MORY KANTE A PARIS
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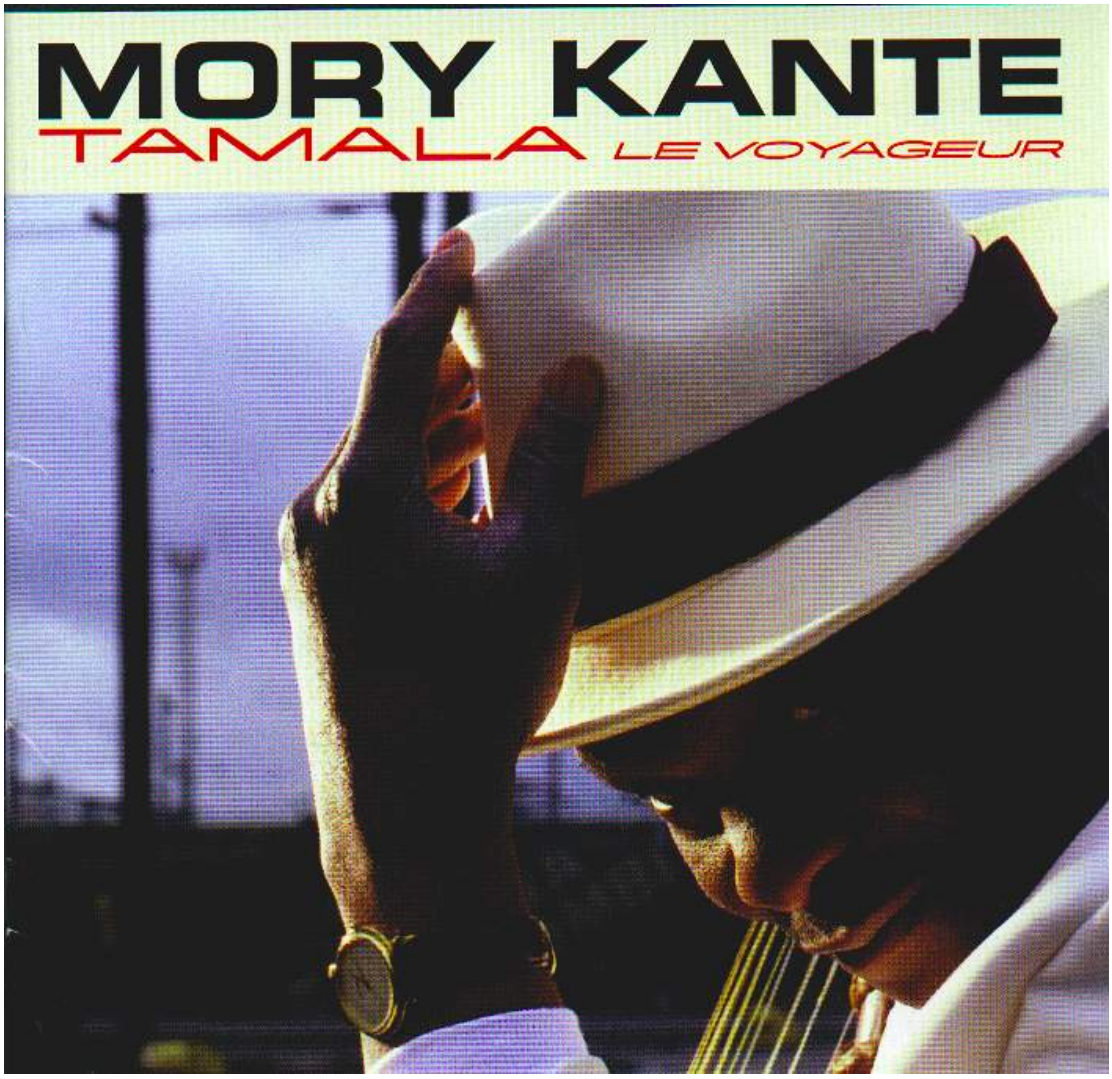

The griots of Mali and Guinea have their own way of talking: they call it "jelikan" - Jeli (griot) language. It's dense and full of metaphors and aphorisms and philosophical observations. Proverbs are its pepper. Proverbs allow for quite biting comments, without being specific. They're like a code to a whole way of lateral thinking. In jelikan, entire, meaningful conversations can be conducted purely as a series of proverbs.

Backstage with Mory Kante at the annual Francophonie Trade Fair in London last March, waiting to introduce myself, I overheard him using a string of phrases like "an empty bag will not stand up", "the crocodile is immune to the water", and "the head of a rooster does not hide in a soup". I could see a couple of fans and

journalists looking perplexed. Mory Kante the doyen of techno-kora music, author of Yeke yeke, the biggest African dance-floor track ever, seemed to be talking in riddles. This was the sort of talk I have come to expect from the older generation of Malian musicians living in Bamako, but not from someone who has lived for nearly fourteen years in Paris, and who is known as the "Ambassador of French music". I remembered reading a review in Melody Maker written in 1988, at the height of Kante's success:

"unlike his Nigerian neighbour Fela Kuti, Kante doesn't give interviews backstage in his knickers, but instead dons a dapper white silk suit and silk scarf with a Pierre Cardin monogram and we adjourn to a restaurant for what turns out to be a journalist's nightmare - an interview with a man who speaks mostly in metaphors and hurried French..." (30.7.88)

When it was my turn to say hello, he was polite but distracted, if not exactly hurried. I complimented him on his latest album, Tatebola, commenting on the songs I like, especially his version of the classic kora piece Alla l'aa ke (retitled here Maliba). Again, he was polite, but modestly shrugged it off saying, "the success of one musician is the success of a whole culture." Time for a proverb from me. I dragged out the most obvious one, a well known Mande proverb: "no matter how long a log stays in the river, it doesn't become a crocodile". I was the log, I said, and the river was Mande culture, and...

Evidently surprised, he grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously, and looked at me with a bemused expression. "Et moi, je suis quoi?" he interjected with a wide, teasing grin.

Of rather small build, immaculately dressed in white trousers and zip jacket, with white socks and white shoes despite the cold and rainy weather outside, Mory has an impish, spritely quality. He has one of those ageless faces, though he already has spent forty years as a professional musician. Like singer-guitarist Manfila Kante (a cousin), guitarist Ousmane Kouyate, and other well-known Guinean musicians, Mory Kante's career falls into four stages: childhood in upper Guinea, apprenticeship and early stardom in Mali, musical experimentation and adventure in the Ivory Coast, and... confrontation, for better or worse, with the global music industry in France.

Still shaking my hand rather furiously, in that genial, West African way, with lots of "ca va?"s, he dropped his air of distraction completely, and we launched into an intense conversation. In my now more than two decades of following Mande music from West Africa, this was my first time of actually meeting the famous kora-funk player, and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. Our paths had crossed a dozen times at his concerts in London and Paris, and I knew well some of his regular musicians:

the female chorus singers Djanka Diabate and Diaw Kouyate, percussionist Moussa Sissoko, and others. I had even shaken hands with Mory Kante before, but always "en passant": he had seemed remote, aloof, wary.

The super-star image was compounded by rumours sorrounding his supposedly rich-kid life style: lavish villas in Paris and Conakry, and many other tales of excess. But here was someone who seemed quite down to earth, with no airs about him at all, very much the modern griot.

Had I too bought into the idea that Mory Kante had sold his roots down the river? How many times had I heard similar rumours about other Guinean and Malian musicians, only to discover that they were unfounded, fuelled by jealousy? It's hard to be a rich griot in that culture, which places so much emphasis on sharing.

We returned to my proverb. "You know", he said, "I'll tell you what I am, me too, I'm the log. Because no matter how long I stay in France, I can never be French. The French government has put up too many cultural barriers. We Africans, we can't work under these conditions. I've been living there for fourteen years. I pay my taxes. My royalties go through SACEM. The French ask me to put on big shows. Like at the inauguration of the Grande Arche de la Defense [in Paris, 1991]. I led an orchestra of 130 traditional Guinean instruments. But now, I'm ready to leave."

"Hey, got a place for me and my family in London? There aren't that many of us, only..." (he counts) "well, there's my wife, my six children, my balafonist, my percussionist, my guitarist," etc etc, the list went on. "Shouldn't be a problem, should it?" he laughs.

Life is hardly a bed of roses in the UK for foreign musicians, I replied, indeed for foreigners in general, with xenophobia on the rise. In any case, I felt just a little uncomfortable having this discussion of all places at this celebration of Francophone culture. I knew that many Guinean and Malian musicians were experiencing difficulties in France; indeed some, like Salif Keita, were moving back to Africa. But I had imagined that if anyone was doing alright, it would be the author of Yeke yeke. I thought of him as one of the few West African musicians in Paris who had managed to work the system well. But Mory shook his head. "Next time you're in Paris, come and visit me. I think you'll understand a little better what I'm talking about."

We exchanged phone numbers and promised to stay in touch. "I'll ring you soon!" he said, though I didn't believe he would. "And you, keep your promise to come. You'll see, you'll be leaving your house to enter your house" (another Mande saying).

And sure enough, he telephoned soon afterwards, and from then on we talked frequently on the phone. These were entertaining, stimulating phone conversations. I began to realise that here was a Mande griot who had always been a pace setter,

someone driven by grandiose schemes of musical modernity. But life and circumstance in the late 90s had changed dramatically.

I dug out his recordings from my collection and listened to them again, with renewed interest.

Tatebola, his latest album (1997), has some beautiful material, but though pared down, is still uncompromising in its use of drum machines and back beats. The two previous albums, Touma (1990) and Nongo Village (1994) are to my ears way over-produced, though as always, with some great moments - soaring griot-style vocals and ravishing kora solos, fleeting in and out of programmed keyboards and drums.

In essence, Mory's style has not changed since his 1987 album Akwaaba Beach, which applies universally the "danser-danser" up-tempo two-beat formula of so much West African disco. Even here, however, there are some introspective and haunting passages that show Mory's remarkable gifts as a singer and kora player: as in the song Inch'Allah, where he sings the muezzin's Call to Prayer, with exquisite beauty. And there are always those ethereal female vocals, floating in and out of the dense arrangements.

My clear favourites are from his early output: a couple of albums recorded during his period with the Rail Band, 1971-78 (reissued on CD by Syllart), and a few recordings (cassette only, probably bootleg) with the Guinea National Ensemble.

For those who have only heard Mory in his electric-dance floor mode, and think of him primarily as a kora player, these early songs may come as a surprise. His voice is startlingly beautiful. It has that slightly nasal, "at-the-back-of-the-throat", sound, with high-pitched and very ornamental lines that remind one of qawwali, or flamenco. But this is the vocal tradition of the upper Guinea griots: he pirouettes intensively around long drawn out notes, then glides down at the ends of phrases into an indeterminately pitched sigh.

One favourite is the gorgeous ballad Balakononinfi (the little back bird of the river), (from the album Walignouman lonbaliya, 1976). This song later reappears ten years later on his album 10 cola nuts, as Teriya.

Balakononinfi is originally a song that Maninka hunters' musicians perform on the 10-string hunters' harp called simbin, which produces a hypnotic, cascading pattern of notes. The melody itself is pure lyricism. Mory Kante was the first to "rescue" this song "from the bush", though it has since been recorded by Salif Keita and the female singer Kandia Kouyate, among others.

Another of his great recordings with the Rail Band is the Exile of Sunjata, where he tells the story of Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mande empire in 1235. Here, in typical griot fashion, he moves dramatically between speech and song, narrating the part of Sunjata's story where he is banished from his kingdom.

But already in this early period, it's obvious that Mory has a penchant for a more mainstream, popular sound. In songs like Mogo djolo (1974) (re-recorded on his album Nongo Village), he sings in pure funk style. Funky bass lines and pentatonic scales became his trademark. The marriage between the angular, chugging rhythms of James Brown and the flowing love melodies of upper Guinea gave birth to one of the classics of African pop: Yeke yeke.

When Kante first recorded this song in 1984 on his album Mory kante a Paris, it turned him into a local star overnight. Before either Salif Keita or Youssou NDour had made their breakthroughs, Kante became the darling of the French rock scene. Signed up by Barclay in 1985, he first recorded Ten Cola Nuts, produced by ex-Springsteen keyboard player David Sancious. By now, horn arrangements and fuzz guitars had given way to a disco back beat and keyboards. This album features his only acoustic song, the haunting Parole de griot (Kouma) features female chorus, and two intertwined koras (incidentally, the inspiration for South African group Bayete's Mmalo we).

But it is the more sophisticated, hi-tech version of Yeke yeke from Akwaaba Beach that really hit the global market.

Yeke yeke reached no 1 in the charts all over Europe in 1987, and has since been covered in a dozen languages (Chinese, arabic, Hebrew, Portuguese Brazilian, and Hindi etc). Across a wider constituency, Yeke yeke lives on mainly in its remixes in various "afro-acid" styles, the last one, in 1995 by Hardfloor, reaching no 1 in several charts.

There is no doubt about it, Yeke yeke is a brilliant piece of music. From its opening blast on horns and funky guitar, and Kante's inimitable high-pitched, wailing voice, it is utterly mesmerising. The style of the tune comes from the rich pot of Guinean folklore, its shifting minor harmonies immediately recognisable as a version of a traditional love song, Yekeke. Mande-music fans may remember a more Guinea-rumba type arrangment of this piece by Bembeya Jazz from the mid 1980s, featuring the luscious voice of Sekouba Bambino and the rolling guitar solos of Diamond Fingers. There is also the celebrated acoustic version by Kante's own half-brother, Jeli Musa Diawara, for kora, balafon and guitar.

But watch out, there is a difference between Yekeke, and Yeke yeke. "All good things have many owners" says Kante of the original three-syllabled "folksong", in other words, it can't be attributed to any one composer. But, as he hastily points out, Yeke yeke - his own invention - differs from the parent tune in alot more than just an extra syllable. It has a hard edge, a driving rhythm, a relentless disco back beat, and a true sense of development and tension, which is gloriously released in the catchy vocal hook "yeke yeke".

Yeke yeke came out at the height of the world music craze. Its success encouraged other record companies to back African artists, and so played an important part in the flourishing interest in African music. 1987, readers will remember, was also the same year that Salif Keita released his album Soro. This was indeed a grand moment for Afro-pop.

Paris was its capital. Chic restaurants like the Malian-owned Farafina and Le Petit Chartier had a thriving music scene. On a weekend night (if you could manage to get in), you might find any number of well-known African musicians there: Manu Dibango, Papa Wemba, Salif Keita, Mory Kante... sorrounded by family, musicians, friends, protectors, and fans. On several occasions at Le Petit Chartier, having supper with friends, under the euphoria of their ginginbere (rum and fresh ginger juice), I was lucky enough to see Mory and others join the restaurant band for a song or two, creating a buzz and flurry of excitement among the clientele.

These were exciting times in Paris. The music was vibrant, creative. There was optimism. There was money. There was pride. There was cultural diversity.

But ten years on, and for die-hard fans of African music, Paris is virtually unrecognisable. New quotas for FM radio require that 40% of all music played must be French. So, what is French, one asks? How does one categorise the music of someone like Mory Kante, or so many other African musicians living and recording in France?

A new law (Pasqua-Debré) clamping down on visas and work permits for African musicians, while deducting as much as 90% of their concert fees on taxes, for holiday and other "benefits" which most visiting musicians cannot take up, has made it virtually impossible for even the most established musicians to work effectively in Paris. The Farafina and other such places are either barely surviving or have closed down. The Front National is on the rise, having won a substantial vote in the last elections. There is a grim mood among the Malian and Guinean communities, some of whom have been living there since the 1960s, but still have no official status.

How has all of this affected Mory Kante? Once known as "le griot branché" ("switched-on griot" - the words of French journalist Helene Lee), had the lights gone down on him?

At the Francophonie event in March - his first concert in London for several years - Mory had played on his own. Though far from ideal conditions (an inadequate sound system in a hall not designed for music), Mory gave an endearing performance, treating the audience to some of his old greats, and to acoustic versions of some newer songs, accompanying himself alternately on the kora and guitar.

But on stage at the WOMAD Reading festival in July (his first WOMAD appearance), Mory was back in full hi-tech form, coming across more like a mega rock star than a philosopher-griot. This was a vast, orchestrated, high-energy spectacle, with a dazzling array of drums, balafons, keyboards, horns, guitars, and female chorus. Kante himself, as always dressed in white (which he describes as his "look" - he only wears white, even at home), strutted around the stage playing his kora, "pinching" the strings in his unique jazz-funk style.

Where was his music heading, and what other issues were at play? It was clear that I would only find out by taking Mory up on his invitation to visit him at home, in the northern Parisian suburb of St Denis.

I had only one weekend in August when I could get away, but as it happened, the timing was perfect. That Saturday night there was to be a marathon concert in St Denis of top Guinean musicians, including the singer Sekouba Bambino, organised by the local Guinean "Mande association". And the following day, Sunday, would be the "baptism" party for the newborn son of singer Djanka Diabate (Mory Kante's cousin) and her husband, wizard guitarist Sekou "Diamond fingers" Diabate, leader of the legendary, though now largely defunct Guinean band Bembeya Jazz.

"Fortunately" comments Mory drily, "we have our own community to support our music. No matter how little money they have, even if life here is a struggle, they go on giving money to their musicians. When Jack Lang was minister [of Culture under Mitterand], things were different. He helped us alot. No longer."

St Denis is an old suburb with some stylish 18th century houses and grey slate roofs, cobbled streets, a lively weekend street market and the kind of bars that have virtually disappeared from central Paris: good, cheap draft beers and great croque monsieurs. Shaded from the sweltering sun, we sat over a drink in one such bar (I drinking beer, Mory drinking tea mixed with orange juice - it's medicinal, he claims) and chatted in general, about music, life, and friends in common, especially from Mali. Kante is a good conversationalist, with an inquisitive mind, and he doesn't miss a trick. If you ask him a question and then wander on to another subject, he'll pull you back. If you quote him something, he'll find exactly the right moment later on to follow it up with some proverb, or a bit of griot philosophy.

Every now and again he'll break into another voice, mimicking another musician, or an accent, followed by peals of laughter.

At an appropriate moment, I took the plunge and told him that although I like parts of Tatebola, it's still too techno for me.

"So" says Mory, "maybe you think that because my music is techno, that I've sold out?" (a piercing look). "Actually, I live here just as I would live in Guinea. You'll see, my house is open. Musicians come in and out all the time. They stay with me for

months, even years. Whoever comes to my house, finds an African village. Exactly! Any money I have goes back to Guinea. I've built a cultural complex in Conakry, Villa Nongo. It's a place where musicians can record their albums, or give concerts. It has a hotel in it. I sent my brother off to the States, so he can study hotel management. I hope it'll be up and running soon. Then you'll see my five recording projects. They're big. I have a cultural debt to my country".

"Paris is finished for me; I'm tired of the rascism. You know, one thing about griots, they're the opposite of rascist. Yes! The griots are anti-tribalist. You can't put a quota on a griot. The griot is always behind the scenes, persuading people to get on with eachother. They facilitate relations. I'm by nature an optimist, but this new spirit in France, the new fascism, this makes me deeply uncomfortable. Because the griot can start a war, but he can put an end to it too. The griot is there for the people."

I asked him how he came to have such a liberal approach to life.

"Well, you know, I went to three schools: the white man's school, the Koranic school and the griot school."

"The griot school?" I asked with some incredulity. I remembered reading various academic debates about whether or not "griot schools" existed, or indeed whether there is any kind of formal training for griots.

"Oh yes, but not how you'd imagine. I can't tell you exactly, some things, we can't talk about. I was in villages deep in the Mande, and it's the most intensive training I had, more rigorous than my six years of European school, or my years learning Arabic script and the Koran. This is how I learnt history. The history of the Mande people, and even further back, to King Solomon. I can tell you the origin of the races. Only now, at this stage in my life can I begin to talk. If you give things away too early, you burn out quickly."

I asked Mory about his early days as a musician.

"How much time do you have?" he said, smiling, "because it's a long story, and you know I'm a griot, I can't say anything quickly!"

Mory Kante was born in 1950 in a village called Albadaria, in the Kissidougou region, in the south west, near the source of the river Niger. He comes from a distinguished lineage of musicians on both sides of his family. His maternal grandfather, Jeli Mory Kamissoko, was a "chef de griots" who always went everywhere with an enormous entourage of singers and balafonists - up to 60 people. (Mory likes to recreate this grandeur in his own groups). On his father's side, the Kantes were blacksmiths by hereditary profession, who (like many Mande blacksmiths) had turned musicians. The balafon was their instrument, though they also played guitars. Many famous Kante guitarists are related to Mory Kante: Kante Facelli, Kante Manfila, etc.

"The Kantes went to war fighting beside their patrons, but then went the fighting was over, they'd take out their balafon and play it, because above all, they were musicians. My father was a chef des griots of Kissidougou" says Mory. "He was quite old when I was born, and I had 37 brothers and sisters. " His father died in 1986, aged, by all acounts, 109 years old.

The story goes that even before Mory could walk he was dancing, and even before he could speak, he was singing. By the age of three he was playing the balafon "like a little machine". Soon after he picked up the guitar: "it was natural, since everyone in my family played". By the age of seven, he was playing the wedding circuit. After his stint in the Koranic and European schools, the family sent him off to Bamako, aged 14, to be with his mother's sister, the singer Manamba Kamissoko.

In 1964, Mali had only been independent for four years, and in many ways was less developed than Guinea. "Bamako wasnt very different from home", says Mory. "I lived in the Lafiabougou section, to the west of downtown Bamako. My aunt loved me like my mother. I had left my home to enter my home." His aunt Manamba was married to one of two identical twins, Lansa and Fouseyni Diabate, who had come back from a trip to Central Africa with some money, and had purchased some Boyer amplifiers for their steel-string guitars. "The twins resembled eachother like two fishes in the water. It was incredible. They were really popular at wedding parties. They would plug in the amps, light the petrol lamps, and put me up on a table where I played the balafon. They called me 'le petit de Lafiabougou'. I was still little, but I could play! Then, one of the twins had an accident, so I replaced him in the ensemble, playing guitar." The group was called "The Twins of Lafiabougou".

I asked him if there were any recordings of him from this period.

"I wasn't even aware of the radio then" says Mory. "Recordings - what were they? They weren't important. Nobody thought about such things. What mattered was the live performance. Every week we played at naming parties and wedding ceremonies. Other musicians, they began to imitate our style. At first, they called it *jelifolilaw* (the griot instrumentalists) but when the Americans began their Apollo space missions, they started calling it Apollo. It was futuristic. No one believed the space ships would ever reach the moon. Only the griots knew it would happen, because the griots understand man's potential on this earth. That was Apollo music, it was progressive in spirit!"

"All the while I was in the Apollos, I was doing my griot initiation. Initiation for the griots, that's apprenticeship. It's spiritual, its in the head. It's the learning of the oral tradition, its very dense. So I was being initiated into progressive music, and at the same time, into the secrets of griotism."

In 1970 Mory returned to Guinea, but came back to Bamako the following year. By this time, he had developed a burning interest in the kora. While performing with the Twins of Lafiabougou, he had hung out with the son of one of the great kora players of the time, Batourou Sekou Kouyate (accompanist of the famed woman singer, Fanta Damba). "We would wait until the old man had gone into town, then straight away, we'd run for the room where he kept his kora. His wife pretended not to notice, and let us get on with it. I struggled with the 21 strings, and tried to play my balafon and guitar riffs on it. Nobody taught me. Directly, tout de suite, I had my own style."

"You see my kora? That was given me by Batourou Sekou himself."

At this point in our conversation, Mory's wife, Sira Kouyate turned up. Taller than Mory, elegantly dressed, Sira had come to make plans for that night's concert. "Half the musicians in my band are playing in it" Mory explained. "And the other half, will be there in the audience. Sira, make sure you save us some good chairs! get there early! It'll be packed, and it'll go on all night! But first, I'm taking you out to supper at le Petit Chartier."

We picked up the threads of the interview.

Back in Bamako, the star of the Apollos found himself recruited as guitarist into Bamako's newly formed Rail Band, featuring some of Mali's top musicians, including guitarist Jelimadi Tounkara, and ofcourse, singer Salif Keita.

What followed is one of the better-known stories of West African music. In 1973 Salif left Bamako for a couple of months to do a private gig elsewhere. During his absence, Mory was invited to take Salif's place in front of the microphone. When Salif returned, he found "le petit de Lafiabougou", with his charismatic voice, well entrenched as the band's lead singer. It wasn't long before Salif left to join the Rail Band's main competitors, the Ambassadeurs du Motel de Bamako.

"But there was no rivalry between us" Mory emphasises. "There hasn't ever been any rivalry between us. We're like family. Even when both bands were in Abidjan [late 70s], we were all just good friends". What about the famous Kibaru concert of 1973, I asked, in which Salif and Mory competed over who could compose the better song advocating literacy? "Oh that", said Mory, "that was different. It was *supposed* to be a competition. The purpose was to create interest in the literacy campaign, not to show who was the better singer."

The careers of Salif Keita, the noble albino singer, and Mory Kante, the blacksmith-griot, have run on parallel trajectories ever since the early 1970s. It's hard to see how they could avoid being rivals. Both started out in the Rail Band. Both recorded Sunjata with the Rail Band: Salif in 1973, then Mory in 1975. Ironically, Salif Keita is the descendant of Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mali empire, while Mory Kante

is the descendant of Sunjata's adversary, the blackmsith sorcerer king, Sumaworo Kante.

I asked Mory about this. "You're a Kante, but you sing for Sunjata Keita who was fighting against your ancestor, Sumaworo."

"Good! that's a good question. I sing Sunjata's praises, but if you listen to that recording, I also sing Sumaworo's praises. You know, after the fighting, the Keitas, the Kantes, they regrouped, to become a single people. And to protect this, we developed this special teasing relationship between family lineages, called *sanankunya*. It's a totem that becomes stronger than history itself. A Kante can say anything to a Keita, and vice versa, and we can never be offended. Without these totems, Mande would have been destroyed, it would have been finished, it would be no more. The totem unifies."

"History tells us that Sumaworo 'disappeared' at the end of the battle, but no! there was a secret pact between him and Sunjata! The pact united the kingdom of Susu with the kingdom of Mande."

"So you see, how can there be rivalry between myself and Salif?"

I marvelled at the idea that a relationship which had been established 700 years ago on a battlefield in West Africa could still be relevant in the world of modern pop music.

"Ah, the Mande world!" said Mory, with a sense of awe. "We say: 'the Mande shakes from side to side like water in a calabash. But the Mande will never spill".

The afternoon was flying by. We returned to the mid 70s.

"One day, I asked Jelimady if I could bring the kora to the orchestra, and from then I used to do that from time to time. But meanwhile, we formed our own little group: there was Zani Diabate [leader of the Super Djata band], Ousmane Kouyate, the woman singer Manian Damba. There was a white man, Claude, who's since died, he helped us alot. We rehearsed at his house, he encouraged us. We had kora, djembe, ngoni, and bolon [four-string bass harp] for the bass. But it was modern music we were playing on those traditional instruments. Then we had problems, the group broke up, you could say it was a kind of trial run."

By the late 70s, the political and economic situation in Mali was no longer favourable for the dance bands. The Ambassadeurs had left the country for Abidjan, and the Rail Band were on strike because they hadn't received their government salaries. A customs official from Burkina called Madou Sanfo, who was a long-time fan of Mory Kante's, sent him an air ticket to Abidjan.

"So at the end of 78 I went by myself to Abidjan, but I had no instruments to start up a band with. But - people love griots so much! One day I'm in a suburb of Abidjan and a bus honks outside my door. Its a 22 seater, and Madou Sanfo is standing outside. I

remember it well - it was 9.30 in the morning. He says, look inside. It was stocked with all the instruments of an orchestra. He says, its yours. I trembled."
"So after a few days, I asked Madou Sanfo if he could bring over the whole Rail Band. And he did, he brought them all over by plane. Now, the Rail Band was installed in the Ivory Coast, oy yoy yoy! We picked up strength. I have to write a book about this! Incredible, but true! It was a huge success."
"But then things got complicated: managers, impresarios, and others from outside the band began to "work their evil", causing problems.. After a while, I just left, I gave them all the equipment and even the bus. So I was on my own again, with nothing."
"Then one day I said, what I did in Bamako, I'm going to try the same thing here.
I went to a restaurant called Le Climbier, in the business section of town. The owner was a Baoule. He hired me alone just on kora, then aah! all the big guys from Abidjan began coming to the restaurant. So I called my younger brother, Jelimusa Diawara (we have the same mother, different fathers), and Djeli Mori Djan on balafon, there's no one like him! and a bolon player. I had a female chorus. All my backing singers, they've all become stars in their own right: Djanka Diabate, Djene Doumbia, and so on."
"We began playing versions of Cuban dance hits. When any big star played in Abidjan, the owner of Le Climbier would buy their records, so we could do covers."
" One day Johnny Pacheco [of New York salsa fame] came to the Climbier, and we played four of his songs. He sent his driver back to the hotel to pick up his flute, and we started the evening out all over again, with him. He was astonished. It was beautiful."
"Then Barry White was in town, to play golf, and he came to the restaurant. We did two of his 'slows', and he came down from his table, and sang with me. By this time, our show was so successful we were playing twice a day. That was in 80-81. At that time an American called Gerard Chess came with Stevie Wonder's engineer Aboulaye Soumare, and they 'discovered' me at the restaurant. So I signed a contract with Ebony records, and we did Courougnegne (the sound of people talking), and then mixed it in LA in 81 where I met Stevie Wonder: it was a dream."
"I can't say I was the first to use kora with a band, but I was first to do something big like this. People in Abidjan were crazy for modern music on traditional isntruments."
By now the darkness had closed around us, and it was time to move on for the evening's musical events. We still had a full schedule ahead; time for just one more question. Ofcourse, it had to be about Yeke yeke.
"Well, the song comes from a wonderful tradition we have in the villages. You know, when young griots are approaching the age of marriage, they flirt with eachother through music. They court and ensnare eachother through their songs and dances.

These are sweet songs, I swear. Yekeke is one of them. Its the sound that young women make when they dance: you can do yeke with the bottom, then yeke with the top. It's their way of communicating their interest. So the chorus says, 'Yekeke n'nimo, yeke yeke.'" Mory does a little imitation here for my benefit, to the amusement of those around us.

"N'nimo means 'my sister-in-law'. You know in Africa, we have these teasing relationships with our sisters' or brothers in-law. You can flirt with them openly, and no one will misinterpret."

"So when you want to greet a young girl, but you don't know her name, you can address her as 'n'nimo', that's a friendly way of saying that you like her, you feel comfortable with her. You know, we have a whole wealth of songs like this. But don't doubt it! I put the modern style on it. And it became my fetish song in Ivory Coast, even though the elders criticised me."

He laughed. "You see, I started all this a long time ago. Its my life, quoi!"

Fired by such tales of a moment when individual patrons still sponsored entire orchestras, and musicians were inspired by the heady meeting of cultures, we hurried off to get ready for the next stage of the night. At the Petit Chartier, despite a half-empty restaurant, five Guinean musicians played some sublime music, while I drank more of my favourite drink, ginginbere. By the time we got to the Guinean concert, it was in full swing. In a converted factory, Kerfala Kante and Sekouba Bambino were among several featured singers performing to an audience of some 500 Guineans, dancing, clapping, and throwing money at the musicians, until everyone ran out of steam at around 5 am. And after what seemed like the briefest of sleeps, I was picked up from the hotel by Mory and his sons, to go to the baptism of Djanka Diabate's new baby son. In her small flat in St Denis, Guinea's most famous musicians were gathered to celebrate: Mory kante, Manfila Kante, Sona Diabate and her brother Sekou Diabate Diamond Fingers, while a female griot sang unaccompanied praises and words of advice to each and everyone present. Frequently they joined in her songs, then laughed heartily, and danced. I saw plenty of yeke yeke.

Lucy Duran, Nov 1997