

Dark seeds grow beautiful roots

My family is Mandé, or from the Mandinka tribe in west Africa. We are from Guinea Conakry, not to be confused with Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, or Papua New Guinea. This meant two things; all the music I heard growing up was in my first language and all the music I listened to was in my dominant language. Four events impacted my relationship with music; my father being a DJ, my Islamic school shunning music, receiving my first iPod shuffle, and going to boarding school. The atmosphere was ripe for me to explore and embrace music, but also full of contradictions. Growing up black in America, many mistook my skin color as evidence of my childhood and my Mandé identity became a key but overlooked contextual fact about my background that explains my relationship with music.

“Music is haram,” A message from the Imam at my Islamic teachings school I heard when I was four. I always wanted to be a good Muslim and at four my definition of that idea was very limited creating a strong caution against music. My brother, cousins, and friends who also attended Islamic school continued listening to music and I would listen in a group setting when I could. I was frustrated I had to suppress my musical desires, but as a six-year-old. I didn’t know about emotions and did not realize how music affected my personal life. Time passed and I sat in my limited box of musical knowledge until I began to miss my father.

I never gave it much thought, but my father was a DJ. My limited knowledge of this makes sense, as he often DJ’ed at times when I was asleep. My dad was a restaurant owner, and on the

weekends he would turn the basement into a dancehall. I have small recollections of what being there felt like, but the feeling coincided with the restricting narrative I had received from my mosque. Since my dad lived in New York in 1989, I assumed he possessed knowledge about black artists and black music history but did not share it with us. My parents were Mandé, which meant I was going to be Mandé and around the time I was born my father decided he should filter and eliminate “negatively” associated ties of being black. This included rap, hip-hop, and r&b music. All music that as a late teen I was made aware I did not have exposure to. Instead, my father only played west African artists like Salif Keita, Mory Kanté, and Sekouba Bambino and while these songs were in my first language, they were very difficult for me to understand. Every cassette tape, every burned CD, and every mode of music I had access to at the age of seven played cultural music. On occasion, I’d get lucky and hear songs on the radio, but most of the time we listened to something from one of many CD binders he had throughout the car. I could not escape it, so I began to hate it. The Kora and Drums had become saturated sounds and the inability to decipher the meaning behind the lyrics amplified my repulsion. I was moving away from my roots and ethnic soundscape. Micheal Jackson was one of the few non-African artists my dad played. I realized I had an easier time staying away from music when conditioned by my mosque because I was primed against what I knew as music at the time. In 2008, that all changed when I received my first-ever iPod shuffle.

A small gold square, an escape into my own world. When I received my iPod, I had been attending Islamic school less and my father was away in Guinea. I could choose what music I listened to without guilt or pressure from my dad, but I did not have the resources to download music onto my iPod. But I was in luck, there was a shop nearby that charged \$1 per downloaded song. Every morning

before school I received a dollar and the choice became a song or snacks for the school day. I was a big snacker and wasn't old enough to go to the music shop on my own. I needed a day where I could go eight hours without snacks and sneak away to the music shop without my mother knowing. When the opportunity arose, another critical choice was to be made; what would be my first song? Two things were true at that time; I no longer felt tied to my Mandé background, and I really missed my dad. "Man in the Mirror," by Micheal Jackson was the easy choice, as it was one of the few songs we bonded over. I think for my dad, Micheal Jackson's lyrics captured a powerful message of speaking up for equal rights and meaningful change. While I had my iPod, I managed to get 7 songs before losing it at the park one day. Six of them were Micheal Jackson songs and the other was "We takin' over," by Dj Khaled and Akon, a song that represented more of what I might be listening to if I was raised differently. I was always met with confusing stares when I said I didn't know songs by artists like Lionel Richie, Nas, Aaliyah, or Whitney Houston. Instead, I began listening to current popular black artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Lil Wayne, Beyonce, and Drake. These were artists whose music I both enjoyed and allowed me to better connect with my peers. I continued to listen to and explore black culture and artists slowly shedding my Mandé identity until I got to high school.

When you approach the gates of Hotchkiss, you are awestruck by the beauty and natural landscape. A prestigious boarding school in Lakeville, Connecticut, a town with no sidewalks and many fields nearby. However, the culture and school traditions were very white and often forced minorities to assimilate into the scene. As tensions grew between the black and white students, there was a school-wide fishbowl where the exclusive culture was highlighted. All black students got involved, but International African students did not feel charged about the events on campus. At this

point, I felt I was African-American as it did not matter to anyone I knew growing up that I was from an African household. I felt strongly about the countless microaggressions and treatment I faced as a black student, it impacted every part of my experience at Hotchkiss. I felt especially upset when Firas, my best friend from Benin did not feel as angry as I did. After an intense conversation with him one day, I re-gained a lost perspective. “But Souleman, you are African too, and you should be proud of where you come from,” and I remembered, my family is from west Africa and I am Mandé. My dominant language is English, but my first is Malinké. In Lakeville, I would never find anything with a Guinean resemblance that I might connect with, but I could and did turn to music. I began listening to the popular African songs I remembered my dad playing. The Kora and Drums became sounds of serenity. For the remainder of that school year and our time at Hotchkiss, Firas and I listened strictly to African and Caribbean music with two of our other best friends who were from the Bahamas and Trinidad.

My most frequent genre is now Afrobeats, and I listen to African songs every time I go to the gym. I still feel charged about race relations in America, but have become more intentional about how I approach conversations. Unlike Firas and my father, I grew up in America this was my battle and it was theirs as well even if they tried to separate themselves. My musical moments with my father are now long and entertaining. I play old songs and ask him to translate the lyrics. I am glad he showed me the music he did and appreciate my cultural upbringing. He began DJ'ing in 1992, which did not tell me much about his musical background, but I knew he hid more than he let on. I was on facetime with a Bowdoin friend earlier this year who asked if I knew the song “*O.P.P.*”. Before I could respond, my father quickly interjected and sang the chorus. “C’mon man, you kids man, who don’t know O.P.P

Naughty by nature man, shoot you don't know old school rap you talkin' to DJ ALY TOURE!" We both started laughing and I thought, wow he could have saved me from a lot of repeating conversations. I thought again and realized no, I am glad I had those conversations. I am glad to be west African and I am glad to be Mandé. Malinké is my first language, it is my dominant one, and when I feel lost put on my headphones and listen to African Music bringing me back to my roots.