global economy. The last chapters expose how practitioners are concerned, as are anthropologists like me, that the pressures of globalization are degrading the core of *jaliya* and a sense of Mande enlightened society to the point of no return. This book concludes with the hard question: If *jaliya* has been changing and adapting for so many generations to all kinds of influences, then what is challenging their ability to adapt to current situations? What is the nature of this new pressure, what effect might it have on the future of *jaliya*, and lastly, why should we, non-Mande people, care?

This ethnography is fashioned after a recent movement among a group of anthropologists that explores and reveals the kind of perspective gained from an embodied, sensorial, and reflexive approach to anthropological research (*See* Elliot and Culhane, Pink). Subjecting myself to my teacher's instructions has given me a particular kind of insight into *jaliya* and its importance in Mande society. My understanding draws on tacit knowledge I intuit from the ways in which my teachers sculpt my mind, my body, and my comportment in life. Reflexivity is a natural part of the process. Through continual reflections, I understand the shift occurring in my character as my culturally conditioned patterns, or *habitus*, are shed, in part, as I take on a Mande sensibility. I reveal this newly emerging methodological approach to fieldwork, which I will refer to as a transformative ethnography through the storyline. My approach to learning *jaliya* has necessarily influenced my literary style in conveying the story to readers; I reveal the wisdom of this tradition through lively anecdotes and analyses told from my perspective, produced in collaboration with my teachers, in a way that the readers are drawn into the story, themselves. Though my training and practice as an anthropologist informs this study, my language avoids jargon in favor of blending story telling with personal analytical reflections.

The contribution of this book is twofold. First, it provides a deep ethnographic description of the meaning of and wisdom in *jaliya* within the Mande community from an untold perspective, offering insight into the cross-cultural transferability of local wisdom as it merges into new global realities. Second, this book offers a compelling argument for

crossing cultures through an embodied, reflexive practice of a traditional art. By coming to exist between two world perspectives, that of the dominant culture and that of the local culture, I explore with my informants how to merge into the global economy while maintaining our mutual values; as such, I determine that it will take some transformation on both sides, something not typically admitted in the field of anthropology.

Because of its dual contribution, this book will appeal to anthropology and ethnomusicology professors and students alike who are interested in pursuing deep ethnographic fieldwork from an embodied, and therefore, transformative practice. It will also appeal to social scientists who are interested in the most current events in Mande *jali* music, and more generally, on the transformation of traditional arts as they shift from the local to the global context.

Related Works

This book builds on essential previous researcher on *jaliya* (also *djeliya*, *jeliya*) and Mande music in the fields of ethnomusicology and anthropology, as well as select seminal ethnographies highlighting apprenticeship in the arts. Eric Charry's "Mande Music" (2000 University of Chicago Press) and Thomas Hale's "Griots and Griottes" (1999/2007 Indiana University Press) are foundational resources for me, although both intentionally do not emphasize their subjective viewpoint where as I intentionally use mine throughout. Barbara Hoffman's "Griots at War" (2001 Indiana University Press) offers a deeply ethnographic, at times subjective, but mostly linguistic approach to reveal the intricate tensions and resolutions within and among *jalis* in Kita, Mali. Jan Jensen's essay, "The Griot's Craft" (2000, LIT press, Hamburg), offers invaluable insights into the improvisational elements of *jali* diplomacy in Kela, Mali. My work differs from Hoffman and Jensen in that I focus on how *jalis* shape me, personally, according to their world view and as a result, I see through *jali* eyes.

Jaliya in transformation from the local to the national to the global economy is addressed specifically by several authors. Mamadou Diawara's article, "Le griot à l'heure de la globalization" (1996, Cahiers d'études africaines) offers excellent insights in how *jaliya* in West Africa has changed with radio and other technology up to 1996. Graham Counsel addresses the effects of the *Authenticité* project of nationalization of culture on

jaliya. Eric Charry addresses the commercialization of jali music. My work carries this important subject in the present reality, exposing, for one example, the ongoing power struggle between *jaliw* and *jalimusw* (*male and female jalis*) as it plays out in the context of New York City that belies a deeper dilemma in the future of jaliya. My work interacts with articles by ethnomusicologist David Racanelli who provides the most up-to-date work on jaliya in New York (Racanelli in *Ethnomusicology*) from his experiential point of view. My book differs from the above mentioned works in that it offers relatable anecdotes meant to draw the reader in to the challenging, often moving, and sometimes shocking experiences of harmonizing into jali culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Considering the intensive nature of ethnographic fieldwork, there are only a few authors that reveal their methodological processes within their ethnographies, or the transformation that occurs as one subjects one's mind and body to the trials and tribulations of apprenticing in the field. Paul Stoller's seminal "In Sorcery's Shadow" (1987 University of Chicago Press), Greg Downey's lessons in "Learning Capoeira" (2005 Oxford University Press), Tomie Hahn's "Sensational Knowledge" (2007 Wesleyan University Press), and John Chernoff's "African Rhythm and African Sensibility" (1979 University of Chicago Press) each contain the style of methodology—embodied learning through apprenticeship—that I emulate in my own research and they are among the rare examples. *Sweetness, Time, and Money* draws on these studies and extends the argument for practicing fieldwork through apprenticeship in the arts. My writing style is also inspired by these ethnographic styles of writing, which are often both personal and anecdotal, and takes this style even further in an attempt to apply my oral-historical-musical training to ethnographic writing prose.

Structure of the Book

Metaphoric for the theme of jali music, tension-and-resolution is the running theme through this book in both structure and content. The book is organized in twelve chapters broken into four parts similar to jali musical composition—12/8 time signature; Part I: Innocent Beginnings, Part II: Intensive Trainings, Part III: Crossing Over, and Part IV: Living in the Between. In Part I the author is enchanted by the music and the culture. In Part II, blending into the new culture is more trying than it seems as the author tries to

get along in the Gambia, on her own. In Part III the author relinquishes more easily to the teachings of her jali, and undergoes a transformative process of seeing through a new perspective. In Part IV the author and her informants are living between two worlds, two sensibilities, and navigating between them can be both anxiety-producing and creatively inspiring. The content in these chapters includes familiar, congenial story-telling in which important themes around sweetness, time and money resurface in multiple stories, showing various perspectives, and ultimately the researcher's progress in shifting her *habitus*, and ultimately her world view until she can see these themes through two, very different angles. The transformation in world views underscores moral imperatives that exist in both cultures that are not fully digestible until the reader has encountered and practiced them through several situations. The conclusion recapitulates the meaning in these lessons by which time the reader will have already intuited them to some degree, him or herself. The subthemes address the conflicts and resolutions as the author shifts from an American perspective to a Mande perspective on matters of sweetness (or love) in human relations, the usage of time, and the circulation of money.

Chapter Overview

Part I

INNOCENT BEGINNINGS: MEETING WEST AFRICA THROUGH A MUSICAL PRACTICE

The initial process of learning West African music and culture seems confusing and captivating all at once. Deeper interpersonal lessons lurk beneath early stages of embodied learning while the open-hearted nature of the Gambians draws me in.

I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction starts with a challenging scenario in the Gambia, from which develops a short character sketch of me, Lisa Feder, growing up with an amalgam of cultures in New York City, my backyard. With an intense passion for music and deep concern for the natural environment, my intense curiosity for living in and learning from far away cultures started from a young age and subsequently shaped the way I do anthropology. This book presents the spirit of jaliya from the inside out, from my lived and embodied experience of it.

II. EMBODYING MUSIC, EMBODYING CULTURE: FROM JEMBE TO JALIYA

My introduction to Mande music starts when I learn to play the jembe drum with Americans in Maine. The jembe, although not a jali instrument, introduces me to the polyrhythmic compositions and community style of playing and quickly reveal to me the psychological and social benefits that Mande music has on the being as I learn to play it. It is while drumming that I first encounter Gray Parrot playing the kora, a lute-like instrument of the griots from the same Mande culture. Taken by the spirit of his kora music, I gradually fall head-deep into learning the unusual cultural practice of jaliya.

III. SWEETNESS IN THE GAMBIA

‘Adiata Baké!’ meaning ‘It Is Sweet!’ characterizes my first trip to the Gambia, West Africa. I am lured into the sweetness of kora music while sitting with the Jobarteh family of jalis under the stars in the Gambian countryside. The feeling that the jali music creates is mirrored in the hospitality and kindness of my host Gambian family, the Kanye’s. We sense the immediate allure of West Africa that pulls us in through the heart.

Part II

INTENSIVE TRAININGS: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS IN CLASHING SENSIBILITIES

Getting deeper into Mande culture, I am compelled to sync up with my Gambian and Guinean teachers, which reveals a more tumultuous practice than anticipated.

Moments of anxiety bring our different cultural modalities on issues of money and time to the forefront.

IV. MOVING WITH GAMBIANS TAKES TIME AND MONEY

Things grow more complex as I start ‘moving’ with Gambian friends. I discover a different moral imperative from my guides about how people spend time and exchange money. The differences are felt viscerally, in my body, and cause moments of tension and confusion between my hosts and myself. The music serves as a metaphor in that I practice complicated balafon rhythms that evade my mental

understanding; yet still I manage to reproduce them physically by mimicking the moves of my teacher. Embodied learning without understanding becomes the method, by default, of learning to survive in the Gambia.

V. DOING TIME IN THE BALAFON WORKSHOPS, USA

I receive intensive training on the balafon with Abou Sylla in the comfort of my own culture in Northeastern United States. Yet through Abou's teaching styles, Africa seeps in and causes blockages in mutual understanding. Bodily learning-by-doing takes precedence over verbalized learning-out-of-context, and my deeply engrained cultural habitus to intellectualize prove difficult to overcome, skewing the way I understand and learn the music. I am forced to break into a new modality of experiencing the world by giving up control and trusting in the teacher's method. The results underscore the wisdom in learning Mande culture through a musical practice.

VI. A DIFFERENT RHYTHM IN GUINEA

Now more familiar with Mande music and culture, I go with the flow in Guinea, yet I am still absorbed by the chaos that is Africa. Little moments of insight ignite as Abou's brother, Bengali makes me laugh by telling jokes nonverbally, through the balafon. Tensions mount when another European student struggles with the Guinean ways of doing things, community style. The hodge-podge of life laced with moments of cross-cultural tensions come to a grand resolution when this bi-cultural compound of fote (white people) and Guineans share in a jali musical ritual.

Part III

CROSSING OVER: INTEGRATING INTO JALI LIFE

Close relationships form between American students, particularly me, and our jali teachers, particularly Famoro Dioubate, in a New York context. Again, the sweetness in music and human relations entices us to seek deeper connections with the practitioners of this old cultural practice. However, tension mount when cultural expectations around money and time are not easily translatable. Jalis and Americans

misunderstand one another and relationships once based on sweetness break down from a lack of trust on both sides.

VII. JALI TIME IN NEW YORK

The timing I learn in the balafon music with Famoro has congruencies in the timing and rhythms of his day-to-day life. I must readjust my own rhythms in my own hometown to match his pace of life, recalling lessons from moving with Gambians in chapter three. Slowing down, waiting for answers to be revealed, interacting with people at times not mandated by the clock shows that jali time can persist and offer its wisdom out of the West African contexts if we should choose to give it a chance.

VIII. JALI SWEETNESS IN NEW YORK

The sweetness that pervaded my relationships during my first trip to the Gambia is recreated in New York when jalis play in small, private settings. My heart pours open from these musical encounters. In jali cultural reality, these heart-felt moments of sweetness are the moments in which patrons support their jalis, financially. As an American privy to such moments, I do not know how to respond to this feeling of gratitude. It is that emotion that paves the way for a jali to ask for, or expect, financial compensation.

IX. JALI MONEY IN NEW YORK

Money issues cause great tensions when Famoro continually asks for donations from his American students to finance his life. The students generally expect him to earn his living like the rest of New Yorkers, and each student has different ways of handling the pressure. People dig their heels into their respective cultural norms, and relationships suffer and break. The issue points to a larger problem in translating between a community-based economy versus a global economy, highlighting what is at stake in both modalities.

Part IV

LIVING IN THE BETWEEN

The last three chapters expose the interesting challenges that my informants and I face when living “in the between” of two cultural modes of being. Again, moments of tension are potentially creative opportunities for making informed decisions about which modality to draw on when living in bi-cultural contexts.

X. THE RECORDING PROJECT: COMMERCIALIZING JALI MUSIC

Having recognized the cross-cultural benefits and fundamental problems translating between jaliya on the home turf and jaliya abroad, I devise a plan to help Famoro earn a living by mediating between the two extremes: I decide to produce an album. In the process, I find that even with all the lessons I thought I learned over the years, I still fall into jali traps of giving more money than I wanted and not producing what I had hoped for. The project becomes unsustainable and in the process, Famoro and I both learn from each other how we need to transform our habitual patterns to make jaliya work in a non-Mande context.

XI. JALIYA IN MANDE SCENES IN NEW YORK AND PARIS

How does jaliya function in Mande, ex-patriot social circles in two cities abroad? I attend all-Mande jali events that expose both the roots in the ancient times of the Malian Empire, and the transitions that are effected by being part of a translocal community in the global economic reality. The emphasis on female singers and away from the instrumentalists, the condensed time, the pressures to make money, and the ostentatious displays of wealth among the patrons replace the old values of community and humility. Sweetness, Money, Time, are related to specific Mande values of cool-headedness, humility, generosity, and community. However, they are losing authenticity, according to jalis, when the jali ritual is performed in the New York and Parisian contexts.

XII. JALI MUSIC IN COSMOPOLITAN SCENES IN NEW YORK

Jali music in cosmopolitan scenes has its advantages over jaliya practiced in Mande ex-patriot communities. The World Music scene in which jali music becomes a part, whether manifested as jazz, classical, or jam band dance music opens a space for

instrumentalists playing balafon, kora, ngoni and guitar to work their talents on a naïve audience who appreciates their skills and allure. Here, the instrumentalists reignite their musical talents playing to an awed, non-African audience. The relationship between a jali musician and a Western listener differs greatly from African contexts in which the listeners play a significant role in the performance. How is this changing jaliya forever more?

CONCLUSION

The conclusion brings together the repeating patterns of sweetness in human relations, and the circulation of time and money. The tensions my informants and I experience in relating around these issues, and the process toward resolutions, highlights two different world views, one, tending toward the West African traditional sensibility now in transition, and the other, toward the more dominant European/American sensibility. Irreconcilable differences in ways of handling these components lead the author to conclude that both cultures are in need of some transformation wherever these two modes of being meet. There is no definitive answer to the problem of how and whether jaliya will survive the turn toward commercialization and global integration, but what is clear is that the world can benefit from its wisdom of bringing people together.

About the Author

Lisa Feder has been studying Mande music since 1997, long before she became a doctoral candidate at Cornell, where she made jaliya her focus. Born of a passion for polyrhythmic percussion, and enhanced through a fascination with West African culture, Lisa has formed long-term friendships with her jali mentors, the most prominent of which is with Jali Famoro Dioubaté and his wife, Missia Saran Dioubaté. Her extensive travels have taken her from France to Israel, from Costa Rica to Brazil, where she spent significant time with the Kayapo indigenous tribe, and finally to the Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal. She now lives in Paris, France where she is developing an association for the cultural promotion and education of jali music and Mande culture. In each location to which she has travelled, Lisa chooses to live with local families and take part in their

daily life to the degree that her own cultural habitus has become a conglomeration of smatterings of all her formal experience. Aside from academics, Lisa practices yoga and studies Buddha-dharma philosophy, and spends time in silent meditation retreats. She is also an avid lover of ocean sports, particularly kite-surfing.