

## Sufi Sounds, volume three

Posted At : September 30, 2008 10:23 PM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

Related Categories: Mali

Our next installment of Sufi sounds from Africa takes us East to Mali, home to some of West Africa's most iconic Muslim sites; the Great Mosque of Djenne-the world's largest mud brick building-is an architectural masterpiece, the mystical city of Tombouctou has been a renowned center of Islamic learning since the 15th century. And although today Muslims make up around 90% of Mali's population, the worldviews of many Malians still accommodate the pre-Islamic beliefs that are deeply rooted in the country's different regional cultures.

Since the 9th century there have been several different Islamic waves that have washed across the Malian Sahara, pushing south into the Sahel. Berber and Tuareg merchants from Northern Africa, whose commercial success often depended on the strength of their religious networks, first brought Islam to Mali in the 9th century. This first wave of conversions was followed by a second that came in the wake of the twenty-five year reign (1312-1337) of Mansa Musa, one of the most powerful and devout king's of the Mali Empire. His wealth and fame reached beyond the shores of the Sahara and drew Muslim scholars, artisans, architects and traders to his capital of Niani. The third, and perhaps most dramatic wave (it wasn't until the twentieth century that Islam became the religion of the majority of Malians) came from the Senegal River valley. El Hadj Umar Tall was born, around 1797, in the heart of the Futa-Tooro, the region that straddles the Senegal-Mauritania border, and that remains home to the Fulani people, who formed the backbone of his religious and military empire. A devout adherent of the Tijjaniya brotherhood, El Hadj Umar kicked off, in 1848, a jihad that lasted until his death in 1864. And it was after his defeat of the Kingdom of Ségou, on March 10, 1861, that many Bambara –the culturally dominant ethnic group in Mali- converted to Islam.

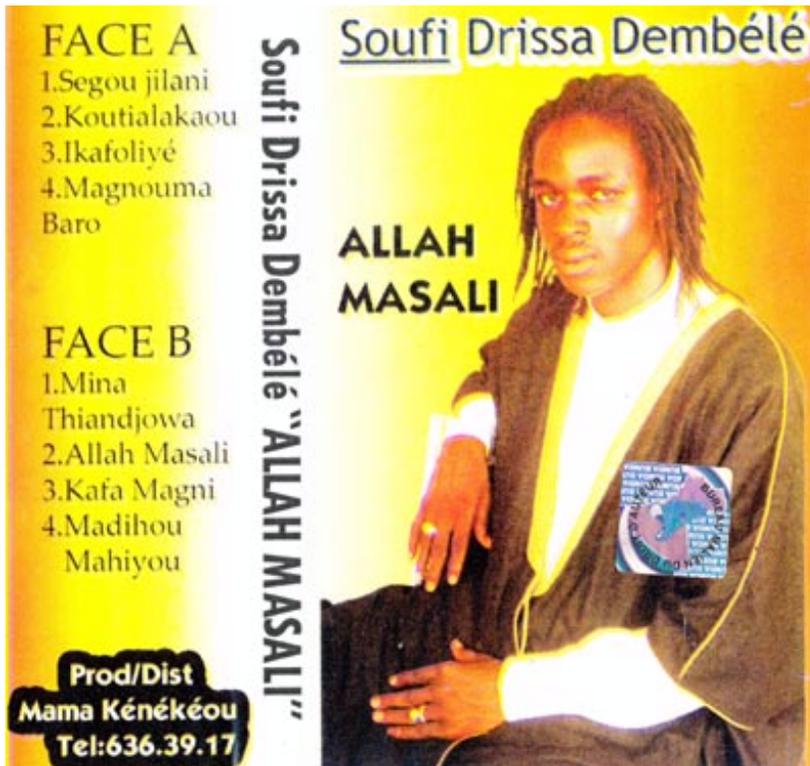


Today, Ségou remains a center of Bambara culture and a very devout city. This first cassette features Sekou Cissé, who goes by the nickname 'Sekoublé'. He is a member of the Tidjane brotherhood, and although he still lives in Ségou, rarely performs anymore in public. These recordings were probably made some time in the 1980s. He sings spiritual advice inspired by the teachings of the Koran.

↪ [Sekoublé 'excerpt one'](#)

↪ [Sekoublé 'excerpt two'](#)

Soufi Drissa Dembélé also comes from the region of Ségou; he was born 60 miles north in the town of Niono. He is a member of the Qadiriyya brotherhood and a follower of Sufi Yaya Dembélé, a preacher and teacher from Markala (20 miles downriver from Ségou). He started composing and singing professionally in 1999, and has released two cassettes.

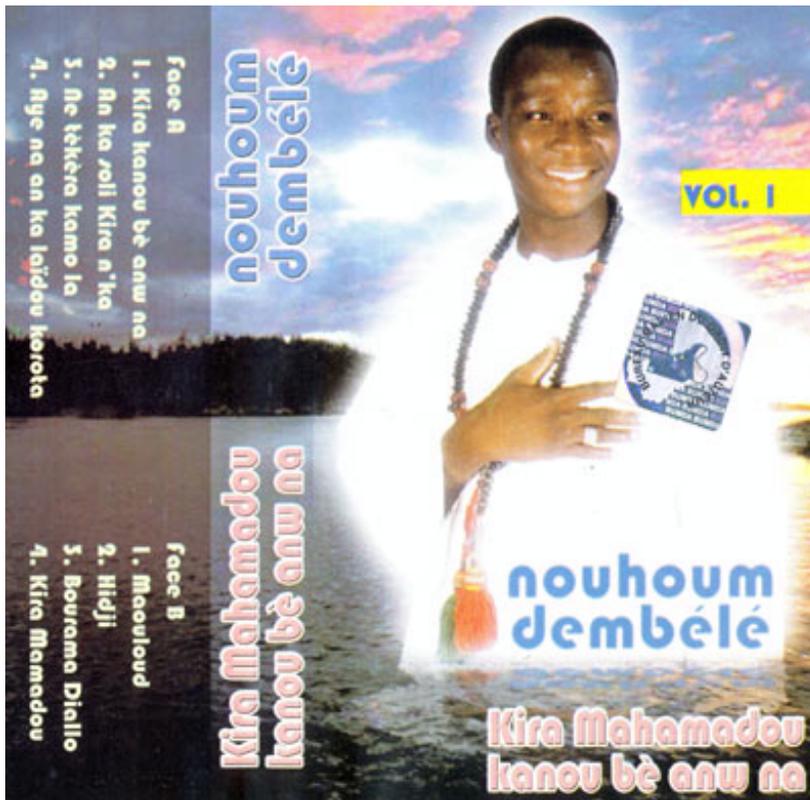


Soufi Drissa Dembélé described his music to me as 'Zhikr', and sings in both Bambara and in the Miniyanka dialect of Senoufo (his mother-tongue). He currently lives in Kouthiala, and performs primarily throughout southern Mali (he has also been invited to perform for Qadir festivities in Burkina Faso and Guinea). These next two tracks are off his first cassette, which was released in 2006.

↳ [Soufi Drissa Dembélé 'Mina Thiandjowa'](#)

↳ [Soufi Drissa Dembélé 'Magnouma Baro'](#)

Although Sufi brotherhoods have been an important part of Malian Islam for centuries, Sufi Drissa Dembélé is part of a new generation of Malian Sufis, with their own style of worship, who first started to draw attention in the early 1990s. Drawing inspiration from the Baye Fall of Senegal, and in some cases from West African Rastafarianism, this new generation of urban Sufis-previous generations of Malian Sufis were more concentrated in rural areas- have created a syncretic style of worship that reflects Malian pop culture.

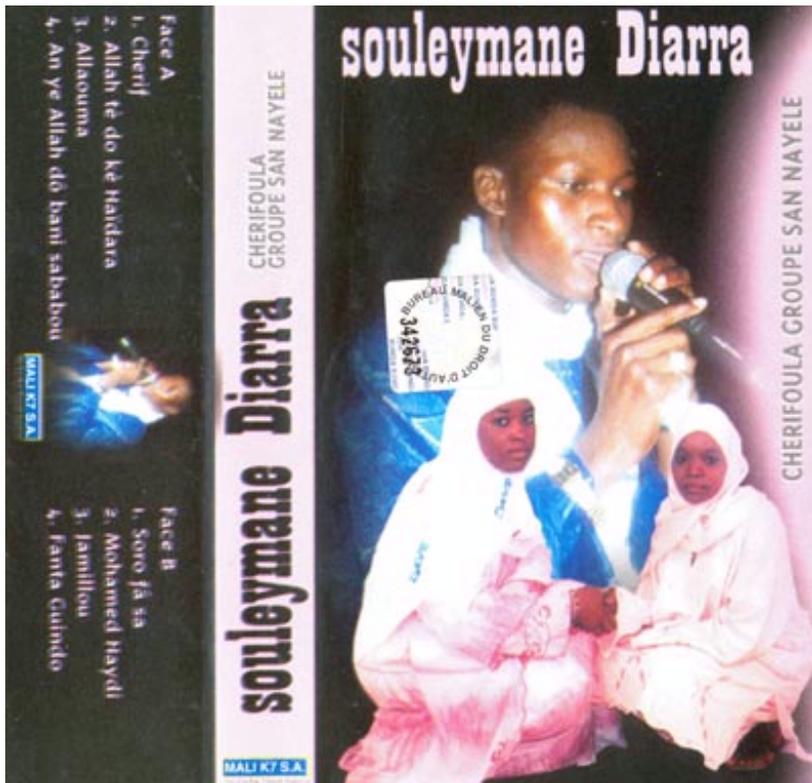


Nouhoum Dembélé started his career, back in 1986, singing popular secular music. He was also born in Ségou, and grew up there in a religious family. It was after his mother passed away that he decided to devote himself entirely to religious music. Like his mother, he is a disciple of Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, Mali's most famous and charismatic preacher; Haidara is a mega-star, whose religious 'revivals' fill soccer stadiums. In 2005 he self-produced this first cassette release. He performs throughout Mali, and has been invited to perform at events in Burkina Faso and the Cote D'Ivoire. He is currently working on his second cassette.

↳ [Nouhoum Dembélé 'Ne Tèkèra kamo la'](#)

These next two tracks by Souleymane Diarra feature some beautiful singing, by both Souleymane Diarra and the female choir. I haven't yet been able to get in touch with Souleymane Diarra, but I think he is a Tidjane, and I am pretty sure this is his first cassette.

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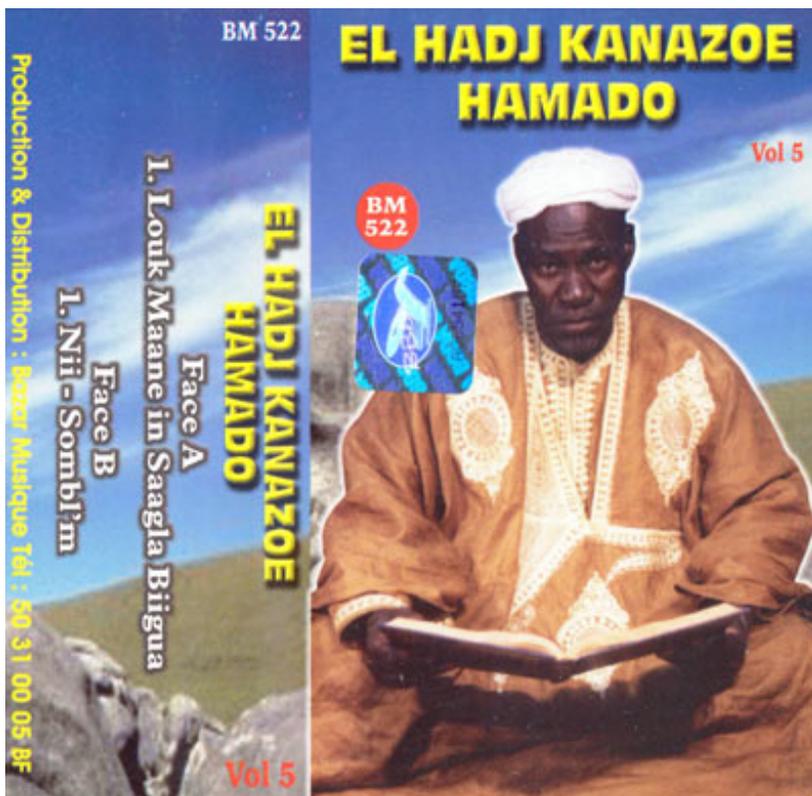


Interestingly, the cassettes by both Dembélés and this one by Souleymane Diarra all feature similar instrumentation; ensembles built on the rhythmic foundation of a calabash, and fleshed out by 'ethereal' keyboard playing. (Don't let the keyboards discourage you! All of these tracks feature some great vocals.)

↳ [Souleymane Diarra & Cherifoula Groupe San Nayele 'Allaouma'](#)

↳ [Souleymane Diarra & Cherifoula Groupe San Nayele 'An Ye Allah ...'](#)

El Hadj Hamado Kanazoe is one of my favorite African Sufi singers. He is not from Mali, but from Burkina Faso. He was born in Mané, not far from the town of Kaya, in north-central Burkina Faso, and since 1970 has been living in Ouagadougou. El Hadj Kanazoe started singing when he was 12 years old and has released 15 studio recordings.



He is the most famous performer of Wazu music, a style that alternates chanting of the Koran in Arabic, with moral commentary in Mooré, the language of the Mossi people. El Hadj Hamado Kanazoe is a disciple of the Tidjani leader Cheikh Aboubakar Doukouré.

↳ [El Hadj Hamado Kanazoe 'excerpt one'](#)

↳ [El Hadj Hamado Kanazoe 'excerpt two'](#)

This post draws on interviews conducted with Nouhoum Dembélé, Soufi Drissa Dembélé, and El Hadj Hamado Kanazoe, with special thanks to Agathe Diamma and Samuel Kiendrebeogo for their interpreting help. Next up Cote D'Ivoire, Benin and Nigeria.