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The Role of Griots in Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali

By William Gries

The most basic description of griot could be summed up in a griot's own words when he says "I teach kings of the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past" (Niane 1). However truthful such a definition may be, it is lacking in many a significant area. Griots are more than just walking history books made necessary by a supposedly illiterate society. Even the dullest student could recite some passage about Alexander the Great or Caesar Augustus but griots look on such confined learning with disdain saying "other people use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them" (Niane 41). Griots therefore, do not just recite the past, but "rescue the memories of kings from oblivion" (Niane 41) and along with this rescuing comes all the fanfare, intrigue, and learning of that past ancient time. For a griot it is important not just to tell the truth but to "teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed" (Niane 84) and that which they do share must be shared in a beautiful, musical, way. It is their job not just to present history, but to use it as a tool for teaching in specific situations and philosophizing about life in general. Clearly then, it can be seen that griots, in African society, are more than just scholars of history. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* demonstrates the griot's multiple roles as historian, teacher, advisor, philosopher, and, ever important, musician.

The text offers three main examples of a griot. First there is Gnankouman Doua, the griot of Sundiata's father. Next comes Balla Fasseke, the griot presented to Sundiata by his father and the son of Doua. Less obvious, but very important, is Mama Kouyate, the griot that is actually

relating Sundiata's story for the reader. Each of these griots participates in the many roles of their position, beginning with Kouyate as he says "I know the list of all the sovereigns who succeeded to the throne of Mali (Niane 1). It is here, by listing Sundiata's lineage that the role of the griot as a historian is shown. Kouyate demonstrates that Sundiata is a descendant from a prominent Islamic heritage as well as the prominent ancient kings of Mali. The griots are very aware of their role as historian. A fact made evident by Balla Fasseke when Sundiata's host marches off to confront Soumaoro as he says to the great leaders "I salute you. But what will I have to relate of you to future generations" (Niane 59). This interaction, between the royal griot and the warriors, was an intentional motivation strategy as "Sundiata arranged a great military review in the camp so that Balla Fasseke, by his words, should strengthen the hearts of his sofas" (Niane 58). The griot then, can wield his power as historian to spur men to great acts, such as "pierc[ing] through and through" (Niane 59) a mountain with just a sword. Lastly, it is through knowledge of the past that kings gain wisdom and Sundiata is not an exception to this rule. From his griot, Sundiata "listed to the history of the kings which Balla Fasseke told him; enraptured by the story of Alexander the Great, the mighty king of gold and silver whose sun shone over half the world" (Niane 23). The lasting effects of this myth are shown throughout the epic as Sundiata compares himself to, and elevates himself above, the great Greek hero.

The stories of a griot also serve an educational purpose. Within the story itself Balla Fasseke is shown to give "the child education and instruction according to Mandingo rules of conduct. Whether in town or at the hunt, he missed no opportunity of instructing his pupil" (Niane 23). Just as Balla misses no opportunity to teach his young king, Kouyate constantly weaves lessons into his tale of Sundiata. Through the story of the buffalo woman from the land of Do, Kouyate accomplished his dual goal of telling the history of Sundiata's birth while also

presenting the moral lesson that kindness can overpower strength or, as the buffalo woman says, “your generosity has vanquished me” (Niane 8). What is more, this tale also reiterates the old proverb ‘do not judge a book by its cover’ for Sogolon is “a very ugly maid-uglier than you can imagine” (Niane 8), yet it is from her that the great king will be born. The tale of Sundiata’s first steps, presents the lesson that “the more a wife loves and respects her husband and the more she suffers for her child, the more valorous will the child be” (Niane 22). In this story, Sogolon, Sundiata’s mother, is shown to be a moral exemplar while Sassouma Berete is cast as wicked. The former’s death as a honored queen while the latter’s death in obscure disgrace support this dichotomy and help perpetuate the lesson for the listener of Sundiata’s tale. Yet another example of Kouyate using Sundiata’s tale to teach moral lessons can be seen in the episode of the witches and the garden. Sassouma gathered the nine witches of Mali together with the intent of setting them against Sundiata. To accomplish this the queen mother sent them to steal from the garden of Sogolon, hoping that her son would retaliate with violence. Instead Sundiata, upon seeing the old women in his mother’s garden says “what is the matter with you to run away like this. This garden belongs to all” (Niane 25). Just as he demonstrated the value of kindness, Kouyate shows, for his pupil, the value of generosity. Actions such as this, make clear the griot’s role as teacher and educator.

Often throughout the epic, the special relationship that exists between a king and his griot is shown. The griot is, from an early age, the closest friend and advisor to the king. This close connection is demonstrated when Dankaran Touman sends Sundiata’s griot away to which the young king responds “you have taken away our part of the inheritance. Every prince has had his griot, and you have taken away Balla Fasseke” (Niane 27). Additionally, it is not until Soumaoro took Balla as his own that “war between Sundiata and Soumaoro became inevitable” (Niane 40).

There are other, less dramatic, examples of the kinship between a griot and his king though. For instance, when Sundiata is being born Nare Maghan “sent all his courtiers away and only Gnankouman Doua stayed by his side” and “tried to distract the sovereign with his one-stringed guitar” (Niane 13). Additionally, it is Doua who announced to the town upon the birth of his king’s child that “the child of Sogolon will be called Maghan after his father, and Mari Djata, a name which no Mandingo prince has ever born” (Niane 14). This idea that “I [the griot] am the word and you [the king] are the deed” (Niane 58), is made very literal when Balla acts as Sundiata voice when speaking as Mansa, for the ruler of an empire “does not speak like a town-crier” (Niane 77). There are multiple instances throughout the epic of the griot acting for the king, in both personal and public situations, when the king is at a loss for direction. When Sundiata reconnects with his step sister after seven years he is unsure how to garner from her the information necessary to defeat Soumaoro. It is here that Balla steps in saying “wipe away your tears and tell your story, speak to your brother. You know that he has never thought ill of you” (Niane 57). Alternatively, when Sundiata is born, his father is sent into such a state of awe that he knows not how to react. Doua, however, “realizing the king’s emotion, got up and signaled to two slaves who were already standing near” (Niane 13) to beat the ceremonial drums and alert the town to the birth of the new prince. These instances show the deep connection between a king and his griot. Often, it seems, the latter is present at the critical moments in the former’s life. What is more, a separation between these two, between the word and the deed of history, is a great transgression worthy of war.

Both the griots in and outside of the legend fulfill another role in African society as philosophers and the philosophy they put forth is rather unique. It is a philosophy of fate or destiny. As Kouyate says “God has his mysteries which none can fathom...each man finds his

way marked out for him and he can change nothing of it” (Niane 15). This strong sense of destiny pervades the epic. For instance, the fact that Sogolon would be presented to Nare Maghan as a wife was destiny as foretold by the hunter-soothsayer. Particularly though, it is a philosophy precipitated by the griots, even when such a philosophy is forgotten by others in society. When Nare Maghan throws Sogolon out of his household for the disgrace that her crippled son, Sundiata, has brought upon him, “Doua never ceased reminding him of the hunter’s words” (Niane 16) that proclaimed Sundiata a great king. In short, Doua tries to remind Nare Maghan that “man is in a hurry but time is tardy and everything has its season” (Niane 6) or, in other words, that everything is predetermined and it is only man’s duty to play out the grand scheme. Balla Fasseke reminds the banner-men of Sundiata what will happen to those that try to contradict this philosophy of fate saying “each kingdom has its childhood, but Soumaoro wants to force the pace, and so Sosso will collapse under him like a horse worn out beneath its rider” (Niane 62). In the eyes of the griot, to go against this philosophy of fate is to provoke downfall, just such a downfall as that which befalls Soumaoro when he contradicts the destiny of the great Sundiata. A destiny to rule all of Mali.

Just as important as his duty to history or philosophy, the griot is always inextricably linked to music. Throughout the epic, music is often a requisite part of African society’s important moments. As such, the griot is tied to these moments as both their chronicler and their orchestra. During the wedding of Nare Maghan and Sogolon for instance, “Doua, standing amid the eminent guests, held his great spear in hand and sang the anthem of the Mandingo kings” (Niane 10). Music is also an integral part of both war and hunting. It is the griot that provides this music as is demonstrated by the crowd that would greet a young Sundiata as he returned from his day’s hunt singing “the ‘Hymn to the Bow’ which Balla Fasseke had composed” (Niane

23). This war song is seen again when Sundiata convenes his council at Ka-Ba. Here the great host of Sundiata celebrates its victory and newly established empire by having “at a signal from Balla Fasseke, the musicians, [give] off muted notes while the griot’s voice gave the throng the pitch for ‘Hymn to the Bow’” (Niane 76). Both war celebrations and weddings fall into the griots domain of musical talent. These critical moments in the life of the community are underscored by the songs that accompany them. Songs that exist to the present day and, as such, link the old stories of Mali to the present day descendants of the great empire. The epic says that “music is the griot’s soul” (Niane 39). This may be made most evident by Balla Fasseke’s weakness for the great enchanted balafon of Soumaoro. This magical balafon demonstrates the power of the griot as a musician for it is through his “improvised song in honor” (Niane 40) of the soccer king that he is accepted into Soumaoro court and avoids punishment. Music then, is a major component of the griot’s role in the community.

The concept of a griot presents a radically different conception of history than that normally found in the western world. The west is the home of analysis, and history has not been spared from this vice of reason and debate. Academic history in western culture is something to be rigorously checked and rechecked for factualness and accuracy. It is a study of hypothesis and data. The African griot with its multiplicity of roles including historian, teacher, advisor, philosopher, and musician, brings life back into the study of life’s story. While western history seeks to tear away all the social and cultural debris that may contaminate the truth of history, the griot seeks to bring these lost world of culture and society back into being. It is for this task that the griot hold so many roles in a community. They are engrained in a community with the hope or reproducing a shadow of that community for some distant later world.

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