

Other Feminisms: The Articulation of Gender Through Music in Tuareg, Mande and Suyá Cultures — by Michael Zarathus-cook

Modern feminism is often identified with the intellectual discourses of western countries and institutions, and while no one disputes the admissibility of feminist ideas to the global population, the advances made by feminists in non-western countries go relatively unsung. The present essay will examine how the participation of women in the composition and performance of music describes and normalizes their relation to men, across three cultures: the Tuareg people of Niger and Mali, the Suyá people of Brazil, and the Mande people of West Africa. The guiding constraint that I use for relating musical traditions to the larger social organization of their participants is to exercise a high degree of caution in the attempt to answer the question of cause-and-effect as it pertains to the relationship between music and culture. A particularly striking example of an instance wherein music is placed as the *cause* of cultural phenomena is the case of ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger's understanding of the Suyá people when he argues that "*it is musical events that create the dualism of Suyá social organization.*" (Seeger 1979, 392)¹. We find a very similar sentiment echoed in an anecdote by the Scottish writer and politician, Andrew Fletcher, that precedes Seeger by two centuries: "*I knew a very wise man . . . that . . . believed if a man were permitted to make all the Ballads, he need not care who should make the Laws of a Nation.*" (Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun 1704)². This conception of the relationship between music and culture is fairly counterintuitive to the general assumption that from a people's culture *arises* their music. While I can only abbreviate the complexities of these opposing concepts here—and I believe neither holds complete sway—it does provide a fascinating example of music being not only a vector of culture, but the root of culture itself. It then follows that one should expect that we can find in musical performance not only the ancient vestigial traces but also the current innovations and advances of a people's culture, in this case as it relates to women's rights.

The female musicians of *tende*—a canon of songs sung by women and accompanied by a so-named drum—are an example of musicians on the vanguard of advancing women's rights through musical performances. I came upon the genre via a local concert that featured Bombino, an emerging Tuareg group whose style of music is referred to as *tichoumaren* (which translates literally to 'guitar music' in Tamasheq, the language of the Tuareg). The conceptual translation of *tichoumaren*, however, is 'protest music', and is sung exclusively by male rebels (Rasmussen 2014, 267)³. We find this same gender-based separation of genres in the music of the Suyá people, which is divided primarily into *akia* (shout songs exclusively performed by men) and *ngere*, wherein women are sometimes allowed to participate as a group or with other men (Seeger 1979, 380)⁴. Unlike Suyá music, contemporary music of the Tuareg presents a more obvious instance of culture shaping musical tradition, whereby the culture is that of a nomadic people enduring the turmoils of political persecution (Rasmussen 2014, 264)⁵, as well as resistance to Islamic conversion (Nelson 2009, 58)⁶. Of relevance is the hypothetical question that can be formulated in regards to *tichoumaren*: if a culture of resistance inspires the male of a population to cultivate a musical genre of protest, are the women of that culture, owing to the generally diffused sentiment of activism, more likely to pursue autonomy and revolt against

subjugation on the basis of gender within their society, which is then expressed in their music? *Tende*, as a genre, seems to be an affirmative answer to that question. *Tende* is the counterpart to *tichoumaren*, protest songs by women against threats that are both internal (patriarchal structures) and external (political stresses), as well as an establishment of their status:

“Ideally, tende music reflects and reinforces Tuareg women’s status. Traditionally, it is one of several sources of women’s power. In rural communities, women inherit, own, and manage livestock, build, maintain, and own the tent, and have the right to initiate divorce, travel, and receive male visitors, even after marriage.” (Rasmussen 2014, 268)⁷.

Similar to the social organization of the Suyu people of Brazil, Tuareg society is not definitively matrilineal or patrilineal, but unlike the Suyu people, constant interaction with neighbouring communities gradually destabilizes traditional expectations of the relations between men and women, and this is expressed and perpetuated in musical performances. The relative openness of Tuareg society, who are part of the larger Berber population, perhaps relates to their tendency for a more progressive culture in musical performance, in comparison to the Suyu people who rarely allow their women to participate vocally in musical performances:

The Suyu say that the singers want to be heard by the women. Women never sing akia; they are the audience. Specifically men say they want to be heard by their mother and sisters. They say that if a man sings well, his mother and sisters [...] will be happy. (Seeger 1979, 380)⁸

Though political instability further disrupt the institutions that otherwise promote gender equality in Tuareg culture, anthropologist Susan Rasmussen points out that Tuareg women *“continue to exercise much influence through their capacity to publicly ridicule, as well as praise, men”* (Rasmussen 2014, 269)⁹. The courage of Tuareg women in the face of perpetual turmoil and dislocation due to regional conflicts—which the men share and express in *tichoumaren*—is expressed in *tende*, *“As many become impoverished, men feel greater threats to their masculine pride. The poetry of the tende songs, composed and sung by women, alludes to male battle heroes, labor migrants, and Islamic scholars, personal sentiments of love and anger, female kinspersons, friends, and rivals.”* (Rasmussen 2014, 269)¹⁰.

We encounter this same tendency to use musical performance for the purpose of feminism with female *jeli* musicians of Mande culture and their pursuit of inclusion in *ngaraya*, the highest tier of the *jeli* canon:

“Many women jeli singers (jelimusow) have a special claim to ngaraya, and some also seek to position themselves within the canon, as they increasingly move into the centrestage of Malian popular culture.” (Durán 2007, 569)¹¹

Jelimusow are, in that respect, similar to women who sing *tende*, both of whom are vigorous proponents of what Rasmussen describes as the ‘other feminisms’ and ‘other modernities’ that can be expressed through music (Rasmussen 2014, 263)¹². *Jelimusow* however

have been more successful than *tende* women at claiming their own stake in a national music scene traditionally dominated by men, as “more than 70 per cent of musicians featured on Malian television broadcasts are women.” (Schulz 2001, 229)¹³. *Jeli* as a musical tradition is much older and has a more illustrious canon than *tende*, with a hierarchical system of cultivation (*ngaraya*) that can be adjusted to not only to *include* women, but also begin to prioritize their contemporary contributions to the canon:

“As with the term *jeli*, *ngara* is non-gendered, and can be applied to both men and women. Much of the discourse on *ngaraya*, however, emphasizes the *jelike* (male *jeli*) as providing the canon, while the *jelimuso* is often seen as straying from and actively debasing it. There are very few women singers who are held up as role models.” (Durán 2007, 574)¹⁴

Notice the similarity between the satirical role of the *jelimuso* in respect to *ngaraya* and that of *tende* musicians in respect to the men they sing about. In light of what Seeger and Fletcher had to say earlier about the significance of music to culture, we should understand the achievements of women in both of these musical traditions as of utmost consequence in the proliferation of feminist ideas. We should simultaneously be perplexed by how it is we find in the Suyu people of Brazil—the poster case of music as the precursor to social systems—a perpetuation of female subjugation through a musical tradition. Does the less-than-obvious question then follow that *there are fundamentally anti-feminist musical traditions*? Before taking a closer look at how Seeger arrives at the conclusion that Suyu music prescribes Suyu culture, we’ll examine a reference made by ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán that proposes an origin to the current condition of *jelimuso* in respect to *jelike*, a proposition that is antithetic to the causal syntax which Seeger ascribes to Suyu culture and music:

“Bakari Soumano, Chief of Griots of Mali (*jelikuntigi*) from 1992-2003 explains that although women can be *ngaraw*, their power in society was diminished because they were not included at the original meeting between Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mali empire (c.1235) and his generals when they drew up the charter of Mande society.” (Durán 2007, 574)¹⁵

Soumano’s hypothesis, which is at best an oversimplification of the significance of a real or imagined conference, nevertheless feels more intuitive inasmuch as it describes contemporary exclusion of women in music as a *result* of cultural foundations that precede musical traditions. Contrast that to the special case of the Suyu people, or at least a specialty which Seeger suggests is the reason our usual understanding “that music is an “art,” a primarily aesthetic and therefore incidental activity, has led us astray with respect to Lowland South American music. To these societies music is a fundamental part of social life, not merely one of its options.” (Seeger 1979, 392)¹⁶. So special is this case that instead of understanding the exclusion of Suyu women from singing *ngere* as perpetuated by a culture—like many others—wherein the social significance of women are measured by their relations to men, he brings our attention instead to a culture that is perpetuated by a musical tradition (and its dual genres):

In conclusion I want to make a point central to my understanding of ethnomusicology and the lowland South American Indian societies. I have not argued that the social organization of the Suyá is prior to the musical structure of their performances. I am not saying that the dualism of the music is a simple reflection of the dualism of their society [...] The music, far from being a reflex, is part of the creation and continual recreation of the dual features of Suyá society. Thus the dual structure of music is fundamental, not reflexive. What is expressed by singing is crucial, not incidental. And the very importance of music in Society—in the talk of its members and the amount of time and resources devoted to musical activities—may lie in the active role music plays in the creation and life of society itself: its musical creation and musical living. (Seeger 1979, 392)¹⁷

In light of ‘*what is expressed by singing is crucial, not incidental*’, and the fact that Suyá women are not allowed to sing nearly as often as men, the earlier question of whether or not there are fundamentally anti-feminist musical traditions should seem perhaps less absurd. For the female musicians in Tuareg and Mande society, who are pressing for inclusion on the same platforms of musical performance that their male counterparts enjoy, the answer to that question should be *no*. Maintaining a musical tradition *should* be compatible, to an extent, with the evolution of gender relations. The degree of difficulty which a female musician encounters in doing so is significantly increased if her presupposition is that musical traditions *prescribe* cultural norms, instead of the notion that an evolving and bidirectional flow of influence exists between music and culture.

I admit that Seeger’s conclusion is arrived at and elaborated by a considerable amount of nuance, *and* that it is more so a *description* of a special case rather than a normative proposition. Nevertheless it provides an opportunity to examine the complexities of the unique relationship between music and culture. Inasmuch as it is a decent sign, music is not a thing *in and of itself*. Music simultaneously indicates tradition as well as cultural innovations—like the ones pursued in feminism—while also influencing the latter. To describe and accept music as the primary cause of culture—a *crucial* cause—is perhaps to neutralize its unique feature as a signifier and indicator of a culture. We see this unique feature, for example in the way the music of *tichoumaren* express the distresses of men towards external political forces, and *tende* in turn mocks these same men to the extent that they are perpetuation subjugation of the female population internally. In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated how contemporary Tuareg and Mande musical performances are used to normalize feminist ideas, in contrast to the musical traditions of the Suyá people whose subjugation of women seems to be perpetuated by their musical tradition.

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