
“Elle connaît tout le Mande”: A Tribute to the Griotte Siramori Diabate

Jan Jansen

This is a praise song for a woman who praised others during her own lifetime. Siramori Diabate¹ is today considered to be the paragon of old-style griottes² (*jelimusow*, West African female bards) in Mali, especially in the part of Mande that is covered by the present-day Republic of Mali.³ Or, to say it in the words of a young man who listened in 1989 to my recordings of Siramori's songs “Elle connaît tout le Mande.” This tribute is also a reply to Thomas Hale's call in *Research in African Literatures* for more research on griottes. I will not elaborate on gender-specific characteristics of the art of griottes, but describe Siramori in her sociocultural context, as a talented member of the prestigious Diabate bards from Kela.⁴ In this description I follow some lines set out by Siramori herself in an interview with her published under the title *Sorofè*. Thus, I argue that “traditional” knowledge on griots, that is, data about male griots and the so-called “schools of oral tradition,” is useful in the study of griottes.

The metaphor of “bridging distances” is used to describe Siramori's creativity, since she bridged cultural, geographical, and social distances. Siramori Diabate's career represents a stage in both griotism and the creation of nation-based group identities in Mali, because she articulated the tradition of her Mande homeland to the Mande people who migrated to the city. She appealed to a new generation that derived its identity primarily from being citizens of the nation-state of Mali, and less from its ethnic background. Siramori is generally acknowledged as a person who bridged the old and the new: her songs are appreciated by all kinds of people, whatever their age or ethnic background. This is a remarkable achievement, and Y. F. Kone does not exaggerate when he writes:

ils sont rares les *jaliw* [= griots-JJ] qui ont su s'adresser à tous les maliens dans leur diversité: cela Siramory Diabate l'a réussi. (19)

Rare are the *jaliw* who know how to speak to all Malians in their diversity. Siramory Diabate has managed this.

In this respect, Siramori can be compared with her male agemate, the famous blind singer Banzumana Sissoko, called “Le Vieux Lion” (see Keita, “Jaliya”). It is no coincidence that a recent collection of historical recordings from Mali has been released in two 2CD boxes titled *Sira Mory* and *Banzoumana*. Following my impression of Siramori's career, I will present proof of her mastery by adding to

my article the text of "Sara," the song that will always be connected with her name. The text of this song shows how brilliantly Siramori negotiated different sets of values and coped with apparently ambiguous values, thus appealing to a wide audience.

Siramori's premature death on 16 October 1989 can be considered as a great loss for Mande culture. Radio Télévision du Mali acknowledged this loss immediately in the week following her death it broadcast several programs dedicated to her repertoire of songs.⁵ Mali's leading cultural journal, *Jamana*, also published a two-page "Hommage à Siramory Diabate" by Y. F. Kone. Only then, when it was too late, did I fully realize why the staff of the Institut des Sciences Humaines sent me to Siramori the moment I arrived in Mali in 1988 for my first fieldwork on Mande griots. Now, seven years later, and after nine months of fieldwork among Siramori's family in Kela, I feel it both a duty and an honor to write a tribute for this fantastic singer with her inciting and hoarse voice.

Siramori was first of all a descendant of the famous Diabate griots of Kela, a village at the banks of the river Niger, 100 kilometers southwest of Bamako. She was born in Kela around 1925, the daughter of Bintufaama Diabate.⁶ Being a Diabate from Kela more or less shaped her life. The Diabate from Kela have long been considered the keepers of the "true" version of the Sunjata epic, Kela is a so-called "school of oral tradition." The septennial ceremony, during which the Diabate from Kela recite the epic, attracts many visitors from all over Mande.⁷ Among them can be found many bards who visit Kela in order to add prestige to their own performances of the Sunjata epic.

The Diabate of Kela today are a group of 250 persons who have been split up into five patrilineages. They derive their high status from their relationship with the royal branch of the Keita family from Kangaba. This town was a major political and economic center in the West African Sudan in precolonial times, the Diabate's link with the rulers of this important town explains the prestige of the septennial ceremony mentioned above. Other reasons for the Diabate's high status are the great sense of unity between the five patrilineages, and their pride in being in possession of the Sunjata epic (see Jansen, forthcoming).

Not all the Diabate from Kela become famous artists, but among every generation there are some who are successful. The patrilineage to which Siramori belongs seems to have a special talent for music. Her grandfather Kelabalaba is considered to be the first Diabate ever to be the official spokesman in the septennial recitation of the Sunjata epic. His four sons have inherited this talent (see Fig. 1). Siramori's father, Bintu'aama, was a renowned player of the *ngoni*, the traditional Mande lute. The people in Kela still mention him as a great artist, and his *ngoni* is said to have continued to play even after he had stopped playing it.⁸ Siramori's agemates El Haji Bala and El Haji Yamudu both had impressive careers as musicians.⁹ They both had their own music group with which they toured Mande.¹⁰ Among Siramori's classificatory grandchildren, Kasemadi (aka Kasse Mady) is by far the most famous. Kassemadi sang in the 1980s with bands like National Badema A and B. Today he lives in Paris and his records are sold all over the world. His younger brother Lanfia is not only a fine *ngoni* player, but has also an outstanding voice and features in the Bajourou trio. In the 1980s Lanfia was the singer of Mali's legendary Rail Band.

Some of Siramori's children have 'inherited' their parents' talent. Siramori was married to Nankoman Kouyate, a balafon player who played in the group in which Siramori was a singer and dancer (*infra*). Her two daughters Sanudje and Bintan are considered to be the inheritors of Siramori's secrets (Jansen, "Secret," 123-24). Sanudje is a professional singer, who alternates stays in Bamako and Paris. She has made one cassette in Paris with Ibrahim Sylla, the producer for many Malian artists. Sanudje's sister Bintan has married a Diabate from Kela and she has acquired a central role in music performances in Kela. Two of Siramori's sons are also active as professional musicians. Her youngest son, Lansine Kouyate, is a talented balafon player who played on Salif Keita's latest album, *Folon*. Her second son, Sidiki, is a guitar player who travels through the Mande region with his electric band. His home base is his mother's compound in Kangaba.

Becoming a griot, however, is not merely destined by birth. It also depends on talent. None of the rest of Siramori's children are involved in music. Her oldest son is an executive who works for the "Eaux et Forêts." Another son works as a photographer in Bamako. Her youngest daughter is married to a merchant from Bamako.

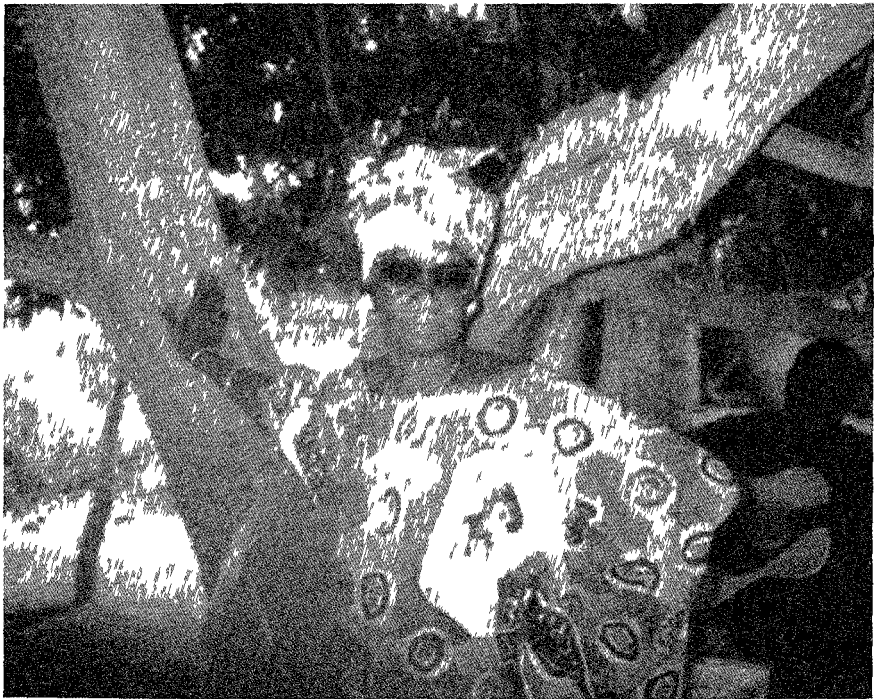


Fig. 1 Siramori Diabate (c1925-89) under the mango tree in her compound in Kangaba, March 1989. Photo by and with permission of Jan Jansen.

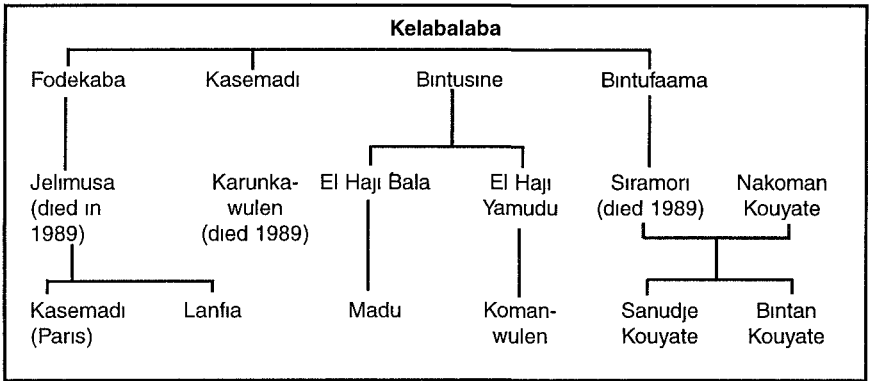


Fig 2 The parental relations between Siramori and other gifted musicians in her patrilineage

Although Siramori's family environment provided fertile soil for her talent, she had to experience a long learning process. Just like many daughters of present-day famous griottes, Siramori started as a dancer and chorus singer. She performed this role in the group of her "older brother," El Haji Yamudu. Another member of the band was Siramori's husband, Nankoman Kouyate. A photo of the group, taken during the festivities of Mali's independence in 1960, still decorates the wall of El Haji Yamudu's hut.

The bards from Kela learn by listening. Only when they have arrived at a certain age, and when they have acquired a certain social status, are they allowed to perform in public. Only certain old men are allowed to recite the Sunjata epic, but everyone more or less knows the content of this tradition. The epic is remarkably stable in a location like Kela. The three versions of the epic recorded in the period 1924-92 are similar as far as the main line of the story is concerned.¹¹ There can be, however, a great deal of difference in style: the 1992 version, for instance, is not very poetic compared to other versions of the epic, as Stephen Belcher has rightly remarked (pers. comm.).

Men and women acquire the same information about Sunjata, since they are all allowed to attend the (rare) official rehearsals of the epic (see Jansen, forthcoming). However, female bards in Kela perform in a different way from their male counterparts, but they lean greatly on the highly standardized praise lines for the ancestor who "founded" the patronymic, the so-called *fasaw*, often interpreted as "genealogies." The words of the *fasaw* can be recited or sung, only old men are allowed to recite the words of the *fasaw*. In public performances of the Sunjata epic, these praise lines connect the various themes in the epic. This explains why Siramori did not appear to be a great storyteller: she had never been trained in telling. A few days before my return to Holland, in April 1989, I was ordered to come to Siramori and bring my cassette recorder with me. Siramori was alone in her room, and she announced the telling of some stories. The result¹² proved to be rather dull and disappointing, because the content of her stories was widely known and her speech lacked the power to convince. It seemed as if she was constantly hesitating and looking for words.

When, however, Siramori sang about the very same topics, words came automatically, and the result was overwhelmingly impressive. This is due to both the power of her voice and the way she recites. For example, Siramori's voice was hoarse, and therefore compelling and special. There is a widespread rumor that Siramori used to have a "normal" voice, and that her voice changed suddenly because of a spell or curse. However, Lucy Durán wrote me that her voice is already "distinctly hoarse" on recordings made by A. Alberts in 1950.

Siramori's "verbal arts" were the other source of her success. These arts can be illustrated by two anecdotes that may explain how powerful the spoken word can be in Mande. When in January 1989 a neighbor of mine in Kangaba listened to my recording of a *Sunjata fasa* by Siramori, he became so excited that he exclaimed "Now give me a knife! When I hear this, I want to see blood!" That same month I walked home with Mamadu Kouyate, the son of my host in Kangaba. We just had recorded a hunters' song in which Siramori sang extensively about the two brothers who killed the buffalo of Do, a famous theme in the *Sunjata* epic. Immediately after the recording Mamadu walked like a drunken man—he could hardly find his way back home! He explained his strange behavior by proclaiming that he was so moved by Siramori's song that he could not control his body. It is clear that Siramori was a griotte who was able to evoke strong emotions with her words.

Siramori's voice was unique, but she owed her verbal arts and her knowledge to her family in Kela. When I recorded the *Sunjata* epic in 1992 in Kela, I again heard the story of the buffalo hunters. The similarity between Siramori's songtext and the spoken epic text was great. For instance, in both stories the same expressions were used to describe the buffalo of Do. This proves that male and female bards drink from the same source in Kela, although they are expected to behave differently, and to deal with this knowledge in a different way. Therefore a labor division is in place: women and young men sing, while only old men speak. People learn the art of reciting the epic by listening and keeping their mouth shut. Young people generally deny being able to speak. However, they have elaborate opinions on the question of who among their agemates will be a great speaker in the future.

A gender division with regard to musical instruments has also been observed in Mande. Generally speaking, men are said to play instruments while women are said to sing. Women play only certain rhythm instruments, such as calabashes or the *karinyan*, an iron rod. However, this does not mean that the women's knowledge about music is restricted to rhythm instruments; many female artists know more, as illustrated in the following anecdote. In 1989, I recorded songs by Bintan Kouyate, Siramori's daughter. Among them was a nice song, which I titled "A yelema" (Things Change).¹³ In 1993, during the recordings of *An Bè Kelen*, I requested Bintan to perform this song again. She could not remember the song, because "A yelema" is not the official title. When she found out what I was talking about, she remarked that she had not sung the song for years. The guitar player who accompanied her did not even know it.¹⁴ Then Bintan took the guitar out of the hands of the guitar player and showed him the melody. I was astonished and exclaimed "Hey, older sister, you play the guitar!" Bintan reacted by smiling with an expression of superiority on her face. Therefore, both female and male griots may share a great deal of their knowledge, but perform it in a different way.

Of course, Siramori was aware of her role in society as a woman. She said, for instance, in the moralistic tone that is so typical of Mande griottes (Anonymous 5)

Je suis une femme, moi-même () Ce n'est pas par simple plaisir que
je flétris nos défauts et chante nos qualités La femme est le pilier de la
société et la famille le ciment de la société

I am a woman, myself It is not through simple pleasure that I
denounce our faults and praise our good qualities The woman is the pil-
lar of society and the family is the cement of society

Siramori cannot be described merely as “a woman,” since “woman” is not a very productive analytical category in research on griottes. She represented various, more specific, social categories, for instance the “traditional bard from Kela,” “the professional musician from Mali,” “the traditional rural woman,” and “the modern urban woman.” Siramori produced images of all these categories in the context of the Mali of the 1960s and '70s. Thus one can really state without exaggeration that “elle connaît tout le Mande.”

Let me first elaborate on the claim that Siramori really represented society as a whole. This idea is, of course, context-dependent. It can be compared to the septennial recitation of the Sunjata epic, a context in which the Diabate griots from Kela are considered to know in its entirety the history of Mande. Although their version of the epic more or less resembles versions recorded elsewhere, the ceremonial context—during which the epic is told in a hut in which no strangers are allowed to enter—produces the status ascribed to this version and these griots. The same can be said about Siramori, in the context of the Mande at the crossroads of two eras, Siramori Diabate from Kela indeed “connaît tout le Mande.” She more or less determined how to discuss “hot topics” (see the song “Sara,” following), thus creating a discourse on society, a truth for Mande. She did this as a “woman” or a “female artist” or as a “griotte from Kela,” and thus as a unique individual who negotiated these various roles and created songs in response to the demand of her time, that is, her cultural, social, and historical context. Thus, Hale’s observation on the lack of material on griottes reveals a lack of research on griotism in general. Griots and griottes each shed light on the cultural process of griotism, and therefore Siramori’s contribution to Mande culture can be largely analyzed by focusing on her success as an individual in relation to her sociocultural context.

First, Siramori was a bard, a member of the Diabate of Kela. She was very proud of this status. In an interview (on *Sorofè*), published on cassette, she said about the Diabate and their knowledge: “Griotism has born fruit at our place and we are the fruits,” and “I was born in it, I grew up in it, and I settled in it.” In the interview she talks a lot about “being a good griot” and about “people who deserve to be praised.” Siramori considers praise singing to be at the heart of griotism. She proclaimed that what had been shown by her father and her mother was good. She added “An b’o sira fè” “We want that road.”

Her opinions about praise singing are quite remarkable, when compared to those of present-day Mande griots who often claim that they do not sing for money. They do this in an effort to neutralize complaints such as “nowadays griots

sing for money, and not for the truly heroics” However, Siramori clearly pointed out that prestigious and powerful people are supposed to donate many gifts “If we say that someone is the owner of a gun [*marifatigi* = a powerful person-JJ], up to the moment that his fame has its end, you will find nothing but his gun in his house” To say it in other words a really powerful person gives everything away

There is yet another factor that had a great impact on Siramori’s career, namely the booming of Bamako, Mali’s capital Bamako has known a remarkable growth in the twentieth century in 1883, it counted 1,000 inhabitants, in 1958, it counted almost 100,000 inhabitants, in 1980 there must have been about 600,000 people in Bamako, and today it is said to have 1 million inhabitants Since Mali has about 8 million inhabitants, Bamako is Mali’s biggest city by far Many inhabitants of Bamako have migrated from the adjacent countryside It is clear that these people were in need of representatives of their own “traditional” background Siramori could satisfy this demand, since she lived only 100 kilometers from Bamako

Today the trip from Kela, via Kangaba, to Bamako lasts less than four hours The road is not very bad, except in the rainy season, and small iron bridges cross the various tributaries to the Niger This route is a product of modern times Mamadi Diabate, my neighbor in Kela, told me one evening

Mamadu Konate [the famous politician who died quite suddenly at the eve of Mali’s independence-JJ] has managed for us all the iron bridges from here to Bamako There used to be wooden bridges which had been built by the French These bridges could not carry the weight of big cars Therefore, it took two days to arrive at Bamako We went with a big truck When we arrived at a bridge, all the people had to disembark with all their luggage Halfway the trip, most often at Bankoumana, the truck driver always stopped and said that we were to continue the next day He then used to complain that his car was tired (laughing) Since the installation of the iron bridges it is even possible to go to Bamako and return the very same day

Siramori certainly must have benefitted from this improved infrastructure I consider the building of these bridges an important aid in the griots’ breakthrough, since the new bridges made it possible to articulate different cultural spheres the urban and the rural

In this respect, the location of Siramori’s house is significant Marriage patterns are virilocal in Mande society, and men settle patrilocally settling in the compound of the father is preferred This means that the usual practice is for a woman to leave her paternal compound and settle in her father-in-law’s compound However, Siramori did not do this She and her husband, Nankoman Kouyate—whose family lives about 100 kilometers west of Kela—settled in Kangaba Thus, they settled neolocally, and not far from Siramori’s village of birth

Kangaba is 5 kilometers north of Kela As discussed, it is a famous town and the Diabate from Kela are clients of its rulers These rulers still enjoy much prestige as the village chiefs of Kangaba In the modern nation-state of Mali, Kangaba is the capital of a “cercle,” an administrative unit Thus, by living in Kangaba, Siramori had access to her family tradition in Kela, modern bureaucracy in Kangaba, traditional power in Kangaba, and people in Bamako who needed a griotte from Mande

Siramori may have considered it crucial to stay in the Mande area, because this was necessary for the continuation of her status as a real Mande griotte. It was due to the improved infrastructure that Siramori managed to remain part of the local tradition, while profiting from Bamako's economy. Her participation in "modern life" was partial, even marginal. Indeed, it is meaningful to notice that Siramori never made a record as a solo artist, the sign of modernity, only after her death did Syllart productions release a cassette with some recordings made by Radio Mali.

In this respect it is interesting that it was said that "*elle connaît tout le Mande*." The young man did not say, "*Elle connaît tout le Mali*." It is clear that Siramori represents a stage in the history of Malian popular music: today, successful griottes live in Bamako and go "*en brousse*" to work on their repertoire and to get information, but Siramori preferred to "*live in*" the repertoire and to go to the city to attain additional status. Present-day singers want to dominate the Malian music market—which has come into existence in the last decades—and therefore they live in Bamako, but in her time, Siramori had to settle for a prestigious position in the Kangaba region.

Thus, it is evident that Siramori bridged several distances. Thanks to the improving infrastructure in Mali, she was able to spread her fame over a larger geographical area than her predecessors were able to do, and she did this without moving from the cradle of her tradition. This importance of the development of the infrastructure must not be ignored in the analysis of the spread of genres in Mande music. The recent popularity of Wassoulou music in Bamako, and thus in Mali (Duran), is, I believe, a result of the improved infrastructure, for the Wassoulou region had always been relatively isolated from Bamako, since it was further away than Kangaba/Mande, and not connected by a good road.

Siramori also bridged a cultural distance by transferring Mande tradition to the urban culture that came into existence in Bamako. The urban people were influenced by "Western" culture, and had to cope with different values that were considered to belong to different ages. For instance, Mali's megastar Salif Keita once claimed to be a twentieth-century person and said that his father belonged to the nineteenth century (see Keita, "A Praise Song"). Thus, differences in culture were expressed in differences in time.

Siramori had to be able to adapt herself to both "traditionalistic" and "modernizing" demands. On the one hand, she played the role of client of a patron, and on the other hand, she built up relationships with the "*nouveaux riches*" in Bamako. In this way she also bridged the new social distances of her time.

The negotiation of apparently ambiguous values, the bridging of distances, is visible in Siramori's repertoire, for instance in the text of "*Sara*," the song that will always be connected with Siramori's name. This song, now a classic dance band song, "tells the story of a woman who is betrothed to someone but in love with someone else, and who manages to extricate herself from the betrothal honourably" (Duran, "Birds of Wasulu"). Sara indirectly discusses values relating to the love marriage. With a great feeling for social relationships and norms, Siramori maneuvers between two extremes. Sara and her lover are determined to marry each other because they love each other, and in this they represent modern times. At the same time, Sara wants to accept traditional values by accepting the man chosen for her by her family. Her solution to this problem is a pretended

illness. No one can heal her, and thus she is sent back from the chosen husband to her family. Back home, Sara's father promises to marry her to the man who is able to heal her. Secretly, Sara instructs her lover how to heal her, thus achieving a happy end.

The "tone" of the song "Sara" also combines two extremes. Siramori blends different tendencies into an entertaining short story. The song combines the plot of a trickster tale with a vivid description of a traditional marriage ceremony. Siramori beautifully describes how Sara is accompanied to the village of her future husband, and how she is welcomed there. When the marriage is canceled, first the ten kola nuts are returned in exchange for the bridewealth. Sara embodies different tendencies, because she is modern in her choice of her lover, but traditional in her behavior towards him, because she addresses him with "n fa" 'my lord,' 'mister,' literally 'my father.' Siramori deals subtly with Islam. God/Allah is praised, but at the same time human beings are shown to use and abuse His name: the amulet makers appear to be nothing but quack doctors. The song is also moralistic, since it talks about the weight of a promise (both *kumakan* and *lahilu* have been translated as "promise").

In January 1989, Siramori sang "Sara" for me. She was accompanied on the guitar by her son Sidiki Kouyate. At that time I did not realize what I was recording. As a symbolic way of offering my apologies to Siramori for this lack of respect, I will now give a full translation of this song. For this translation I am much indebted to my friends Esger Duintjer and Boubacar Tamboura.

"Sara" is the name of a girl. However, the word "sara" refers to many other words that—with slight tonal differences—have to do with the things that happen in the song (see Duintjer). *Sàra* = "death", *furū sara* = the marriage ended in divorce, *sàra* = say goodbye, *sàra* = delightful, attractive, *saratu* = agreement, meeting. Therefore, Sara's name is the point of departure for many puns by Siramori.

Title "Sara"¹⁵

Words Traditional/Siramori Diabate

Translation Esger Duintjer/Jan Jansen/Boubacar Tamboura

Sara fòtò lahilutigi le ye
 A Sara kan jan
 Kumakan ka gèlèn,
 Kumakan ka gèlèn
 Hòròn nín ka kumakan namína
 Nyamangòden t'í ye, kumakan y'í galo ye
 Yèrèwoloden fila ye kuma mìn fò,
 mun y'a sela tiriti la, nì Ala tè?
 Furunyogònma fila ye kuma mìn kè,
 mun y'a sela tiriti la, nì Ala tè?
 Hòròn t'í k'a la kumakan ka gèlèn,
 jòn ma Ala lòn
 Kumakan ka gèlèn
 Sara n'a jatigikè bèrè de saratira
 A ko o ne furukè bèrè na kè dī lon don

A ko kumakan ka gèlèn
 Kumakan ka gèlèn
 I ko k'í furukè bèrè na kè ne dí,
 Sara, ee, Ala
 I k'í mūrī ı kumakan ma jaa dè,
 jòn ma Ala lòn
 Sara furubagalu nana,
 Sara furuwarı laminara,
 Sara furumısı laminara
 Kumalekènyògòn ko nın ye kabako ye'
 Kumakan ka gèlèn
 Sara kan jan
 I ko ı furukè bèrè na kè ne dí
 I furuwarı laminara,
 I furumısı laminara
 Kan'ı mūrī warı nın ma, n nugunyògòn
 Kumakan ka gèlèn
 I ka mına n kumakan ma jaa dè,
 kan'a kòròtò Ala la
 Sara kònyòmàlònna lu wulıra,
 kònyòmınanu sırıla,
 kònyòmàlonlalu wulıra
 Kabını kònòlu kasıra,
 kònòlu kasıra a la,
 konkankokònòlu kasıra,
 kònyòmàlonna lu ko nın ye kabako ye'
 Kònyòmuso mın wulılen ye nın ye,
 ı tolo tè yırıla kònòlu kasıra?
 Sara yee
 Sara saratınyògòn tè kumala
 A wara se kèla a dugu kòfè,
 jembefòlalu wulıra a la,
 balafòlalu wulıra,
 jelimusow karınyantıgılu wulıra
 A ko ne kònò ye n dımına,
 ne kònò ye n dımına lalala-ıı
 Ne kònò tè sumala
 A ko ne kònò ye n dımına lalala-mm,
 ne kònò tè sumala
 Kònyòkumbènnalu balıra,
 Kònyòtıgılu balıra
 Musokòròba kelen de ye yen
 A ko mmm,
 alu t'a masènsèn
 ka w'a bıl'a kèla lu le ma,
 Sara ee, Ala
 Basımugunıntıgılu wulıra a la,
 Tafokurulalu wulıra a la,

Kònòbòrònna wulira
 A ko n kònò ye n dimina lalalala,
 ne kònò tè sumala
 Sarafurukè bèrè nín balira
 A ko ne kònò ye n dimina
 A ko kumakan ka gèlèn
 Sarakè de ko jòn ma Ala lòn
 Ne malola tan,
 ne malola fadenmajugulu nya na
 Kònyòmuso mìn dilen n ma nín ye,
 Tile saba o kònò tè sumala,
 Tile naani kunkolodimi na wulira
 Ní Ala tè ko mìn, o tè kèla
 Sara furuwarí ka sagín kò
 Bílakeronín fíla bè bolí bírírí,
 ka w'í lò dubalen bolo de la,
 ka duniya rògwè, jaa duniya ye tan de ye
 Bílakeronín fíla bè bolí bírírí,
 ka war'í lò Sara tònnyògon de da la
 Aí ko, ne n'Ala cè, Sara furu o rò sara
 Woro tan mìn ye,
 woro tan mìn ye mìnínègè lò walewuguu,
 o y'í dalafyè le dí, o Ma
 Jaga saratikan ye Sara dimina
 O war'a d'a wolofa bèrè le ma
 W'a d'a wolofa bèrè le ma
 Sara ba ye kasíra buruburuburu
 A ko n Ma kana kasí
 Mansa Ala kana kè e de kasíra
 Baba í tè kèw lajè n ye?
 Dugukònkèw lajè n ye
 Mìn bara ne kòndònnín suma bí,
 baba, baba,
 ne furukè bèrè na k'o dí
 Dugukònkèlu balír'a ma,
 Dangadugubèèkèlu balír'a ma,
 Basımugunıntıgılı balır'a ma,
 Tafokurulalu balıra
 Sara wulira tuma jòn na?
 Sara wulira alıfajırı la
 A war'í lò saratınyògòn de da la,
 ale taara, aa, mògò tè bon na wa?
 N nugunyògòn, ko mògò ye bonna cèn n ma?
 Jòn kan ye subadıbí rò nín ye sa?
 Jòn kan ye alıfajırı la nín ye sa?
 I gundokènyògòn de kan nín dí,
 O kòndònyògòn de kan nín dí
 A ko í tè donna wa, Sara kankelenfò?

N ye donna kè, n fa
 I tè sığıla wa, Sara lahlutığı?
 Ne ye n sığıla kè, n fa
 Basımugunıtıgılı balır'a la,
 Tafokurulalu balıra,
 Mın ye ne kòndò nın suma nı kòròta la,
 ı ye kònkònbèrè le ta la sını,
 k'o de la gonıkısè de fan na la
 Nı kònkònbèrè nın wulıra,
 ı y'o bıla ne minnıjı de rò, saratinyògòn,
 ne kòndò dı suma sını
 Kam'a sòrò o kumakan ka gèlèn
 Sara furukè bèrè kèr'o dı
 Sara kòndòya fòlò ye Sara ye
 Sara sinnaban ye Sara ye
 Hòròn tèna ko o ko kè,
 ı ka f'ı da le la,
 ko ı kumakan ye ı galo ye,
 k'ı kan'ı kumakan lajèngè
 Fıla tana nı Manınka tana, Bamana tana
 Aı ko dı bı?
 Muri a la ba!

Sara is sung for those who keep their promises
 This Sara inspires confidence
 It is hard to keep your promise
 It is hard to keep your promise
 Everyone must keep his promise
 If you are not an unworthy person, you must keep your promise
 How can the confidence between two dignified persons be spread, if not
 by God?
 How can the confidence between two fiances be spread, if not by God?
 No one will deny that it is difficult to keep your promise, God is inscrutable
 It is hard to keep your promise
 Sara and her lover made a promise towards each other
 She said You will be my husband one day
 He said It is hard to keep your promise
 It is hard to keep your promise
 You say that I will be your husband
 Sara, ee, oh Lord ¹⁶
 You must think well about your words,
 God is inscrutable
 The people responsible for Sara's marriage have come,
 The money of the bridewealth has been accepted
 The cow of the bridewealth has been accepted
 The lover said This is astonishing!
 It is hard to keep your promise
 This Sara inspires confidence

You say that I will be your husband.
 The money of the bridewealth has been accepted,
 The cow of the bridewealth has been accepted,
 You must forget about the money, my lover,
 It is hard to keep your promise.
 You must believe my words,
 Do not be impatient towards God.
 Sara's companions for her marriage have departed,
 All her household utensils have been packed.
 The companions for her marriage have departed.
 From the moment the birds sang,
 The birds sang for her,
 The "konkan" birds sang for her.
 Her companions for the marriage said: This is astonishing,
 The bride is ready to depart.
 Don't you hear the birds singing in the tree?
 Ee, Sara.
 Sara's lover did not say anything.
 When she arrived at the village of her future husband,
 The tam-tam players played for her,
 The balafon players played for her,
 The griottes played their karinyan for her.
 She said: My belly is aching,
 My belly is aching, lalalala-ii,
 My belly won't calm down.
 She said my belly is aching, lalalala-mm,
 My belly won't calm down.
 The people who welcomed the bride could not heal her,
 The people responsible for the marriage could not heal her.
 But there was an old woman,
 She said: Mmm,
 You must accompany her
 To the compound of her husband.
 Sara ee, oh Lord.
 The healers have presented themselves,
 The makers of amulets have presented themselves,
 The belly masseurs have presented themselves.
 She said that her belly was aching.
 My belly won't calm down.
 Sara's future husband could not heal her.
 She said: My belly is aching.
 It is said that it is hard to keep your promise.
 Sara's husband said: God is inscrutable.
 I feel ashamed,
 I feel ashamed towards my family.
 The woman they gave me to marry,
 Her belly has not calmed down during three days,
 The fourth day a headache is about to come.

What God does not want, that will not happen
 Give me back the bridewealth that I paid for Sara
 Two young boys ran away,
 And they seated themselves on the branch of a ficus tree,
 To watch the world, yes, this is how the world is
 Two young boys ran away
 They went to Sara's friends
 They said We swear to God that Sara's marriage is over
 The ten kola nuts,
 The ten kola nuts in this bowl, alas, they announce the bad news, Mama
 Indeed, her promise made Sara sick
 They gave them to her own father
 Go and give them to her own father
 Sara's mother kept on crying, buru-buru-buru
 She said Mother, do not cry,
 May God stop your crying
 Papa, won't you call the men for me?
 Of all the men of the village,
 The one who can calm down my belly today, papa, papa,
 He must become my husband
 The men from the village could not heal her,
 The men from the neighboring villages could not heal her,
 The healers could not heal her,
 The makers of amulets could not heal her
 When did Sara get up?
 Sara got up before daybreak
 She went to the house of her lover
 When she arrived Aah, is there nobody in the house?
 My lover, is there someone who has taken my place?
 Whose voice is that in the dark?
 Whose voice is that before daybreak?
 This is the voice of the one with whom you share your secrets,
 This is the voice of the one with whom you share your thoughts
 He said Don't you come in, Sara who keeps her word?
 I will come in, my lord
 Won't you take a seat, Sara who keeps her promise?
 I will sit down, my lord
 The healers could not heal her
 The makers of amulets could not heal
 If you want to calm down my belly efficiently,
 You must take a bangbang pebble tomorrow,
 And put it in smoldering charcoal
 When the bangbang pebble is hot,
 You must put it in my drinking water, my lover,
 And my belly will be calm tomorrow
 It will happen like this because a promise is hard to keep
 This man became Sara's husband
 Sara's first child was named Sara,

Sara's last child was named Sara
 When a free man is not able to accomplish something,
 He must not promise it,
 Because his promise will commit him
 He must never withdraw his word
 Totem of the Fulbe, totem of the Maninka, totem of the Bamana¹⁷
 What do you say about it nowadays?
 Think about it!

Concluding remarks

Siramori Diabate was a legendary griotte from Mali. On the one hand she was, as a Diabate from Kela, still rooted in tradition, and therefore she stayed in Kangaba, on the other hand, she actively participated in urban life in Bamako. The song "Sara" illustrates how Siramori voiced the changes that have taken place in Mali society since the 1950s. Siramori worked from her cultural and historical context, and from her education within the family—in a so-called "school of oral tradition." While griottes and griots participate in large part in the same traditions and activities, the main difference between griots and griottes is their role during a performance, since they then represent different aspects of their communal knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising that Siramori saw herself mainly as a Diabate from the village of Kela. However, this does not mean that griottes need not be studied. I fully support Hale in his call for research on griottes. Especially in the cities, griottes are today's representatives of griotism, and thus they must be first-choice informants for most of the research on griotism and popular music.

This tribute to Siramori Diabate gives an impression of the dynamics of culture. In the context of the young developing nation-state of Mali, Siramori Diabate adapted Mande heritage to the demands of modern times. Therefore, she indeed "knew all Mande." May she always be remembered in Mande.

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NOTES

- 1 Siramori's name has been spelled in various forms: "Siramori," "Sira Mory" (on records and music cassettes), "Siramory" (in Kone), and "Siramuri" (on the wall of her house in Kangaba and therefore in Jansen, *Siramuri Diabate*).

- 2 Hale uses this word as the female form of “griot” and I follow him in this choice, since this term looks like a suitable form of “griot” both to an English-speaking and a Dutch-speaking audience. However, this choice is quite confusing for the francophone, since in French it means “morello cherry.” Therefore, the French prefer “griote” as the female form of “griot.” See, for instance, Raffanel’s account in Hale 76.
- 3 For a discussion on the term “Mande,” see Vydrine.
- 4 Hale (80) talks about the Kouyate griots from Kela. Although widespread, this is not correct, because there is no Kouyate lineage in Kela. There was one, which was not very prestigious, but its members left a decade ago (from information by Mamadi Diabate from Kela). In Mande, the Kouyate are usually represented as the griots of the Keita, and the Diabate as the griots of the Traore. However, in the Kangaba region, this division does not hold because there the Keita have Diabate griots and the Traore have Diawara griots, who also live in Kela. This deviation from the general pattern has far-reaching consequences for the way the Sunjata epic is told by the Kela griots (see ch. 4 of my PhD thesis, *De Draaiende Put*).
- 5 From information provided by Geert Mommersteeg.
- 6 The Malinke have a patrilineal descent system, and thus it is not exceptional that Siramori presents herself mainly as the daughter of her father (on *Sorofe*).
- 7 For descriptions of this ceremony, see Dieterlen, Meillassoux, and Camara. Although the official septennial recitation is open only to the Diabate themselves, training sessions are open to all. For a description of these training sessions, see Jansen, forthcoming.
- 8 Information provided by Bintan Kouyate, Siramori’s daughter (early Nov. 1994). This story is told about several famous griots, for instance the above-mentioned Banzumana Sissoko.
- 9 These two brothers are often the informants of researchers who work in Kela. El Haji Bala as “Nansara Bala,” “Bala,” or “Kelabala”; El Haji Yamudu as “Yamudu” or “Yamaru.”
- 10 Field recordings of them can be found on Bird.
- 11 Compare Vidal, Ly-Tall et al., and Jansen et al. The similarity in the general outline of various Kela versions is due to the fact that the epic represents a standard set of status claims by the Keita rulers from the Kangaba (see Jansen, “The Younger Brother”).
- 12 Published in a modest translation in Jansen, *Siramuri Diabate* 78-79. I was astonished to read that Amy Koita was “singing the Sunjata epic” (according to Durán in Hale), for it is my experience that Mande people easily attribute prestigious French genre terms, such as “épopée,” to performances of prestigious persons, regardless of what they are performing. So if a prestigious old man merely recites *fasaw*, he can be considered to be reciting the epic (in Jansen, forthcoming). I suppose that Amy Koita actually sang an impressive *fasa*, and did not actually develop the story line. For instance, that is what she did at a concert in Utrecht in March 1990 (if I remember the date well). Performing an epic takes a great deal of training. Siramori would have never recited or sung the epic, although she proved that she knew its content and many expressions derived from it. Only some old men are allowed—and able—to recite it.
- 13 The text of this song on the rising status of a woman as soon as she has children can be found in Jansen, *Siramuri Diabate* 126-27. The translation (not by Cemako Kante) is debatable. The official title of the song is “Wusukurunba,” which means “big sweet potato.”

- 14 Therefore, the final result is astonishing When the group played the song, Bintan stopped the recording after 30 seconds and said that she did not like the rhythm Then a second try was made This one was excellent and has been put on the compact disc A remarkable achievement by these semiprofessional Mande musicians'
- 15 Although this is the title, Siramori actually pronounced it as "Salàn"
- 16 Griottes often use the word "Allah" in between lines Bad singers use it too often When, in Nov 1994, Bintan Kouyate amused me with a parody of her competitors from Bamako, she sang, after every short line, "EEEE, Allah"
- 17 Well-known expression, often used in praise songs by the Diabate from Kela

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