

Wassalou singing to almost operatic heights. But Mr. Koite's music is more mercurial. His singing is warm and direct over instrumentation that constantly changes styles. Big-boned and affable, with a head of neat dreadlocks, he says his lifelong goal is to make music that touches every Malian culture, of which there are many.

The question is why?

We were sitting, sweating in the 110-degree heat at one end of a large courtyard of what in Africa is called a compound, a group of low buildings that looks more like a motel than the huts that once might have stood here. Mr. Koite and some of his 17 siblings (his father had four wives) live in cinder-block rooms all around. At one end, the five musicians from his band, Bamada, were setting up for a rehearsal. Nearby, women were cooking and children were playing. It was a typical urban Malian scene — except

David Hecht, a freelancer based in Dakar, Senegal, writes about culture.

for Mr. Koite's band and his shiny gold 1985 Mercedes-Benz parked in the middle of it.

"I guess I'm a kind of ambassador," he said, speaking impeccable French, "but one who is resident in his own country." Although he is often on tour in Europe and the United States (he will perform at the B. B. King Blues Club and Grill in Manhattan on Thursday), he says he will always remain based here. One might wonder why. There are beautiful cities in Africa, but this isn't one of them.

Dead flat and surrounded by barren mountains that trap the stifling heat, the Bamako area is much like Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, only with dirt tracks instead of freeways and red dust instead of pollution. Urban sprawl here is out of control as thousands of people come in each year from the impoverished rural areas. Diverse cultures live together, forging a kind of common identity.

Mali has been divided by ethnic tensions between northerners and southerners that

The Malian Habib Kiote hopes to use his music to promote a national pop culture in his ethnically divided country.

have led to blood shed. One of Mr. Koite's achievements has been to create a song based on music from a northern ethnic group and make it popular in the south. Like many intellectuals here, he maintains that for his country to move forward, a national popular culture must be built out of the old ethnic-based ones.

Still he mostly talks about music, not politics. "There are so many different types," he said. "You'd have to go to every village, each with its own musical tradi-

tions."

Mali is three times the size of California with few roads, much of it desert. In some areas the music sounds like the blues and is widely believed to be its progenitor. But other music uses Moorish modes that sound almost Spanish, and still others, rooted in pentatonic scales, can sound distinctly Asian.

"It was easier for me to get to know music in the West than some of the music right here where I live," he said.

Despite the variety, Malian music shares at least one common characteristic: little melodic loops that repeat, sometimes for hours, much like the music of the American minimalist Phillip Glass. Mr. Koite uses the word "cyclical" to describe the pattern. The loops are often played behind a singer reciting family genealogies or lavishing praise on his patrons. The challenge for contemporary musicians here is to take the musical loops and singing styles and give them a contemporary musical structure.

The challenge is not just how but for whom. In the United States alone, Mr. Koite has many audiences. Besides die-hard world music fans, Afro-centric black Americans and jazz buffs (he recently toured with the Art Ensemble of Chicago), he is one of the few African artists to have crossed over into rock 'n' roll. His catchy hit, "I Wassiye," has been played on what is known in the music business as "adult alternative" radio stations throughout the United States, typically a precursor to reaching mainstream audiences.

His reputation as a guitar player has become almost mythical, combining rock and classical techniques with Malian tunings that make the guitar sound like a kora or ngoni. After Bonnie Raitt heard him play once she was quoted as saying, "I would drink your sweat." Rolling Stone magazine calls him "the biggest pop star of the West African nation of Mali."

The "biggest pop star" for Rolling Stone

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readers perhaps, but not for Malians. "Habib wouldn't fill the local stadium," said Djibril Kane, director of Mali K7, the company in Bamako that releases his cassettes here. (CD's and records are rare in Africa.) Though Mr. Koite's albums top world music charts, the music hardly sells in Mali. "Sales are only now starting to grow," Mr. Kane said. "I think Habib has been a shock to Malian sensibilities."

A group of young men sitting drinking sweet green tea in the street expressed mixed opinions. "Yes, I want change like electricity and running water," said one, "but we don't need Habib Koite to change our music." They all said they liked pop music from America and elsewhere

in Africa, but as they rattled off the names of dozens of artists and discussed the minutiae of their music, it was clear that local music was of greater importance to them. For Western ears, its sameness and repetitive structures have about as much appeal as Chinese opera.

When Malians hear their music played in nontraditional ways "they are very critical," said Mr. Koite. "I have to show them that I have a real understanding of the subtle melodies and rhythms particularly of cultures that are not my own."

His family has roots in two of Mali's major ethnic groups, Manding and Peulh (sometimes known as Fula or Fulani in English). His band is made up of musicians from other ethnic groups, but the ultimate responsibility for the music rests on him. He always makes references to

Habib Koite takes a nontraditional approach to his music. Some fellow Malians don't like it.

the source of the music in his songs, he says, and he sings at least a few words in the language from which the music comes even if he doesn't actually speak it. "I think few Western listeners are aware of these things," he said. "They have their own ideas about what I'm doing."

As the band began to warm up, he excused himself to take his place at the rehearsal. Children gathered

around in anticipation. He was preparing his next album. The last two were distinctly different from each other, reflecting the tastes of each of the engineers who mixed them in Europe; the one had a rock sound, the other was more acoustic. Mr. Koite asked the band members which album they thought would work best for the Malian sensibility that he hoped to create. They sided with the more acoustic one.

The rehearsal then focused on the new talking drum, or tama, player. (The previous one ran off with an Italian woman at the start of a European tour.) The band played the same part of one song again and again, each time a little differently. He also had percussionists play lines that were traditionally for melodic instruments, and vice versa. "I can drive my musicians crazy," Mr. Koite said after the session.

But he seems proud of his method. So what does his mother think about his music? Does she mind that he isn't continuing in the griot tradition? "I don't think so," he said. "But better you ask her yourself." We got into his car and drove along bumpy roads for a couple miles. When we arrived at her compound, she was sitting on a bed in the courtyard fanning herself, looking like an aging diva.

"I never expected him to be like the others," she said, with Mr. Koite translating from Mandingue. But "he's a good boy." She improvised a little song in praise of him, then added, "White people liked him ever since he was a baby." In keeping with custom, I was obliged to hand over \$20, and we left.

I ASKED him later what was I to make of her last comment. "She was telling you what she thought you wanted to hear," he said. Like all griots. Maybe so, but in his attempt to bring together Mali's many cultures, he is also seen as having become an outsider.

On the last night before I left Mali he took me to a concert by an American jazz singer who he used to sing "Summer Time" in clubs here when she was a Peace Corps volunteer. Afterward we went to the plush residence of the American embassy official who organized the concert and who is Mr. Koite's friend. Standing around on the lawn next to the swimming pool, the conversation turned to how cultures and traditions were disappearing in Mali with nothing coming along to replace them.

Later Mr. Koite and I ended up at a club where a loud salsa band was playing. He acknowledged it was difficult juggling audiences. He also said he didn't like being seen as a "guitar hero" in the United States. "The music is not about my playing," he said.

We talked about his next album. Unlike most African music stars, he said he would not make separate versions for international and local consumption. And again he spoke of his project. I told him that it seemed more like that of an ethnomusicologist than a pop musician and asked him whether he was concerned that Malians did not always appreciate his music. "What else can I do," he said, "but listen to the world around me and try to make something out of it." □