

Peace will come if Africans listen to their soul and their griots

Article By Robin-Edward Poulton and Djely Karifa Samoura

Showing that African ways of peacemaking are culturally appropriate for Africa, both Muslim and Christian, and have nothing whatever to do with Huntington's fictitious clash of civilizations.

Introduction to the book reflecting on the ways that Africans can make peace

We listened to the music of Salif Keita. Mali's greatest musician was singing *Manjou* in honor of Mali's ancestors. While Salif sang, Djely Karifa was reading his version of the same story from one of his notebooks. This is the history of Malian Emperor Soundiata Keita, founder 770 years ago of the Mali Empire. It is a story we have heard many times during our lives in West Africa and a story we have recounted many times to our children, both black and white – the story of nobility and courage and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Soundiata lost the throne as a child and was forced into exile by the King of Sosso, Soumangoro Kanté. Soundiata was handicapped, he walked with difficulty but taught himself to be a great horseman. With the indispensable support of his mother and his sister, he returned to take back his kingdom and his story of triumph over adversity provided the model for Disney's smash hit film *The Lion King*. Soundiata is a Malian-Guinean-African hero, the greatest and most famous member of the long and distinguished line of the Malinké Clan Keita. Where does the *Lion King* come in? Well, the name Keita means 'Lion'.

Djely Karifa's story described the role of music and history and story telling in Malinké society. The word used in English for the traditional historians-diplomats-musicians of the Manding peoples is 'griot'. The Malinké word for 'griot' is *djely*. 'Djely' is a title, a title that is both earned and inherited. Djely Karifa is descended from the famous and distinguished griot Clan Samoura, initiates of the mystical brotherhood of Kangaba. Djely Karifa was born in Dabola, in modern Guinea. Kangaba is a town in Mali near the Guinean frontier, which reminds us that Africa's modern frontiers are new. African frontiers are artificial divisions, separating people who should normally and rightly consider themselves brothers and sisters from a single family. We are all descended from the same Ancient Egyptian civilization of Africa, and we must not allow ourselves to be divided by labels like 'Guinean' or 'Malian', or 'Liberian'. Tribal and linguistic names are also unhelpful. We are all Africans and we should be proud of it!

The town of Kangaba contains the sacred house of the Malinké initiates: a round, decorated hut with a straw roof known as Soundiata's house. Beside the painted shrine is a pile of stones. Each visitor adds one stone as a symbol of his visit and prayer. Over the years we have both added several pebbles to this pile where Soundiata long ago placed his own stone. This is the place where Soundiata Keita was crowned around the year 1235. This is a place where griot diplomats are born and receive an education in making peace.

Djely Karifa's story described how Soundiata received the magical 26-stringed *cora* from the *djinné* or spirits of the Niger River, and gave it to his friend Balafasé Kouyaté to play. Balafasé Kouyaté is famous as Soundiata's personal griot and praise-singer. Karifa explained that this is a confusion of stories: the original story is from Sosso, the king was Soumangoro and instrument he wrested from the water genie was the *balafon* – the wooden instrument played like a xylophone, with calabash sound boxes hanging beneath the wooden slats that the musician hits.

Soumangoro's magical *balafon* still exists.¹ Soumangoro had a great musical reputation on the *balafon*. When he passed it to Fasé to play, the legend tells us that he heard the musical and vocal talent of his griot and cried out in ecstasy, "It is so much more pleasant to hear the music from the hands of another and one's praises from the voice of another!"

Nothing prepares people for peace more graciously than being praised for their own achievements and those of their forebears. Legend makes Soumangoro the founder of the *balafon* and they say that the *balafon* is the founder of the griots. Of course this is not so. Fasé Kouyaté was already a griot before Soumangoro gave him the *balafon*... and the *balafon* antedates Soumangoro by many centuries. West Africans have been making peace for 40,000 years.

Mali and Guinea have many peace mechanisms. If two Fulani are in dispute, a Kanté (descended from Soumangoro) can separate them with a single reproach because their ancestors made a pact thousands of years ago. The Kanté are Blacksmiths, makers of tools for agriculture and for war. The Kanté clan has lived on the banks of the Niger River since Old Testament times. The Kanté have been magical masters of the art of smelting iron ore for at least 5,000 years, maybe ten times longer.

We can see how history becomes distorted, especially oral history. Soumangoro Kanté built his fame on the back of the Empire of Wagadou and Ghana. Thanks to his famous griots, Soumangoro enhanced his reputation at the expense of his ancestors most of whom are forgotten. Later Soundiata Keita, victorious over Kanté, became the owner of the *balafon* and new owner of the genie story.... transformed neatly into a *cora* story because the Malinké instrument is the *cora*. And Keita took over Kouyaté, who with the Diabaté have remained the traditional royal griots of the Manding. The fame of Balafasé Kouyaté remains untarnished, but his name gives the lie to the *cora* version of the story, for does his name not contain the word *balafon*? The original *balafon* was given to Fasé Kouyaté. His name henceforth included the *balafon* since this instrument became the father of his fame, and of his misfortune: for Soumangoro was so pleased with the music that he wanted Fasé to remain always with him and his music. Soumangoro maimed Balafasé by slicing through his Achilles tendon, making him lame and therefore chaining him to the *balafon* and to his master.

The Kanté versions of the Soumangoro legend do not emphasize the cruelty of their king-hero. They remind us that Soumangoro was the man who outlawed slavery (later restored by the Malinké king Soundiata Keita). The Malinké griots tell us, on the other hand, that Soumangoro surrounded himself with the skulls of the kings he had vanquished in battle, and that he turned Fasé into the musical cripple of the *balafon*. Then he was defeated by the Lion King who replaced Soumangoro as the creator of legends.

Does the contradictions between the Kanté and the Keita legends invalidate oral history and the stories of Africa? Not at all! Quite the contrary. Oral history is invariably based on truth. The legends and founding myths of Africa tell us not only what happened, but also how the peoples of Africa perceived themselves and their heroes. The legends actually add to the fun of history by enticing us into interpretations and forcing us to rethink our prejudices. Let there be no mistake about history: all history is propaganda. Study the history books of your children's school lessons, and see what they are told. More important, see what they are NOT told! How much do they learn about the vanities and failures of leaders? Why are history books filled with stories of

¹ Only once has this precious historical instrument been allowed to travel outside Guinea, when in 1999 it was put on display at the Paris (France) headquarters of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. This wonderful wooden *balafon* is 800 years old.

war and victorious battles? Why are they not filled with stories about motherhood? The answer is, of course, that history books are written by men to please their political leaders. How much better the history would be if it was written by women! Our children spend too much time looking at battles, and too little time studying peace and justice, the laws of good governance and the arrest and condemnation of political crooks. Stories of corruption would be too painful for the elite - better focus the children's attention on victorious battles, even if this glorifies war.

Instead of war, we should be glorifying peace! Africa is a victim of imported ideologies. If we searched the foundations of West African culture, we would find few reasons to make war and many ways to live together. Africans have always believed in One Creator, a God who rules over everyone and to whom we speak through the intermediary of our ancestors. That is why Elders are the leaders of African society. Their authority has always been based upon spiritual authority, as well as wisdom and age and the organization of economic life. Conflict is a natural part of human relations, but West Africans always used to know how to manage conflict and avoid violence. What is the Palaver Hut, if not the Place of Peace and Compromise? By ignoring the precepts of our peace-negotiating ancestors, we have allowed Africa to lurch into violent conflict. The rape and pillage we have seen in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Sudan, Rwanda and Congo shame us all, Africans and non-Africans alike. Inter-communal violence brings misery upon the inhabitants and shame us as leaders. Instead of turning to the wisdom of our Ancestors, using the griots and ancient traditions of mediation, we allow anger to get out of control. Worse, we ignore our traditions and allow religious bigots to manipulate us with foreign ideologies.

In place of the 'palaver tree' and 'palaver hut' and other ancient traditions of partnership, we have allowed religion to become a tool to separate us. Religion has always provided evil men with a weapon for political exploitation. Never has this been truer than in the present 'Clash of Fundamentalisms' (that is writer Tariq Ali's expression, not ours, although we wish we had thought of it first!). There is no 'clash of civilizations' - that is a silly theory - but we live in a world where economic deprivation and political frustration create a terrain that fosters extremism and international terrorism.

There are people in our world who experience such levels of poverty and deprivation that infant mortality kills off one child in every three. In some cultures, parents do not name a child until it has survived the first week: far from identifying 'life at conception', they actually do not consider a baby is viably alive unless it survives the first week after birth. As long as this world contains pockets of such poverty, no Christian or Muslim who understands the meaning of his or her religion can live without a feeling of shame. Every human should eat three decent meals every day, and if some African children go hungry we are all shamed as African parents.

Our new religions have brought us the prejudices of Europe and the intolerance of Arabia. West Africa has traditions of tolerance and peacemaking more ancient and far superior to the bigotry of the imported religions (YES!! Both Islam and Christianity are imported religions). Abraham was an African. The Father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham took his monotheism from Africa across Sinai into Palestine. Over the centuries the tribal influences of Celts, Franks, Goths, Greeks, Romans, Kings and Princes and Popes, Arabs, Persians, Pakistanis and the Taliban have infiltrated the original message of God. SO far has it gone, that we can no longer recognize in militant Islam or in evangelical Christianity the message of tolerance and partnership and "love thy neighbor" which is contained in the original spiritual message of both religions.

We need to be critical as we hear the distorted message of Christian and Muslim 'literalists', the people who are fueling the "Clash of Fundamentalisms". In the meantime we invite you to listen to the music of Salif Keita and ponder the deeper meaning of *Manjou*.

How can we now honor our West African ancestors?

Do you hear the drumbeat of the African soul?

If we understand the mystical brotherhood of Kangaba, we will realize that it is a place where peace is born.

Soundiata Keita was crowned Mali's Emperor around 1235 in a sacred space dedicated to griot diplomats, West African spiritual values, and the art of making peace.