The Song of the Griot

Manthia Diawara


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Manthia Diawara

I have been fascinated with griots and the power of song since I was young. In high school in Mali, I had a friend named Seydou Ly. We used to call him Sly, because of his Afro hairdo and because he loved the blues. In high school, our group—we called ourselves the Rockers—would meet at his house for tea, grilled meat, and music. Some of us would play guitar, and there was a turntable with piles of blues and R&B records: James Brown, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix, Howlin’ Wolf, Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, Ike and Tina Turner, Sly and the Family Stone, B.B. King, Buddy Miles, and Albert King, as well as white musicians like the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Carole King, Joni Mitchell, the Who, Cream, the Faces, the Grateful Dead, Joe Cocker, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, Grand Funk Railroad, and Steppenwolf. We wore shirts decorated with peace signs and flowers; we smoked kampe; we supported black power, the Black Panthers, and the Black Muslims in America; we were against the war in Vietnam and apartheid in South Africa.

Sly and I thought our Afros were powerful enough to set us apart from our peers in Bamako and transform us into the black Americans we admired so much. We used to spend hours on our hair, washing it with special shampoos and combing it. Our imagination was captured by defiant images of George Jackson, Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and James Brown. We tried to look like our black American heroes. We walked tall, in packs, and pretended we couldn’t speak French. We called one another by American nicknames. Slowly, we became aware of race in our daily relations with French people. We began to see racism where others before us had seen colonialism or class exploitation.

We felt that we were immersed in an international youth culture, far ahead of our peers, who did not listen to Jimi Hendrix, who did not even know about Woodstock. To educate them, we de-
cided to organize our own Woodstock in Bamako. Sly and I knew everyone who had played at Woodstock, and we wanted to make sure that our Woodstock-in-Bamako would present the real thing, not French imitations or African musicians stuck in Cuban jazz. In addition to musical authenticity, we wanted our Woodstock-in-Bamako to have a competition for best outfit, a teach-in on freedom, and enough kampe for everybody.

We rented a place in the center of Bamako called the Maison des Anciens Combattants, a veterans’ building with a space for theatrical performances and a bar. There was a man in Bamako called Addy Sow, a member of a group called the Beatles of Bamako. Addy had just come back from Switzerland with plenty of new albums we could use, so we made him the leader of our Woodstock. We put up huge posters displaying a
drawing of Jimi Hendrix with the slogan “Woodstock-à-Bamako,” and we invited all the youth groups in the city to attend. These groups—mostly men, but some women—had names like the Rolling Stones, the Sofia (knights), the Tonjon (foot soldiers), the Kings, and the Stars. The Rockers’ biggest rivals were the Soul Brothers.

On the day of the event, Sly and I prepared to go to the Maison des Anciens Combattants. We spent the entire afternoon doing our Afros. Sly put on a vest made of mud-cloth, our traditional cotton, with a “V” (for victory, and peace) drawn on the back and “SLY” written underneath. “SLY” was also on the front of the vest, running vertically on both the left and the right sides. He wore Levi’s jeans ornamented with holes and fringes; juju necklaces and bracelets adorned his body. He really looked like Sly Stone. I wore a red cotton-and-polyester short-sleeved shirt with “Keep on Truckin’” on the back. Over the shirt I had my embroidered blue satin jacket; I had blue bell-bottom trousers and red clogs from Denmark. When I added a Venetian-glass necklace, cowrie-shell juju bracelets, and dark glasses, I looked—and felt—like Jimi Hendrix reincarnated.

People admired us on our way to Woodstock-in-Bamako. We felt good about that. We were kitsch, and we were living on the cutting edge. When we arrived, the amplifiers were blaring Joe Cocker’s “With a Little Help from My Friends.” There were many people dressed like Jimi Hendrix, George Harrison, Richie Havens, Buddy Miles, Sly Stone, Frank Zappa, Alice Cooper, or James Brown. But some people wore traditional hunter suits: tight-fitting trousers and mud-cloth blouses oversewn with cowrie shells and mirrors. A few of them wore hunters’ hats, which covered their ears and cheeks all the way to their chins. They had bows and arrows. Many of these people belonged to our rival group, the Soul Brothers. There was smoke in the air, and Sly and I were feeling good about ourselves.

Soon Jimi Hendrix’s “Voodoo Child” came on, and we were on top of the world. The songs, the joints, and the Afros helped to cement my friendship with Sly and other Rockers that night. I remember taking the podium at the
teach-in and talking about peace, with quotes from Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?” Jimi Hendrix’s “The Wind Cries Mary,” and Grand Funk Railroad’s “I Am Your Captain.” Sly said that I’d done well; I’d mentioned the songs he dug the most.

I don’t remember who won the prize for best outfit, or how many people passed out on the premises, stoned. But Woodstock-in-Bamako opened the door to the creation of Afro-rock bands in Bamako, and it was one of the highlights of my friendship with Seydou Ly, a.k.a. Sly.

In 1965, Radio Mali advertised a concert by Junior Wells and his All Stars at the Omnisport in Bamako. They were described as a Chicago-based group that was going to electrify the audience with tunes made famous by Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and James Brown. I was very excited, because I had records by Junior Walker, and in those days, when my English was limited, Junior Wells and Junior Walker were one and the same to me.

Sure enough, the concert was electrifying. Junior Wells and his All Stars
played “My Girl,” “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long,” “It’s a Man’s World,” “There Was a Time,” “I Can’t Stand Myself,” “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” “Respect,” “Midnight Hour,” and “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” During the break, some of us were allowed to talk with the musicians and ask for autographs, although a white translator from the United States Information Agency stood between us. I remember distinguishing myself by bypassing the translator and speaking directly to one of the musicians in English. “What is your name?” I asked. His eyes lit up as he told me his name and asked for mine. “My name is Manthia, but my friends call me J. B.” He said something about James Brown. By this time, everybody was looking at us. My experience with English consisted of two years in junior high school and three month-long summer vacations in Liberia. I’d gotten the J. B. from James Brown’s songs.

The next day, the news traveled all over Bamako that I spoke English like an American. This was a big deal in a francophone country, where one acquired subjechthood through Francité—that is, through thinking with French grammar and French logic. We were also living in awe at the idea that to be francophone subjects we had to be as adept in Francité as Leopold Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal, who spoke French better than the French. As one who spoke English like an American, capable of fluent conversation with pop stars, I was acquiring a new and equal type of subjechthood—perhaps even one superior to my comrades, who knew Sartre’s “Chemin de la Liberté” by heart. I was in the vanguard, on the front line of the revolution. For me and for many of my friends, to be liberated was to be exposed to more rhythm & blues, to be up on the latest news about Muhammad Ali, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These American heroes were becoming an alternative source of cultural capital for African youth. They enabled us to subvert the hegemony of Francité after independence.

... Sly dropped out of school in the ninth grade and went on to become a successful businessman. He still has his Afro. Today he and I are both in our forties, and our friendship is still strong. Our musical repertoire now includes jazz and African music. Every time I visit Sly, I bring him the latest jazz and R&B records from America.

One day some years ago, Sly confided to me that he sometimes felt like giving a lot of money to one of the top griots, so that he could have a song written just for him. He is wealthy, and attracts many griots at his business during the day and at his home in the evening. They sing his praises, and he gives them money. He said that in Mali, no matter what you did or gave away, you were nobody unless there was a griot to set you apart with a song. As an example, he cited Babani Touré, a nouveau riche who had come to Bamako and given away millions to griots. Salif Kéita, one of Mali’s greatest pop musicians, had written a song for him.

I said that I was firmly opposed to giving a griot money to sing my praises. I believed that a person made history by building something that engaged and
benefited others. Sly was already doing this with his paint factory, where he employed more than fifty people. He also supported his extended families in Bamako and in his father’s village. I told him that if he had extra money, he should invest it in a cultural center where young people could come and listen to music, watch movies, read books, and produce their own art: he would be immortalized as the benefactor of the young genera-

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tion of Malian artists. That would be ten times better than entrusting to griots the task of making his name.

But I myself once succumbed to the flattery of a griot. On a visit to Bamako a few years ago, I asked Sly to come with me to a live performance by Toumani Diabaté, a master of kora music. I had fallen in love with the kora in Dakar, at a jazz club called L’Atelier. A friend had taken me there to see Soriba Kouyaté perform. L’Atelier was a hole in the wall, with hardly enough room for twenty-five people. Its clientele was usually limited to a dwindling number of French expatriates who came to hear old songs by Charles Aznavour, Georges Brassens, and Edith Piaf. But when Soriba played, on Thursday nights, there was scarcely room to stand. Soriba was a big black man, about six feet tall and two hundred pounds. He played electric kora in the dimly lit, smoke-filled room. Sometimes he would play sitting down and sometimes he would stand, swinging his kora around the way a hunter swings his rifle, as he danced to the tune of “Simbon,” the old griot’s song.

The kora is a tall instrument with twenty-one strings; its base consists of an oval calabash covered with cowhide, and its neck is a long pole attached to the calabash. The musician plays it by holding it upright like a bass viol and plucking the strings. Soriba’s repertoire ranged from classic kora songs like “Duga” and “Yarabi” to music borrowed from Jimi Hendrix, Michael Jackson, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. When he played standing up, jabbing at the kora strings and moving his big body left and right with the instrument, Soriba could remind one of Simbon hunters, Charlie Parker, and Jimi Hendrix, all at the same time.

The fusion of African American and Mande music in Soriba’s performance had blown me away: it was as if, at long last, African music was unafraid of becoming modern. Soriba knew the kora well enough to create improvisations that transported the listener through jazz and the blues, yet he always returned to the Mande by using traditional griot songs—“Duga” or “Yarabi”—in the rhythm section. It was as if Soriba’s kora would suddenly tell us that Charlie Parker and Jimi Hendrix were already in the Mande, and vice versa. When I spoke with Soriba about the kora after his performance, he told me to visit Toumani
Diabaté when I was in Mali. Soriba said that Toumani was the best kora player of his generation.

Sly and I went to see Toumani Diabaté perform in Bamako, in a place called Fast Food. It was, in fact, a fast-food restaurant, specializing in meat-and-onion sandwiches and cold drinks. The room was small: a kitchenette, a counter where the orders were placed, and no more than five tables. Outside, there were a couple of additional tables, with umbrellas to block the sun. Fast Food was in the heart of downtown; during the daytime it was hardly noticeable amid the crush of pedestrians, the slow traffic, the vendors pushing carts filled with lemon-ade and Coca-Cola, and the women with trays of oranges and bananas on their heads. At night, the streets were quiet save for the music drifting out of Fast Food and the hubbub surrounding Black and White, the nightclub at the end of the block. Patrons would circle the area looking for parking spaces, and a crowd of cigarette vendors hawked their wares in front of the club. I suspect that the owner of Fast Food had opened it there to capitalize on Black and White's after-hours patrons.
When Sly and I arrived, the chairs inside were already taken, and the standing room outside did not give us a good view of the performance. Some of the people standing outside were obviously dressed for the nightclub, not for Mande blues and jazz at Fast Food. Luckily for us, the owner noticed Sly and came to welcome us. He gave us two chairs inside, making us the envy of many of his customers. Toumani Diabaté was sitting behind his kora.

According to Toumani Diabaté, the original kora had twenty-two strings. It was invented in Gambia by a griot, an ancestor of the Diabaté clan. The griot was running after his fiancée, who had suddenly disappeared into a cave. He followed her; but when he emerged from the cave, he was holding a kora instead of the woman; his fiancée had vanished. The griot played the twenty-two-string kora in memory of her until his death; then one string was removed from the instrument in his honor.

That night, Toumani Diabaté was performing with two other artists, one playing a ngoni (a four-string, guitar-like instrument) and the other a balafon. The kora, the ngoni, and the balafon are the three traditional instruments of Mande culture. When they found out we were in the audience, the musicians played “Duga.” Toumani first allowed the ngoni player to make a show of his virtuosity. This musician made the ngoni sing the
Mande hero Sundiata's praises, and added his own riffs and syncopations. The crowd loved it. I let myself be transported by the ambience, stamping my feet and snapping my fingers. Then Toumani himself came on. He took the familiar beats of “Duga,” but kept climbing higher and higher with them until our foot-stamping and finger-snapping could no longer keep up.

Suddenly, a griot woman rose and burst into her own “Duga” song. She first praised Toumani for his virtuosity, declaring that he was the son of Sidiki Diabaté, another great kora player, and that no one was his equal. Then she turned to me and called me a hero like my great-great-grandfather, Daman Guile Diawara. It was breathtaking. I pretended not to understand what she was talking about: after all, I was a modern man. I had to resist the temptation of giving money to griots.

But then Sly reached into his pocket and handed a bundle of francs to the griot woman. I kicked him under the table, but it was too late. Toumani’s music had created an atmosphere of heroism that had taken away my self-control. I was upset with Sly for paying for me and thus depriving me of my right to belong to this culture—to understand it, to respond to it in a proper manner. His gift had made me an outsider, but it also registered as a debt that would have to be paid off. How could I show my friendship to him in Mande terms? I had to repeat his gesture. This would not only consolidate our friendship through the reciprocity of gift-giving, but it would vindicate me in the eyes of the audience, by demonstrating that I understood Toumani’s music and that I could pay for my own praise-song. (Generosity toward griots is de rigueur in Mande culture—it is a sign of heroism. Some people even give them houses or cars.)

The musicians did not keep me waiting for long. They played “Yarabi,” a love song. “Yarabi” is one of the few modern songs from the Mande repertoire; it was created in the fifties to provide young people with something easy to dance to, something like the rumba and cha-cha, modern Cuban songs that were all the rage in dance halls from Dakar and Abidjan to Conakry and Bamako. These songs—songs like “Yarabi,” “Alalake,” “Kaira,” and “Cebendo”—inaugurated a style of street party called Goumbé or Bals Poussières, which became extremely popular with the boys and girls of Mande West Africa. The parties brought together young, urban people who considered themselves “civilized,” but who could not afford the cover charge at nightclubs. At the Goumbé, it was said, elegant young men, or zazou, met beautiful young ladies sophisticated enough to dance arm-in-arm with their men. The young people who organized Goumbé in the cities were usually migrant workers from the villages or from neighboring countries. The Goumbé brought them together, regardless of clan and traditional gender divisions. People put on their best Europeanized outfits to come to these street parties. If they did not have trousers made from alpaca or Tergal (a shiny, wrinkle-free imported fabric), they borrowed them from their friends.

Songs like “Yarabi” were also modern because they were about women as objects of desire, in addition to the Mande
hero. They had lyrics like, “My lover is innocent. Let me teach you how to smile, let me teach you how to dance.” In “Yarabi,” the singer says, “My love never offends anybody. Let me give you a scarf; let me take you for a ride on the back of my scooter, because you’re the one I love.” The current wave of Mande

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jazz and blues performances by such artists as Oumou Sangaré, Morfinla Kante, Zani Diabaté, Ali Farka Touré, and Toumani Diabaté is indebted to these Goumbé songs, which introduced love lyrics to the Mande repertoire. Songs like “Yarabi” also marked the beginning of secular entertainment in Mande West Africa. Unlike traditional griot songs like “Simbon,” “Duga,” and “Sundiata,” they were not associated with rituals. They merely provided entertainment for young people in the city.

When Toumani began his solo improvisation with “Yarabi,” he was simply unstoppable. I remembered something Miles Davis said about the style of Charlie Parker: don’t try to rival him—just let him do his own thing and wait for him to finish. Toumani plays the same way: no one can keep up with him, but all his notes feel good. Once again, the griot woman jumped in at the moment Toumani had everyone hooked. She praised him, and then turned to Sly, making him the subject of her “Yarabi,” her love. She said that he was the handsomest man in Bamako, the hope of rich and poor alike. She would not stop. Then, before anybody could move or do anything, I reached into my pocket and handed her a hundred-dollar bill.

I don’t think Sly and I had so much fun together since Woodstock-in-Bamako. We felt victorious, as if we owned the world. Sly still had his Afro; only mine was missing. But by the end of the evening, when he dropped me off at my hotel, I was furious with myself. How could I have given money to a griot?

Lying in bed that night, after Toumani’s concert, I thought about the griots’ power to keep West Africans in the thrall of a heroic past, to evoke feelings that have not changed in seven hundred years. Despite our attempts to catch up with the modern world, they have trapped us in a narrative of return, a permanent identification with the heroes of old griot songs: Sundiata, Mansa Musa, and Samory Touré. They tell us to return to Mande: no one knows us as well as the people in Mande; no other place welcomes us as fully as Mande. We are kings in Mande, even if we wash dishes or clean toilets in other lands. We are like disenfranchised clans when we travel overseas; foreigners have no idea how noble we are, how much history we have. We say that no matter how well we
do abroad, we belong in Mande: our homeland is Mande. We must return to build our homeland; we must return to claim our inheritance. We can never be anyone else's children. We are our mother's children; we are the children of Mande. No matter how long a log stays in the water, it will never be transformed into a crocodile.

I still ponder the injunctions of the griots. They bar the door to any sense of cosmopolitanism, any profound mixing of cultures. "Sundiata" is carefully crafted to move from the hero's departure or exile from Mande toward his triumphant return or restoration to the culture. The hero's exile is a crucial part of the story: a common man can transform himself into a hero only when he is out of sight. Sundiata had to leave Mande for Wagadu, the capital of old Ghana, because his half-brother was unwilling to share power with him. But his exile was what enabled him to learn the skills of leadership in war. In Mande, he could only be a hunter; in exile, he could learn from other cultures, come to know the world. Only then could he return to transform Mande from a collection of hunting and blacksmith clans into an empire of warriors.

"Sundiata" warns us about the difficulties of exile: "Their feet ploughed up the dust of the roads. They suffered the insults that those who leave their country know. Doors were shut against them and kings chased them from their courts. But all that was part of the great destiny of Sundiata." This wisdom sustains the new Mande heroes, who sweep the terrace of the Eiffel Tower and the streets of Paris, who drive cabs in Montreal or peddle African sculptures on 125th Street in Harlem. They are not looking for recognition or belonging in these places, for recognition and belonging are sweet only when they come from Mande.

...
most advanced form of black modernity, because it successfully deployed race to change the law on questions of citizenship and national identity. Blacks in Europe can be modern only through Marxism or Christianity or some Eurocentric version of universalism; Africans and Arabs resist modernity in the name of Islam or tradition. Only black Americans have an authentic modernity, a culture capable of conquering America and the world. I cited as examples Martin Luther King, Jr., and the black church, Malcolm X and the Black Muslims, jazz and the blues and hip-hop, and African American literature and theater: all these, I argued, exemplify a unique form of black modernity.

We are trapped in a narrative of return, a permanent identification with the heroes of old griot songs. The heroes tell us to return to Mande: no one knows us as well as the people in Mande; no other place welcomes us as fully as Mande. We are kings in Mande, even if we wash dishes or clean toilets in other lands.

At this point, an African student raised his hand and declared, on the contrary, that black Americans had lost their African identity, that they were lost. He refused to call their alienation a culture. He had been born in Paris twenty-three years ago and lived there all his life, but he would never consider himself French. He was from Senegal, and proud of it. In fact, he said, he hated France. He would return home to Africa as soon as he finished his studies. He would work anywhere in Africa before considering work in Europe.

I responded with the lessons of my own black American experience. Where would he be returning to? My student sounded more French than Senegalese. His defiant attitude was itself more a product of French culture, which advocates individual freedom, than of West African culture, where his voice would have been suppressed by the elders, the clan, and the social divisions that determine who can speak. But more important, he was contributing to his own exclusion from the French society he had helped to build and shape. He was denying himself the right to belong, to become a full citizen of France.

Thinking back on the incident, I realize how much I underestimated the power of the narrative of return that permeates the everyday lives of migrant workers and their children. Like Sundiata, they live for the moment of their heroic return. When Toumani Diabaté played “Duga” and the griot woman praised me in song, I was momentarily the envy of everyone. The money that Sly and I gave to the griot woman acknowledged the incomparable supremacy of that moment of return. The only thing that counts is that moment; it makes people forget all the pain and humiliation they went through in exile. In Mande, the time of exile is but a season, no matter how long it lasts. It is the return that is eternal.

Giving money to the griot woman represented my participation in the dis-
course of Mande heroism—a discourse which, together with the caste system and the subordination of women through polygamy, sustains the power of the clans that constitute the main barrier to the creation of a democratic society in Mande West Africa. I still felt guilty for succumbing to the flatteries of the griot woman. Was culture more powerful than reason? As I considered everything that was broken and stagnating, and looked at the debris that filled the city of Conakry, I felt like Sundiata returning from war and exile to the ruins of his native Niani: “From the top of the hill Djata gazed upon Niani, which looked like a dead city. He saw the plain of Sounkarani, and he also saw the site of the young baobab tree. The survivors of the catastrophe were standing in rows on the Mali road. The children were waving branches and a few young women were singing, but the adults were mute.” How could the griot woman’s song make me rejoice in the midst of such a catastrophe?