

Jaliya in the Modern World: A Tribute to Banzoumana
Sissoko and Massa Makan Diabate

by

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The advent of colonization in the 19th century marked a decisive point in the encounter of Mandenka society with the West. With the defeat of Samoury Touré, the last in the long line of great precolonial rulers, the French set out to transform the structure of Mandenka society by blurring the traditional distinctions established between the *horon*, the *jon* and the *nyamakala*. By dispossessing the *horon* from the power they had exercised since the days of the Empire and by placing the state apparatus beyond the reach of the masses, the colonialists planted the seeds of disintegration and self-doubt, if not self-denial, in one of Africa's most elaborately structured and proudest societies. The radical changes which resulted from this encounter have forced the different components of Mandenka society to reassess the value of traditions several centuries old in the light of the new challenges of nation-building and economic development. In this paper, I have chosen to highlight some of the present problems and future prospects of the griot caste by concentrating on the lives of two of its most distinguished members in the Republic of Mali, the late Banzoumana Sissoko and the late Massa Makan Diabaté. By looking at the ways in which these two figures have practiced their art, one may acquire an understanding of the value and enduring significance of *jaliya* or the state of being a griot, in our modern world.

With the death of Banzoumana Sissoko and Massa Makan Diabaté, respectively in December 1987 and January 1988, Mali had lost two of the most eloquent advocates of its national unity. Working in two different languages, Bamanankan for Sissoko and French for Diabaté, and in two different media of expression, the former with the spoken word and the latter with the written word, these two poets exemplify the deep belief of the Mandenka people in the perennation of Old and Greater Mali. This belief is expressed and translated in the following aphorism: "Le Mandé vacille, mais il ne s'écroulera jamais." [Mande may stumble but it will never fall down.] Among traditional griots, no one has touched the hearts of Malians, whether they be Maninka, bamaman, soninke or sonrhai, more than Jeli Banzoumana. He has been identified with the nation in its entirety since the break-up of the Mali Federation in the early 1960's, when his patriotic songs gave the courage to his fellow Soudanese to rise up and march on Senegal. It is known that whenever Banzoumana's music is played on the National Radio uninterrupted for several hours, Malian people suspect that some

major change is taking place in the destiny of the country: this was the case in 1968, when the military toppled the government of Modibo Keita and on many other occasions. Massa Makan Diabaté has been the most prolific of all Malian writers with thirteen major works in less than twenty years. Many people consider him as the founder of modern Malian literature, but to those who have told him this, he has always answered that one never creates a literature, one only continues a tradition. In a 1983 interview, he said the following:

Mais lorsqu'on me considère comme le fondateur de la littérature malienne, alors là, je dois en toute honnêteté dire qu'on ne crée pas une littérature; on la prolonge en y apportant sa petite contribution. [But when people consider me as the founder of Malian literature, I must say in all honesty that one does not create a literature; one continues a tradition by adding one's small contribution to it]¹

One of the factors which accounts for the great popularity these two artists have enjoyed with the citizens of Mali and of other countries formerly contained in the Greater Mali Empire stems from their concern for the integrity of their art. In effect, today in Mali there is a profound sentiment of wariness towards the griot and his speech, which symbolizes, in the eyes of many people, a collusion with the political and economic powers-that-be. Very often griots display an opportunistic attitude towards their art, which is a direct reflection of the profiteering attitude which has pervaded the administrative structures inherited from colonization. One may argue that there has always been a temptation on the part of the griot to be an accomplice of the governing class. Thus Claude Meillassoux says:

My contention is that they are an instrument of the dominant class, and not a class in themselves. This is quite obvious for the *jeli*, or praise-singers. They act as conservative stimulant in society; they encourage *horon* people to live up to their code of values, they drive them to war or restrain their wrath, and they are the guardians of the ideology of social inequality²

After the publication in 1976 of *Gens de la parole*, the very insightful study of the griots by Sory Camara, one can consider the preceding assertion as an oversimplification of the role and purpose of the griot in Mandenka society. Camara analyzes from the point of

view of history and psychology the mechanism of the traditional division of his society into three castes: Thus, his analysis shows that the dynamics provided by the fierce competition between the *horon* and the *jon* necessitates the strict impartiality of the *nyamakala* caste. Camara's analysis is borne out by assertions made by the Malian ethnologist, Youssouf Cissé who contends that one cannot be the censor of the power and a participant in the exercise of power at the same time. Cissé's contention contradicts Meillassoux's analysis of the role of the griot in traditional Mandenka society. The attitude attributed by Meillassoux to the griot is symptomatic of the distortions introduced in precolonial society by colonialism. Massa Makan Diabaté and Banzoumana Sissoko showed a clear and unequivocal concern for the image of the griot by making references to the symbolism of gold in the traditional society. In a 1983 interview Diabaté says the following:

Les griots des soleils des independances ont troqué l'or contre du cuivre. Ce ne sont plus que des animateurs publics qui déploient les broderies de leur éloquence pour quelques pièces de monnaie.[The griots of the suns of independence have traded gold for copper. They are but simple entertainers who display their flowery eloquence in order to gain small change.]³

In the last years of his life, Diabaté seems to have deeply grieved over the lack of integrity among the members of his caste. It is thus no wonder that Diabaté's last novel *L'Assemblée des Djinns* was devoted to the griot caste and its insatiable thirst for power. One of Diabaté's characters sums up his perception of the griot in modern Mali in the following statement:

Les griots sont morts avec l'arrivée des Blancs, quand nos rois au lieu de s'unir contre un danger commun se sont entre-déchirés. Les griots des soleils d'aujourd'hui ne sont que des animateurs publics qui chantent n'importe qui. Ce sont des *Samba danse* comme on en voit dans des cages qui se trempent pour quelques friandises. Chef des griots!.. Mais il n'y a plus de griots.[The griots have died with the arrival of the Whites, when instead of uniting against a common threat, our kings were at each other's throats. The griots of today are but public entertainers who sing the praise of anybody. They are chimpanzees who are seen dancing in their cages on the marketplace for a few candies... Chief of the griots!.... But there are no more griots]⁴

In l'Assemblée des Djinns, Massa Makan Diabaté castigates the griot caste for its lack of vision, a shortcoming illustrated in the inability of the different clans to agree on a common leader for the caste. In order to prove that the griots are losing their fundamental mediatory character in Mandenka society, he shows them in isolation from all the other components of society. Whereas in the past the word of the griot was credited with building families, clans, and empires, here his speech is vain, vulgar and destructive. All in all, this novel is a pessimistic assessment of the state of the caste and of its future.

In the practice of his art, Sissoko also placed the highest premium on moral integrity, a value which is celebrated in the oral traditions through the expression *sanun suman jeli* [the griot who has the purity of gold]. If the word of the griot were not pure and exempt from fraud it is unlikely that the Mandenka would have likened it to gold, their most revered metal. In fact the Malinke concept of purity is expressed by the word *saniya* or *sanouya*, the state of being like gold. From the late 1950's, when Banzoumana Sissoko became known on the national scene, to his death in 1987, the entire Mandenka nation was witness to his categorical refusal to curry favor with any politician or rich patron. It is interesting that in his immensely rich repertoire of both traditional and original songs, there is not a single one containing praises for a living person. This fact seems a superhuman feat when considered in the context of the generalised clientelism of our modern nations. In Mali today, society has lost its ability to effectively spell out and enforce the criteria of heroism; as a result, the immediate and short-term interests of the praise-singers and their *Jatigi* [patrons] are placed above those of society as a whole. Today, it takes a great deal of personal integrity and sacrifice to resist the temptation of easy money and instant stardom which opportunistic praise-singing guarantees. In integrity, Sissoko has very few equals. When asked in a 1979 interview why he never sang the praises of the living, he answered:

Ces héros morts ont plus fait pour moi que les diri-geants contemporains. On ne chante que les méritants. Les Da Monzon et Soundiata détenaient un pouvoir que la communauté leur avait confié. Ils sont donc morts sans être destitués parce qu'ils s'entendaient bien avec le peuple au contact duquel ils vivaient. Aujourd'hui, la moindre parcelle de pouvoir gonfle la tête de nos dirigeants qui deviennent des oppresseurs. Eux comme leurs successeurs. [These dead heroes have done more for me than contemporary leaders. One sings only those who deserve to be. Da Monzon and Soundiata held a power that the

community had vested in them. They died without ever being toppled because they got along with the people in the midst of whom they lived. Today the slightest authority swells the heads of our leaders and turns them into oppressors. They as well as their successors]⁵

When uttering such an acerbic criticism of modern African political systems, Sissoko had the strong conviction that he was putting in words the deepest sentiment of his people. The integrity that Sissoko and Diabaté displayed in the practice of their art was the direct reflection of the pride they took in being griots. Contrary to the belief common in our time that the *nyamakala* is a person of low status, they always draw an egalitarian picture of Mandenka society in which the *nyamakala* proudly fulfills his function of referee of social competition, of cathartic object for the *horon* and the *jon* and of living memory for the society as a whole. One can find a clear illustration of this caste pride in one of Banzoumana's original compositions entitled "Sarafo" [The bravest of the brave]. Since space will not allow me to analyze in detail the music and the lyrics, I will confine myself to the main themes of the song.

In the first four stanzas, Sissoko reasserts the importance for the griot of choosing the right patron, the one who deserves praises. This excludes the upstart and the person whose soul lacks nobility. Sissoko chose to invoke a person named Sanou for several reasons: first, that person is the bravest of the brave; second, his name means gold, the metal associated with purity, as we have seen. The person he has chosen to invoke here is the epitome of heroism because he has received unanimous social recognition and because he will never know the humiliation of losing it. This idea is an indirect but pointed criticism of modern heroes (politicians and merchants) who are often extolled one day and trampled underfoot the next. In the succeeding stanzas, Sissoko praises himself--a practice common among the griots--for having chosen the right *jatigi*. he calls on the different members of the *nyamakala* caste to come to honor him and help him praise the *sarafo*, the hero of the heroes. These passages are marked by the frequent repetition of the word *nani* and several alliterations such as the ones found in *darapo* and *sarafo*. The verses in these three stanzas are short in order to develop the contrast between the different meanings of the same word and to reinforce the effect of the rhymes and the rhythm:

i yo jaliw yo
a ye darapo nani ne ye
a ye darapo nani

*baroro jaliw yo
aw ka sarafo nano*

In the lines just cited, the *jali* is placed on a pedestal because the flag is brought for him in recognition of the role he plays in society. This idea of privilege is reinforced even further in the next three stanzas which center on the question of an appropriate gratification for the role played by the griot. Here, Sissoko expresses his scorn for the base material objects for which other members of his caste are ready to compromise the integrity of their conscience. He turns down the gifts of a horse, a slave and a cow, which are perishable objects of possession. He prefers gold since it is, for the Mandenka, the very symbol of purity and integrity. *Sanou* is repeated three times in each of the stanzas in order to express the commitment of the singer to the purity of his tradition. The concluding stanzas carry this idea even further since the merchant class is called upon to honor the griot by raising the flag for him. In these stanzas, Sissoko indirectly pays tribute to the dynamism of the Mandenka people in trade by naming all the areas where their activities took them: the Ivory Coast, Ouagadougou, Dakar and Bamba Niaré, the other name of Bamako. Since the Middle Ages it is known that the *jula* have played a major role in creating a sense of cultural and religious integration in Central West Africa through trade and the population movements that accompanied it. In the last stanza, Sissoko returns to his patron, Sanou, the son of Bugu and indicates that the latter is a *Jali*, thereby reasserting one last time the social importance of his caste.

When one considers the works of these two griots, one is struck by the persistence of one major theme: the beauty and the glory of Mali and the Mandenka people. On separate occasions, both have said that only the masses deserved their loyalty and that they consciously stayed away from *la politique politicienne* and its opportunism. Thus, in a 1979 interview, Sissoko said the following:

"Mais dans les luttes des partis africains, je n'ai pas voulu m'engager fermement d'un côté ou de l'autre. J'aime le vainqueur, de ce fait, je n'aime personne avant l'issue de la bataille. Ce qui m'intéressait le plus, c'était le peuple et sa culture." "[In the rivalries between African parties, I refused to take a firm stand on one side or the other. I like the winner, therefore, I like nobody before the end of the battle. What interested me primarily was the people and their culture]⁶

As for Massa Makan Diabaté, when asked why he did not deal with the political problems of his country and Africa in his writings, he answered "Il y a déjà trop de spécialistes pour ce faire." [There are already too many specialists who are doing that]

What Massa Diabaté and Banzoumana Sissoko have proved in their work is that the art of the griot should be concerned with values which involve the community and the nation. Both have tried to define the Malian identity as it was shaped by several centuries of heroism and nationhood. Thus Banzoumana put his talent to the service of the modern nation of Mali because he saw it as the heir of the medieval empire. He composed a song which was later to become the national anthem of the new republic. In the atmosphere of strong nationalism created by the struggle for independence, the love of one's country and the belief in self-sacrifice were themes that had a deep resonance in the heart of all Malians, Northerners as well as Southerners. In his epic songs of Soundiata, Da Monzon and Maki Tall, he exhorts the people to compete not only among themselves in meeting the challenge of nation-building, but also with their forebears in the truest and most constructive spirit of *fadenya*, the main source of social competition and progress among the Mandenka. His moral authority coupled with the restrictions placed by the socialist government on opportunistic praise-singing and the ostentatious gifts that come with it helped to generate among the griots of Mali a relatively conscientious approach to the manipulation of our historical heritage.

This participation of the griots in the effort of national mobilization lasted until the end of the seventies, when the economic setbacks of the socialist regime brought about a military government and a different conception of the role of the griots. In fact, this period saw the rise of several aspiring griots who derived their success from taking advantage of the credulity and the vanity of certain members of the military leadership and the merchant classes. In this new atmosphere, the young griot can easily do without the long and rigorous training formerly required in the *tarikh* and other disciplines and rely solely on a beautiful voice, charming looks, and at best, a mediocre knowledge of genealogies. In this new environment the griot is perceived as a social parasite and a mercenary. This image has alienated many educated young people from any identification with the caste of their parents: they do not wish to be perceived as *jali* nor do they wish to play his role. In this respect, Massa Makan Diabaté is an exception among Malian writers and intellectuals, many of whom are of griot ancestry. He always proclaimed himself to be a griot and to have derived his art from the tradition of the griot. Having studied the history of Mandenka

society from the traditional as well as the modern point of view, he declares with conviction that

Avant la colonisation, il n'y avait pas de préjugés envers les hommes de caste. Ca n'existait pas. Chacun était fier de ce qu'il était. Une fois ce bouleversement introduit par la colonisation, le noble s'est senti frustré du rôle qu'il jouait autrefois, et il a eu un comportement quelquefois amer, aussi bien contre la colonisation, ce qui était tout à fait normal, mais aussi contre hommes de caste qui avaient pris la direction politique qui lui revenait de droit dans la société traditionnelle. [Before colonization, there was no prejudice toward the people of caste. It did not exist. Everybody was proud of what he was. Once colonization overturned this order, the nobility felt shorn of the role he played formerly, and sometimes displayed bitterness toward the colonizer, which was normal, but also against the people of caste who had taken the political leadership which was his in the traditional society]⁷

Unlike most writers who come to the oral traditions as outsiders, that is, after having studied the classics and world literature, Massa Makan Diabaté was initiated into the art of the griot by his uncle, the late Kèlè Monson Diabaté, one of the greatest storytellers in modern Mali. The nephew sought to replicate the uncle's eloquence using the French language, and he was so successful that his translations of the old Mande epics are considered among the best examples of modern African rhetoric in French. Regarding his relationship to the French language, Diabaté has stated several times that it resembles adultery. Diabaté explains the meaning of this simile in the dedication of his last novel:

To the memory of my aunt, Marie Diabaté Witiades, who taught me French using the stick. Therefore, I refused to marry this language, my favorite among all, but instead chose to give her little bastards.⁸

From the very beginning of his career, Diabaté chose to pay tribute to his ancestors by writing down their words and translating them into French. He produced two award-winning plays, *Une Si Belle Leçon de patience* and *La Mort d'Ahmadou*, and epic poems such as *Janjon et autres chants Populaires du Mali* and *Kala Jata*. Diabaté's respect for the oral tradition led him to commission a record entitled *Première Anthologie de La musique malienne*, a collection of songs

performed by l'Ensemble instrumental du Mali. In the mid-seventies, he began his career in the novel with a trilogy about his birthplace of Kita, one of the centers of Old Mali. When asked if this change of genre did not constitute a break with the oral tradition, he answered no, because as he put it, "j'adopte le même ton; je conte." Being a Malinké myself, I believe that Diabaté's works reflect the soul of the Malinke like no other work, that is, with love and respect for their strength as well as their weakness. In describing the most salient characteristics of the Mandenka, Diabaté states:

Le Manding se définit lui-même comme un homme sans finesse et il le dit bien en disant: "nalomaya de be mandenya diya" c'est-à-dire "c'est la bêtise qui rend l'état malinké agréable;" le malinké, par essence, est bête et il le dit. Mais il compense cette bêtise par une persévérance et un courage à toute épreuve, à telle enseigne que ce qui est chanté dans l'épopée, c'est d'abord le courage: mais aussi la fidélité à ses engagements, la fidélité à sa lignée. [The Mandenka defines himself as a witless man and he says it well when he says: "Nalomaya de be mandenka diya", which means "it is witlessness which makes being a malinke fun;" the Malinke is essentially witless and he says so. But he compensates his lack of wit by an unfaltering perseverance and courage first; but also loyalty to one's pledges, loyalty to one's ancestry.]⁹

Traditionally, the griots have distinguished themselves as social psychologists. As such, not only do they excel in detecting the most secret motives behind human behavior but also they excel in using them in their mediatory role and in their art.

Dominique Zahan uses this connection between the griot and the emotions to put forth a particular etymology of the word *nyamakala*. Without entering this debate, one can say that the ability to inspire a wide range of feelings gives the griot caste an incredible power over their countrymen. Thus, in his art of the novel, Massa Makan Diabaté uses traditional institutions such as the *fadenya*, the dynamic principle of a polygamic society, the *fraternité de case*, the bond which ties together a group of men who have been circumcised at the same time. He shows his characters struggling with modern governments and their designs, which in most cases conflict with the imprint the Mali Empire and its glorious past have left on the mind of the Mandenka. In his trilogy, he shows the people of his native Kita banding together to resist the regime of President Bagabaga-Daba [Termite-with-a-big-mouth], the man who claims to

be the father of the Nation and who "se proclama "President a vie" et bien qu'il ignora tout de l'art militaire, "Maréchal de la République de Darako". "[he proclaimed himself President for life and Marshal of the Nation although he knew nothing of military art]

Few writers in Africa have been able to penetrate the mind of the illiterate masses as deeply as Diabate. With him, the novel ceases to be a privileged medium whereby a disgruntled intellectual projects his own frustrations on some traditional characters if not puppets designed by him; the novel becomes a direct echo of the traditional theater, the *Kotéba*, in which the masses mock the unnatural and the undesirable, such as the abusive husband, the mean-spirited daughter-in-law, the charlatan and--why not--the heavy-handed ruler and the tyrant. If there is a writer who served the people of Mali, it is Massa Diabaté and if there is a writer who was conscious of his social mission, it was Massa Diabaté. Diabaté's deep social and political consciousness is revealed in his statement regarding the role of the griot: "Etre griot, c'est participer à la mémoire sociale d'un peuple, en l'occurrence du peuple manding." ¹⁰[To be a griot is to participate in the social memory of a nation, in this case, the mandenka nation]

In conclusion, one can say that the life and work of Banzoumana Sissoko, the Old Lion, and Massa Makan Diabaté lie at the heart of the problems of Modern Mali. As griots, they struggled to define the country's potential in its effort to enter the modern era by holding on proudly to the moral patrimony of their ancestors. They proved through their lives that to be a true *jali*, you have to be willing to be a *sarafa*, a person willing to sacrifice his life for the truth he believes in, for an ideal, even if others in your family, your caste and your country have betrayed it. In their work, Sissoko and Diabaté showed that in our modern world, where materialism has eroded the old distinctions between sexes, castes and social roles, there is still a value in honouring one's word. Just as there is a Malinke song called the *Duga*, which the griot sings only for those who have achieved great feats in the battlefield or in other areas of human endeavour, there is also a song called the *Lamban*, which the griot sings only to celebrate the memory of those members of their caste, who have been faithful to the truth and to the great tradition of the Word. I would like to end this with a few lines from that song:

Salam Aleikum, eminent griots
 Eminent griots of Manden, As-salam Aleikum
 You owe your distinction to *jaliya*
Jaliya is hard to define, it is hard to know
Jaliya is unequalled, *jaliya* is satisfying

The little bird knows for which patron to sing
 Illustrious griots, I salute you
 Illustrious griots of the Manden, to you my salute

Griots of Manden, I shall call on the dead
 Those who have never disappointed us
 I salute you, griots of Manden
 I salute you, griots of Niagassola
 I salute you also, griots of Kirina
 O you griots of Kita, the beautiful land of Kita
 To you my humblest salutations.

If we must remember those who have gone before us
 Let's salute Morifindian Diabaté
 He was a man of his word
 Who else shall we remember
 We shall remember jali Faceli Kante
 He honored his jaliya
 What makes jaliya difficult
 It is finding the worthy patron
 And what makes jaliya pleasant
 It is finding the right patron
 Let us all remember jali Banzoumana Sissoko
 And jali Massa Makan Diabaté
 For they have honoured us by honoring their jaliya
 O people of Manden, let's respect jaliya
 Because jaliya is difficult

1 "Etre griot aujourd'hui: Entretien avec Massa Makan Diabeté", *Notre Librairie*, 75-76(juil-oct. 1984), pp.115-19.

2 Claude Meillassoux, "A Class Analysis of the Bureaucratic Process in Mali", *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol.6(1970), 2, pp.104-05.

3 "Etre griot", p.119.

4 Massa Makan Diabete, *L'Assemblée des Djinnns* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1985, pp.62-63.

5 "Interview avec Mohamed Maïga", *Jeune Afrique*, 985, 21 nov. 1979, p.55.

6 Idem.

7 "Etre griot", p.118.

8 Massa M. Diabeté, *L'Assemblée des Djinnns*,

9 "Etre griot", p.117.

10 Idem, p.115.