

# MUSIC OF MALI



Folkways Ethnic Library FE 4338

Recorded on location in Africa by Betty and W. Gurnee Dyer

Edited by Charles Hofmann



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FUNERAL AT DINI  
DINI FUNERAL (finale)  
WEDDING AT TIMBUKTU  
WEDDING SEQUENCE WITH  
MEN'S SERENADE  
TAUREG MINSTRELS AT TIMBUKTU  
(with 2 lutes)

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COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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MALI, formerly called the French Sudan, became a republic in 1960. Bamako is its capital and within its area of over 465,000 square miles, there are over three and a half million people.

In this Sudan region stands the fabled, legendary city of Timbuktu which had flourished over 600 years ago and on whose caravan trails passed much of the riches of the African kingdoms. Later this city was to become a center of learning famous throughout the Islamic world. Through the years, conquered and looted, Timbuktu became (except for a few surviving monuments of its past) just another unremarkable assortment of mud houses which is its condition today.

This is the second of a series of recordings made in Africa by Betty and W. Gurnee Dyer. The collection is made in the interest of the Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, New York City. Photographs are by W. Gurnee Dyer. The series is edited by Charles Hofmann, lecturer in ethnic music at the American Museum.

SIDE 1:  
Funeral at Dini

## SIDE 2:

- Band 1: Funeral at Dini (Finale)
- Band 2: Wedding at Timbuktu
- Band 3: Wedding Sequence with Men's Serenade
- Band 4: Taureg Minstrels at Timbuktu  
(with two Lutes)

## FUNERAL RITES AT DINI IN THE DOGON PEOPLE'S COUNTRY

Walking, climbing, sliding up and down the rocky paths that criss-cross a complex of ten tiny villages all known as Sangha—all sprawling atop the falaise or cliff in the area better known as Bandiagara, we explored homes of the Dogon people who are without question among the most fascinating of Africa's tribal groups. Our guides, three of Sangha's elders, showed us "greniers" or granaries, houses of mud and rock, miniscule yards or clearings, all nestling in the sandstone ups and downs of Sangha. Far below we could see those villages, still in the Sangha complex, hundreds of feet from where we stood, some long dead and without a sign of life - many more alive and thriving tucked against the base of Sangha's towering cliffs. All these human habitations above and below the cliffs for countless generations had been home for the Dogon people. They had even made and lived in great caves suspended between earth and sky in the face of the very "falaise" itself - homes that no one can to this date understand how they were reached or left.



As we did our own brand of exploring one of Dini's elders said, "When an important member of one of our villages dies we have ceremonies that you might like to see and hear. One of our great shepherds died a few days ago and today, tomorrow and the day after there will be funeral rites in his honor. People will come from all the villages of Sangha to dance, chant and carry out our customary rituals. Would you like to come?" We said we certainly would. "Then," said he, "I will go and speak to the chiefs and to the family and I will come to tell you whether you can be present after I have done all this." I thanked my lucky stars that one of the elders spoke French and that I did too.



About an hour later, three Dini men and our French-speaking Dogon arrived, obviously ready to take us up to watch the afternoon's events. "I think you will be welcome", we were told, "but you must do exactly as you are told, otherwise we shall have to leave in a hurry." Said Betty, "What do we have to do?" "Follow us and when we arrive at the proper place we will tell you what you must do at each step."

We made our way between hordes of Dogon men, women and children - thru narrow paths, thru wide clearings with uneven rocky floors. After what seemed well over a mile of walking we emerged on a large square area filled with people, hundreds of them looking with their weird headgear, dress and almost mongolian facial structure - high cheek bones, etc. - much more Asian than African.



Amid all this human sea there surged a great and continuous roar of voices, drowned out from time to time by short, sharp deep explosions from the muzzles of many home made silver barrelled rifles fired by dancers taking part in the rites we'd come to watch. As we neared the great clearing where we were to meet the son of the elder in whose memory all these ceremonies were being held we became aware of another and more persistent sound.

Unlike the discordant pandemonium resounding thru almost all of Dini this was different. It had a throbbing, fascinating and musical rhythm made up, it seemed, of a huge variety of strange notes, some high some low. High or low the rhythm was incessant and, coming out on the main clearing, its volume obscured all other sounds we'd heard.

I must pause a minute here to tell you how we got this far. Early in the afternoon we'd been taken by our guides to where the dead man's son sat surrounded by important village chiefs, priests and elders. Not far away sat the widow with women of the tribe wearing huge, conical, wide-brimmed





straw hats and colorful dresses. The village chief took us solemnly before the son whom we found seated on a great straw mat, obviously awaiting our visit. Arriving in front of this impressive group the chief said to me in a low, quiet voice, "You must make him an offering of two hundred Malien francs, but under no condition give it to him directly." He continued, "Put the offering on the mat before him, tell him that you and your wife grieve for him in the death of his Father, then wait to see what he says and does." I asked, "What happens then?" After a minute's pause, the chief said, "If he does nothing we must leave. If he takes your hand you may stay thruout all the ceremonies."



After what seemed minutes, having done as I'd been told, I put out my hand and to my pleasure and relief his hand stretched out to meet mine. With a nod of his head and a sad, dignified smile, he indicated we were to stay.

"Come," said the chief. "They want you to drink millet beer in honor of the dead." What an ordeal this proved to be. We had to get outside a huge gourd-full of fermenting liquid - warm, bubbling and potent while hundreds of eyes watched us gulp and burble; to have refused would have been inexcusable and insulting.

I forgot to add that after we'd paid our respects to the dead elder's son we went to where his widow sat. We thought, of course, the same rules of conduct would apply but not at all. "You just only offer her one hundred francs," murmured our guide. "This is a widow's due - just half of what is proper for the son." I did as I'd been told again. My gift was gracefully accepted and I was politely thanked and dismissed from her presence and that of her women.

"Now we shall go to where the funeral ceremonies are happening. We must find a place above the crowd from where you can both see and hear." The chief added, "We must also be far enough away from the gun shots to be safe. Sometimes they put too much powder in the load and there is trouble."

Suddenly literally all hell began to pop in the little "square". Warriors, supposedly going off to do battle, gathered in close-packed groups on little areas of level stony ground while women, elders and children watched from vantage points on higher ground, and surrounding boulders. At one end of the clearing a queer contraption some seven or eight feet long stood propped up at a forty-five degree angle. It was about a foot wide thruout its length, surmounted by a large round gourd and spiked at foot intervals with cow horns running crosswise over its entire length, like steps of a ladder. Above the din and furor we heard our guide saying, "That is the bier on which they carry the dead. Watch how it is honored by the orchestra and the dancers."

For the first time we could see the orchestra. It was lined up in front of us some fifty feet away and facing the bier in a rough semi-circle - a strange and to us an eerie gathering of men and instruments giving forth weird, unearthly but somehow musical sounds - sounds of sharp, pulsing rhythm, sounds composed of an unbelievable cacaphony of horns, bells, whistles, rattles, flutes, drums and almost anything noisemaking. Analyzed, none of what we heard and saw could possibly have produced anything like music and yet what we saw and heard was perhaps the most unusually moving spectacle of sight and sound imaginable on earth.

To this throbbing, pulsing, tooting, clanging din dancers leapt high in the air singly and in groups of three or more, lunging this way or that bending low then making tremendous leaps or runs often winding up in ear-splitting explosions of long and beautifully decorated flintlock muskets. At each gunshot roars of delight swelled from throats of countless watchers on the ground or perched high above on rocks or flat topped roofs. Then would begin once more the horn tooting, bell clanging, whistling, rattling, thumping rhythm as before. Hour after hour without a pause the ceremonies kept on this furious pace varied at intervals by the bellows of slaughtered cattle and the shouts of newly arrived celebrants from other villages of Sangha.

Of these a most interesting group were the shepherds who dressed in unique garb with tight-fitting leather helmets and brilliantly colored shirts danced at a furious pace in pairs or fours packed into a tight little circle by hundreds of attentive watchers. These people danced in a little clearing in another part of Dini to a quite different type of music and to a rhythm drummed by their own bare heels in the rocks' dusty surface.

In yet other areas more cattle struggled in death throes as hundreds watched in high anticipation; feats of sword and bow and arrow mimicked life's battles on earth; spear shaking and ever louder musket shots grew wilder and more frantic as a thick acrid pall of blue gunsmoke began to blur Sangha's witch hatted houses and its age old baobab trees.

(from notes and diary of W. Gurnee Dyer)



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