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lessons about the fieldwork (collecting African tradition)

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**A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNY KÜLFÖLDI BARÁTAI
AZ AFRIKA-KUTATÁS TERÜLETÉN
FRIENDS IN ABROAD OF HUNGARIAN SCHOLARSHIP
ON THE FIELD OF AFRICAN RESEARCH**

**BARDS AND RESEARCHERS:
SOME LESSONS FROM THE FIELD**

HALE, Thomas A. (University Park)

(kézirat / manuscript, kb./approx. 1984)

The American anthropologist, Ivan Karp, has often served as a reviewer of proposals for fieldwork in Africa. During a panel discussion on funding for research in Africa, held during the annual meeting of the African Literature Association at Indiana University in 1979, he commented that the first item he always looks for in a proposal is an answer to the following question: "What are you going to do when you step off the airplane in Africa?"

For the foreign researcher planning to do fieldwork in Africa, this is, indeed, an important question. Difficult as it may be to obtain financial support to travel to Africa from Europe or America, the matter of purchasing an airplane ticket is insignificant when compared to the complexities of arranging a recording session with an African informant. Although anthropologists have published some general advice to fieldworkers, no one has ever offered guidance specific to a particular region and to one type of informant who interests oral literature researchers, the West African bard or griot. The purpose of this essay is to offer some lessons learned from contacts with 20 griots in western Niger in 1980–81. Although these lessons are limited in time (some may be out of date by now) and space (they may apply only to Niger), at the very least they can perhaps help to sensitize scholars to some of the problems which they may encounter when conducting fieldwork on oral literature.

In the best of all possible worlds, of course, the foreign researcher might like to step off the airplane, be picked up by a local colleague, and then go directly to the best informant in the region, an old man who sings for our newly-arrived scholar the longest and most detailed version ever heard of the national epic. But in the real world, things do not work quite that way. Foreign researchers, to use a Songhay proverb, come and go like the morning mist on the river Niger. Local scholars, who are busy with their own projects and responsibilities, cannot simply drop everything to take care of each passing foreign researcher. One may find, in fact, that one of those responsibilities thrust on the local scholar is the job of helping the host government evaluate the research proposals of foreign scholars. In most African countries today, the researcher from the outside needs to obtain an authorization from the government before going out into the field. This can take time. But often the local scholar, forewarned of the foreigner's visit, can speed the process. The lesson is, of course, to work with the local people, and to initiate the research authorization process well ahead of time – at least six months.

In Niger, I found a wide range of support and interest in my work on the part of local scholars and researchers. But given the broad scope of my plans, I could not expect Nigérien colleagues to lead me by the hand to the most talented 20 griots in the Songhay-speaking region of the country. Although they were helpful in many, many ways,¹

¹ For example, His Excellency Seyni Kountché, President of Niger, provided a research authorization; Abdou Moumouni, Chancellor of the University of Niamey, and Abdou Hamani, Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, approved requests for research authorization and funding; Gaston Kaba, Chairman of the Department of English and Robert Nicolai, Chairman of the Linguistics Department, sponsored research grants for my work; Djibo Hamani, Director of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences of the University of Niamey and Diouldé Laya, Director of the Centre for Linguistic and Historical Studies by Oral Tradition of the Organization of African Unity, provided a variety of advice and assistance; Oumarou ISSA, transcriber/translator at the Centre, helped prepare a questionnaire for the bards, assisted with some interviews, much transcription and translation, and many other tasks; Mounkaila Seydou, transcriber/translator at the Lexicography Laboratory of the University of Niamey, and Nouhou Hassane Inti, telephone operator at the Central Post Office, helped with transcription and translation; finally, a working group set up by the Linguistics Department continues to provide assistance on the difficult task of refining the transla-

at some point I had to strike out on my own. The question, then, was where to find one of these keepers of the oral tradition, known locally as *djesseré* or *nyamakala*.²

Although there are fewer griots today than there were a few generations ago (at least that is the general impression one gets, although we cannot document this apparent decline), it is hard to find a Nigérien who does not know of a bard. There may not be agreement on just what are the qualities of a great griot. But by simply asking people about bards, one can quickly accumulate a great quantity of references. Where, then, does one start? I found that when people from different areas and social classes referred me to the same bard, then I knew I was on to a potentially useful informant. My referees ranged from university students to common laborers.

The bards themselves, of course, are excellent sources of information about their colleagues. They are part of a network, and they meet at weddings, baptisms, installations of chiefs, and other ceremonial occasions. A middle-aged bard may have studied with an older bard or taught apprentices. Most have travelled widely. They take pride in their knowledge of the profession and its practitioners. Although I encountered professional rivalry between bards once in a while, in general the griots were extremely helpful in providing names of others who would be willing to work with me.

One of the assumptions which I made at the outset in my search for talented Songhay-speaking bards was that the older the individual the better. After all, was it not Amadou Hampaté BA who is supposed to have coined the phrase "Each time an old man dies in Africa, a library burns"? In general, I found that the older griots were usually the most knowledgeable. But this faith in the wisdom of the aged often blinded me to the talents of younger griots. Amid the many references to bards which I would receive, I found myself asking often "but how old is he?". Given a limited amount of time to conduct my work, I would choose the older bard over the younger one. Yet, on more than one occasion, I encountered a young *nyamakala* who was more talented

tions and transcriptions: Fatima Mounkaila, Censeur at the Lycée Kassai, Djibo Moussa, student in the English Department, at the University and Abdoulaye Dan Louma, professor at the Lycée Issa Korombé.

² *Djesseré* is a term of Soninké origin; *Nyamakala* comes from the Mandé world, of which Soninké is one of the cultures.

than some of his older colleagues. The lesson here is to take the broadest possible approach to uncovering talent or wisdom in local informants.

Once one locates what appears to be a griot with some reputation for knowing the past, an introduction is needed. Quite often, the referee can serve as the person who provides the entrée. Although I can speak Songhay with enough fluency to hold a basic conversation with a bard, I worked whenever possible with an interpreter/guide. My primary concern was not so much to improve communication (there were always some people around who spoke French and who were willing to assist), but to soften the initial contact, almost as a petitioner will rely on a griot to make a request in order to have the matter presented in the proper manner. The people who assisted me ranged from a moonlighting chauffeur who had a deep interest in his own culture to a diesel mechanic I had known 15 years earlier, a translator/transcriber from the regional oral traditions research center of the Organization of African Unity (the Center for Linguistic and Historical Studies by Oral Tradition), and a young player of the *molo*, a three-stringed instrument which often provides accompaniment for the singer of an epic. Some were more effective than others in presenting my request. The important thing, however, was for me to avoid simply walking in on a griot and announcing in my less-than-fluent Songhay what I wanted.

Armed with the knowledge that a bard of some importance is available, and aided by a person who will provide an introduction, one can go to the home of the informant to arrange a recording session. But in my experience, when I arrived in the compound of many griots and asked (or had my interpreter ask) "Djesseré a go no" – "is the griot home?", the response more often than not was "a si no" – "he is not here". The frequency of these negative responses does not mean that griots do not like to meet with researchers. It simply indicates that the bard is out working. His stock in trade is his ability to perform wherever and whenever he is needed. But his absence may be for more than just an afternoon. Given the dispersal of the inland populations of West Africa to the coast during the dry season, it is not surprising that many griots follow their clients to Abidjan or Accra after the harvest. If, on the other hand, the planting season is approaching, and one finds the griot gone again, it is because he has moved to the fields for the

duration of the rainy season, along with other members of the family, and won't return until September. To sum up, the griot is rarely home, and it may take the researcher many visits in order to find him there.

Once the researcher and the bard meet, the foreigner must somehow explain the reason for his visit. By this I do not mean simply to record epics (or whatever). One needs to explain why a person from another race and another country who has no cultural claim on the heritage which the griot represents would want to record material from Africa. Although there were many reasons for my interest in the oral literature of the Songhay-speaking peoples, I found it most appropriate to emphasize one aspect of my interest which the *nyamakala*, lifelong teacher and student that he is, could understand most easily. I explained that my students had read the Sundiata epic, but they did not know anything about Askia Mohammed and Mali Bero. They had some notion of what a Mandé griot was all about, but had no knowledge of Songhay griots. They wanted to learn more about griots in general.

The griots understood and appreciated the nature of my request once it was presented in those terms. But after the general purpose of the visit was made clear, the next step was to spell out in more detail the specifics of what I wanted. Griots share a great deal of common knowledge, but some know more than others. One could spend an entire year with a single bard, recording everything he knew, and then discover, at the end of the year, that one had been working with a third-rate informant. I was looking for very detailed versions of the epics of Askia Mohammed, the man who brought the Songhay empire to its apogee during his reign from 1493 to 1528, and Mali Bero, the legendary leader of the Zarma who helped bring them from Mali to western Niger several centuries ago. Once I had explained what I was looking for, and had mentioned in passing that I had encountered some griots who simply did not know the long version, the bard either said he could sing what I wanted or, in some cases, he referred me to others who could. On several occasions, a middle-aged griot would refer me to the mastebard? who had trained him. Usually, the elder griot lived in an out-of-the-way village and had not appeared on television or radio. In a few cases, griots who claimed that they knew the long version of the epic of Askia Mohammed could sing for only short periods – five to 20 minutes – before running out of material. Although

their performance might seem at first to be a waste of my time, there was no way I could predict in advance how things would turn out. These second-rate griots did provide, nevertheless, the lower end of the scale on which I could compare the work of other, more talented bards, and in this sense, it was useful to record them.

If the informant says that he knows the material which one wants to record, then it is necessary to decide when to record – now or later, during the day or during the evening, in front of the researcher alone or before an audience. I found most griots eager to perform on the spot, rather than wait until later. There was sometimes a feeling that the researcher represented an unexpected opportunity for reward which could be lost if delayed. On long trips to survey griots in a large geographical area, it was often difficult to set up recording sessions in advance, and the only thing left to do was to record at the time of the first encounter. At first I was afraid that this would prevent me from setting up what Kenneth Goldstein calls the induced natural context³ – the performer singing for villagers as well as for the researcher, and therefore providing what one might expect to be a more faithful version of the text. But I found that recording sessions arranged on the spot often attracted audiences as large as those at tapings scheduled in the future. Moreover, there did not seem to be a great deal of difference between a morning and an evening performance. I had assumed that the best time would always be the evening, when people are free. But griots perform at any time of the day. Baptisms are always early in the morning. Weddings can go on all day long. On several occasions, shortly before the planting season, I encountered griots who were happy to drop whatever they were doing to perform.

One difficulty which arose when planning tapings in the future was confusion over dates. I or my interpreter/guide might agree with the bard to record on Saturday night. But when we arrived on the appointed evening, the griot would ask us why we had not shown up when we promised. He had expected us the evening before. Although we all knew the meaning of the Songhay word for Saturday – "assibiti" – the

³ "The Induced Natural Context: An Ethnographic Folklore Field Technique", in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts: Proceeding of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnographical Society*, ed. June Helm (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967, pp. 1–6).

bard, a good Moslem, gave it a different meaning. For him, Saturday begins at sundown on Friday. Hence the expectation that we would actually come on Friday evening.

At some point in one's dealings with an informant, either before or after the performance or recording session, one must deal with the matter of rewards. Some researchers refuse to pay or reward performers because this may falsify or corrupt the researcher/informant relationship. Indeed, there have been cases where the informant, in his desire to obtain more rewards, invents material which has, in the strictest sense, no foundation in the culture – although one might argue that such information in and of itself would be rather interesting to study!

In some cultures, performers may not be rewarded for their performance, but at least in West Africa, and especially in the savanna zone, it is expected that the griot will receive something for his participation in an event. So it is essential for the researcher to consider ahead of time just how he or she is going to handle the matter of rewards. In my own experience, I found that some griots wanted to discuss the subject before the performance. Others simply said that they would take whatever I gave them after the taping. Inevitably, the foreign researcher will give more for the griot's services than the local person. This is due in part because when the local person pays the griot, he may establish a relationship with that bard. As a Nigerien colleague explained to me after having recorded a local griot in a studio, the giving of 3,000 francs CFA (\$9) implies that the bard may approach the donor at any time for gifts in the future. The local scholar is here today, and will be here tomorrow. It is an ongoing relationship. The foreign researcher, on the other hand, may never return. He must obtain a receipt, signed with an x or a thumbprint from the griot, to document the expense incurred. The relationship is much more commercial than social.

In a larger sense, if the researcher gives the informant 5,000 or 10,000 francs CFA (\$15 to \$30) for a performance, this sum constitutes little more than a token payment, even though the local scholar might offer less. The griot who attends the installation of a canton chief may return home with 50,000 CFA (\$150) in his purse, several hand-woven blankets in his suitcase, and a horse. He is always happy to earn the reward offered by a researcher, but he has other, better ways of earning far more money. It is possible, but unlikely, that he

will be corrupted by the offering of a token payment from a foreign researcher. Without that payment, he may perform once, but may refuse to provide additional information about the text or himself when the researcher returns later.

It is not inappropriate for the researcher to bargain with the bard over fees for a performance. The griot may have an unrealistic expectation of just how much money the scholar has available for performance fees. The lesson which I learned the hard way in negotiating with one *djesseré* was never to discuss performance fees with the individual in front of a crowd at a wedding! Negotiations should be a private affair. On the other hand, after the performance, when it is time to pay the griot, the offering of the money should be a public event. It provides the recognition of the griot's status. In fact, often during the course of a performance, when local people come forward to place money at the feet of the bard, the performer would stop in the middle of his narration to recognize the benefactor and his distinguished heritage.

The collection of the material in the field, as difficult as it may seem from the foregoing, turns out in fact to be the most interesting and enjoyable part of the job. The work that follows, transcription, translation, analysis of the text, etc. is the hardest part, and may take many, many years to complete. There are numerous questions which the researcher will need to deal with as he or she progresses through these later stages. For example, if the material is published and earns royalties, what share should go to the informant? Jean Rouch has proposed that 20% be set aside for the performer.

At some point, the scholar should deposit his recordings in archives which are accessible both to foreign and African researchers. The Archive of Traditional Music⁴ at Indiana University, which provides tapes free to qualified researchers on condition that the original recordings be deposited with the Archive, will send a set of copies to a library in the host country.

Finally, there is the question of who receives the credit for the publication. When my students refer to the *Sundiata* epic, they commonly make the mistake of saying that it is by Djibril Tamsir Niane, whose name appears on the cover. They forget that most of the version they have read was recounted by Mamadou Kouyaté, and that Niane is the

⁴ 57 Maxwell Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

researcher/translator/editor. John Johnson has provided a good model with his *The Epic of Sun-Jata According to Magan Sisoko*.⁵ The griot's name is in the title, and the names of those who have assisted Johnson are included, too. Ultimately, the processing of oral material is a team effort involving not only the researcher but also the informant and many other people.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that the handful of lessons learned from my own limited experience will provide a failsafe formula for dealing with West African bards. The relationship between the informant and the researcher depends on too many different factors over which one may have no control: the personality of each person, their mutual expectations, their experiences with people of the opposite culture, and even government regulations. But at the very least, some of the experiences described above may help the beginning researcher to cultivate that one quality which is the keystone to building a solid scholar/informant relationship: mutual respect.

(A szerkesztő jegyzete / Note by the Editor: Ez az írás 1984 tájékán készült, amikor remélvén, hogy az 1984-es második budapesti nemzetközi afrikaisztikai konferencia – Folklore in Africa Today – nyomán lehetőség nyílik a Nemzetközi Afrika Folklór Társaság megalakítására, és Bulletinjének – IAOLA (International Association of Oral Literature in Africa) Newsletter – kiadására. Néhány más akkor elkészült további tanulmány és dokumentum is megtalálható lesz majd elektronikus könyvtárunkban. / This writing was prepared around 1984 when we hoped after the Second Budapest Conference of African studies held in 1984 – Folklore in Africa Today – it will be possible to constitute the International Association of Oral Literature in Africa and its Newsletter. Some other once more completed additional studies and documents will also be found then in our electronic library.)

⁵ *The Epic of Sun-Jata According to Magan Sisoko*, Collected, Translated, and Annotated by John William Johnson, With the Assistance of Cheick Omar Mara (transcription), Ibrahim Kalikou Tera (translation), Cheickna Mohamed Singare (translation), 2 volumes, The Monograph Series, volume 5, Folklore Publications Group, Indiana University, 1979.