

The Griot as Actor: Sotigui Kouyaté on Stage and on Screen

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Introduction

When Burkinabè actor Sotigui Kouyaté (1936-2010) passed away, media all over the world were filled with obituaries for him (e.g. Todd, 2010; "African Storyteller Remembered", 2010). This was as a result of an international reputation acquired by the feature films he had done as well as appearances in Peter Brook's productions at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris, among them a French adaptation of Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1990) with Kouyaté as Prospero as well as *Tierno Bokar* (2004), a play on the life of the eponymous Sufi sage.

When Kouyaté came to Paris in 1984, invited by Brook to audition for the part of Bhishma in the *The Mahabharata*, he had done some local theatre productions in Burkina Faso, a country, which had just changed its name from Upper Volta and was then living through Thomas Sankara's revolution. He had done some work in film, notably Christian Richard's film on African slavery, *Le courage des autres* (1982). Together with Félix Boyarm he had directed the dance group "Les Ballets de la Volta" and he had gone to primary schools to entertain children. He was no trained actor and he had never worked systematically in the arts but had earned his living as a civil servant.

Information on Sotigui Kouyaté is scarce. There is one book-length publication in Italian (Beltrame, 1997), another one in Portuguese (Bernat, 2013), presumably related to a workshop Kouyaté did in São Paulo in 2006 (*Sotigui Kouyaté: un griot no Brasil*, 2007) and a short brochure the Institut Français edited together with five of his films after his death (Institut Français, 2011). In addition, there are newspaper articles. Perusing the writings by and about Brook, one finds surprisingly little about the actors he works with, yet his interest especially in Sotigui Kouyaté shines through. One rewarding source on Kouyaté's life, however, is the

documentary the Tchadian film-maker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun made on the occasion of the actor's 60th birthday. Haroun, acclaimed feature-film director (Armes, 2006: 158-166) who won the price of the jury in Cannes with *Un homme qui cri* (2010), dedicated one of his first film projects to his fellow African artist. I will discuss the image of Kouyaté created in this film before going on to discuss his work on stage and on screen.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, *Sotigui Kouyaté, un griot moderne* (1997)

Haroun's one-hour documentary entitled *Sotigui Kouyaté, un griot moderne* alternates between scenes from Burkina Faso, where Kouyaté had grown-up and lived until 1984, Mali, where he was born to Guinean parents, and Paris, where he had been living since 1984. We see Kouyaté at the training centre he founded near Paris, "La Voix du Griot", where we witness classes in traditional storytelling and their enthused participants. We see him in private, with his Swiss wife, Esther, and the small children, and we also see Dani Kouyaté, film-maker, director and adult son of Sotigui Kouyaté, narrating how difficult it was to have a father who performed in schools. Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière, Brook's long-time playwright, talk about him as an actor and human being. In the many scenes from Mali and above all Burkina Faso, his importance for Burkinabè theatre is emphasised by theatre scholar and director Jean-Pierre Guingané and former companions. There is a very brief scene from *Le courage des autres* and another from the *Mahabharata* film, yet none from the theatre productions.

At the very beginning, before the title fades in, we see a medium shot with his young son Mabo, then zoomed to a close-up of Kouyaté, who states:

"Above all I am griot.[...] Griot, that is my identity. One is born griot. [...] And above all I am African. Therefore I belong to all of Africa" (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 00:20-00:50).¹

Haroun thus introduces his title "un griot moderne". Yet what does it signify for Kouyaté to be griot, a Mandigue caste of public praise singers one is born into (Enkerli, 2004: 37-38), and what is this Africanness the

¹ "Je suis griot avant tout. [...] On est né griot. [...] Et je suis africain avant tout. Donc j'appartiens à tout l'Afrique." (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 00:20-00:50, transl. now and in the following quotes A. B.-D.).

actor is referring to? During the film, Haroun shows Kouyaté's links to his paternal and maternal courts in Mali as well as to his court in Ouagadougou and to a small village in Burkina Faso's South West called Ouahabou. Kouyaté emphasises that his court is a place where people look for traditional healing, and friends as well as Carrière testify to his qualities as a healer. In Ouahabou, he salutes the tombs of two of his teachers who had initiated him into the brotherhood of hunters, one of the sources of his mystical and healing knowledge. Together with the scenes from his storytelling workshops, the different facets of the griot – praise singer, storyteller, healer, spiritual sage – are thus being established. Even the successful popular singer is eventually evoked when Kouyaté sings his seventies hit "Mariam Touré". Kouyaté re-emphasises at the end of the film:

"[...] when I express myself, I believe, I express myself in the name of Africa [...], because I'm African before being Sotigui. And when I act, in all sincerity, [...], I see first of all the image of Africa. [...]" (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 53:00-53:41).²

Haroun's film explains the statements which frame the film because it unfolds what being African means to Kouyaté. And if the film is right, it means his initiation into being a hunter and griot, the memory he shares with his local friends and family, a certain way of being acknowledged by other artists, for example, by their respective praise songs of him, and a certain way of being with others which emphasises attentive, sensitive listening to the other (see also *Sotigui Kouyaté: un griot no Brasil*, 2007: 12:12-13:15). In addition, it is an African cosmogony of symbols, philosophy and ancestors he talks about when he is at his training centre. Only there do we see him in African attire and always in long shot. Throughout the African parts of the film, however, Kouyaté always wears Euro-American clothing, usually shirt and sleeveless vest, thus clearly showing that he belongs to several worlds at a time. His expressions, often in close-up or medium shot, vary between joyful interactions with friends and family and the pensive, inward look we see in some court scenes.

Haroun's film, focusing on Kouyaté's return to Mali on the occasion

² [...] quand je m'exprime, je crois, je m'exprime au nom de l'Afrique [...] parce que je suis Africain avant d'être Sotigui. Et quand j'agis, en mon âme et conscience [...] je vois en premier lieu l'image de l'Afrique. (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 53:00-53:41).

of his 60th birthday, relates the actor to his African heritage, calling him a modern griot, thus referring to a “mythical and polymorphous construction called ‘griot’, a fictional creation by writers, filmmakers and critics” (Thiers-Thiam, 2004: 56; transl. A.B.-D.) The film itself goes beyond this mythical construction since Kouyaté gives a very specific and complex reading of the term, anchored in tradition, in the facets he shows. Born himself into the Kouyaté family, who are at the origin of all Mandingue griots (*Un griot no Brasil*, 2007: 05:10), he insists on a legacy which combines social, medical, historical and aesthetic tasks.

In Search of the Truth in Acting: Sotigui Kouyaté and Peter Brook

In Haroun’s film, Kouyaté not only talks about his griot heritage but also about his focus on the human being: “Technique [...] cannot replace the thing, human being, and when one remains far off the human being, one passes by the essential.” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 05:16-05:55).³ And he stresses the basics of his acting: “Believe (*sic*), honesty and the seriousness one puts into the things one needs to defend [...] the rigor, demanding and always searching for quality” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 38:00).⁴ Comments from people he worked with underline this rigour in his work (see Kouyaté, D., 2011: 42; Kouyaté, E., 2011: 26).

Peter Brook’s idea of theatre and of the African actor coheres with Kouyaté’s own understanding of his art. Brook values his truthfulness and purity and perceives him as “a good actor who doesn’t give us any impression of art” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 14:44).⁵ The African actor’s search for “the genuineness of performance which characterises real actors” (Kouyaté, E., 2011: 26) chimes with Brook’s own search for truthful acting. Kouyaté’s emphasis on the human being is taken up in Brook’s assumption that “Africa, that’s what is human. And if you want to say

³ “La technique [...] ne peut pas remplacer la chose, qui est l’être, or tant qu’on reste loin de l’être humain [...] on passe à côté de l’essentiel” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 05:16-05:55).

⁴ “La foi, l’honnêteté et le sérieux qu’on met dans ce qu’on a à défendre [...] la rigueur, l’exigence, toujours à la recherche de la qualité” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 38:00).

⁵ “un bon acteur où on n’a aucune impression qu’il s’agit d’art” (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 14:44).

something about humanity in your theatre, you cannot do it without its contribution. It's that simple. That's why I created La Tempête with Sotigui Kouyaté in the role of Prospero" (Darge and Brook, 2006).⁶ On several occasions, Brook explains why he cast Kouyaté as Prospero and Bakary Sangaré as Ariel in his production of *The Tempest* (1990) and it is not only the humanity he ascribes to Africa, but also the link to the invisible which motivates his choice:

"The exceptional African actor Sotigui Kouyaté, in *The Tempest*, brought to Prospero a culture where the invisible is a constant part of nature, of his own daily experience. It was the same for Bakary Sangaré as Ariel. This Ariel had the powerful body of a footballer [...]. But the lightness came from within" (Brook, 2013: 73).

The productions Brook realised with Kouyaté in the years following upon *The Mahabharata* cast the actor in a specific way – either there was the link to the spiritual world, as in *La Tempête, Qui est là?* (1995) and *Tierno Bokar* (2004), or he drew on Kouyaté's healing knowledge, when he cast him in *L'homme qui* (1993) as both doctor and patient. Both traits of his character obviously fascinated Brook as well as Carrière when one considers their statements in Haroun's film. Another play Kouyaté featured in was Brook's adaptation of South African Can Themba's *Le Costume* (1999). In all of the productions he was cast next to other African actors like Bakary Sangaré or Mamadou Dioumé. But it all began with *The Mahabharata*.

***The Mahabharata* (1985)**

Looking at Kouyaté's work with Brook, it seems that Brook discovered and reinforced a specific quality and image of Kouyaté in *The Mahabharata* which, with the exception of *Le Costume*, he clung to in following works. The Indian epic *The Mahabharata* was a project Brook had worked on for years, when the nine-hour production premiered in 1985. An English version followed upon the original French one and the production, which succeeded in Avignon but met with criticism in New York, brought forth

⁶ "L'Afrique, c'est l'humain. Et si vous voulez, dans votre théâtre, dire quelque chose sur l'humanité, vous ne pouvez pas le faire sans cet apport-là. C'est aussi simple que cela. C'est pourquoi j'ai fait La Tempête avec Sotigui Kouyaté dans le rôle de Prospero" (Darge and Brook, 2006).

a serious amount of theatre criticism (Williams, 1991). In 1989, Brook made a three-hour film from the production; in 2012 the original five-hour version was released on DVD.

The story devised after the Indian epic by Jean-Claude Carrière recounts the merciless confrontation between the Kauravas and their cousins, the Pandavas, all of the latter prodigies of different gods. In the French and English versions of the play and the film, Kouyaté plays Bhishma, uncle to the king and educator to the young princes. After a storyteller's introduction, the epic begins with Bhishma. The very tall and slender actor walks upright, clad in creamy white, flowing garments, a cane in hand. Instead of the dreadlocks he wears later, his hair is cut short and his bony face and inward look correspond to the voice-over of the narrator: "There was a prince called Bhishma, a perfect prince. His mind was clear, his body strong, his heart noble" (*The Mahabharata*, 1989: DVD1: 06:55). We only see the actor at this point, he doesn't speak. When he speaks, his searching English and the medium shot of the camera make him seem younger and less aloof. Yet, since the gods have given him the power to choose the time of his death, he is detached from all other beings. Advisor to the king and renowned warrior, he still must not change the fate of the poem's characters. Yet, it is he who solicits the most violent hatred by another character, Amba, because he cannot wed her, having made the vow not to marry. A mythical being like him, Amba (Corinne Jaber) tries to kill him in vain, until he himself solicits his death. The last meeting of the two characters leads up to Bhishma's death. This death opens and accompanies the entire third part of the film. Alternating between scenes of interaction and solitude, Kouyaté changes from physical interaction with his co-players to stern uprightness in his interaction with Amba in a two-person shot where we only see him in profile (*The Mahabharata*, 1989: DVD2: 5:04-5:50). Clad again in a creamy white cloak and white scarf, the focus is on his eyes and hands. Brook's attention to minute details is well expressed in Kouyaté's silent play when he listens to Amba's at first inaudible steps; then he remains in physical stillness listening to her story. After that we see him alone, glancing into the night, pondering his imminent death. These scenes which film him in close-up and medium shot emphasise the character as prophet, who recognises doom, his eyes wide open, yet can only sacrifice himself. Kouyaté acts with very reduced and precise gestures. It is only when he refuses to give away the secret of his potentially successful aggressor, Amba, to whose death wish he finally succumbs, that emotion sparks in his face.

Brook must have found in Kouyaté's acting a quality which is maintained even on screen: his being astutely present in his play. In *Le Diable c'est l'ennui* Brook refers to a specific quality of acting he calls "sphota"

and which describes just this presence: "The only thing which can help us is the sense of the present. To feel that the present moment is defined in a particularly intense way and that the conditions are favorable to the 'sphota', this 'lightning' which looms up at the moment of the right sound, the right gesture, the right glance, the right dialogue" (Brook, 1991: 68, transl. A.B.-D.).⁷ The project Brook pursues in his theatre work is to find this extra quality in acting which comes from the right gesture. With Kouyaté, this precise gesture can often be tiny, barely visible. Embodying certain of Brook's most valued qualities in acting and pertaining to a rich cultural heritage, Kouyaté, for a period of twenty years, became one of the pillars of Brook's theatre.

The Actor as Griot: Sotigui Kouyaté in *Keïta! L'héritage du griot* (1995)

If Brook draws on Kouyaté's education as hunter and griot, film-maker Dani Kouyaté (*1961) stages his father as griot-narrator in his fiction film *Keïta! L'héritage du griot* (1995). Dani Kouyaté has also worked as a stage director; in the 1990s he toured with his father's show "La voix du griot".

In his homage to the griot as conserver of knowledge and educator, Dani wanted his father to play an old griot on a last mission. Yet he later noticed that his father refused this characterisation (Kouyate, D., 2011: 42). Instead he plays a rather stubborn griot, who insists on telling the story of his name to young Mabo Keïta. Dani situates his first feature film firmly in an African setting. He confronts the modern, urban, French-speaking household, in which Mabo lives, with the rural origin of the griot, who has never eaten spaghetti, as well as with the ancient tale he tells and which the film inserts as a metadiegetic narrative. The plot calls for a communicative situation different from the *Mahabharata*. Here, Kouyaté as Djéliaba is at the center of the plot and, for most of the time, in direct contact with his disciple, Mabo – both names referring to traditional terms for the griot (see Thiers-Thiam, 2004: 56). His action is conversation and storytelling, and once he has entered the court, he stays. He does not interact with modern society outside of the court's walls. Presence is thus again an issue for the way he is staged, yet now it is not effusive. We either see him lying in his hammock or seated under a tree telling his story

⁷ "La seule chose qui peut nous aider, c'est le sens du présent. Sentir que le moment présent est cerné d'une manière particulièrement intense et que les conditions sont favorables au 'sphota', cet 'éclair' qui surgit au moment du son juste, du geste juste, du regard juste, de l'échange juste" (Brook, 1991: 68).

to the boy. In contrast to all others, he only speaks Bambara throughout the film and his self-assurance is audible. The source of Djéliba's natural presence is not only his spirituality, here expressed in his Muslim prayers, but the griot's task to preserve and to educate. Whereas, in *The Mahabharata*, Brook stages Kouyaté as a permanent presence who cannot interfere, it is the social function of the griot and Kouyaté's interest for the people around him – "He got interested in everyone right away" director Ildevert Méda said about him (Bühler-Dietrich and Méda, 2014) – which comes to the fore in *Keïta!*.

Spiritual Strength: *La Genèse* (1999)

In 1999, Kouyaté played Jacob in Cheick Oumar Sissoko's (*1945) *La Genèse*. The Malian film-maker who has directed several feature films was Malian Minister of Culture from 2002 to 2007. His film in Bambara covers the old-testament story of Jacob, Esaü and Hamor and places Kouyaté next to Balla Moussa Keïta (Hamor) and Salif Keïta, the famous Malian musician (Esaü) [see Armes 2004: 134]. The film covers the period between the loss of Joseph and the reconciliation with Esaü following upon Jacob's battle with God. Jacob, in deep sorrow after the loss of his favourite son, refuses to leave his hut. Only after his sons have killed all of Hamor's sons against his will does he leave his hut to talk to Hamor. This brief incident, which reconciles the farmer Hamor with the stock breeder Jacob, is his only appearance in the middle of the film. Only after a long absence from the film Jacob finally appears to join the court assembled after the murder of Hamor's sons. War is about to break out and together with his youngest son, Benjamin, Jacob slowly walks to the assembly. The scene, filmed in the dark, brings together the two chiefs. Jacob denies his sons and, as a heritage, offers to leave behind the story of his father Isaak, which he sets out to tell (*La Genèse*, 1999: 1:11:37). Once more, as in *Keïta!*, Kouyaté as Jacob offers a story, here with the intention to reconcile two inimical tribes, and his voice can be heard in the voice-over of the metadiegetic narrative. Yet the reconciliation is interrupted by Esaü, who claims a restoration of his rights. Again, Jacob narrates a story, now not to the public, but to the child Benjamin. Staged on an empty space, the slender figure and its companion are isolated from all others (*La Genèse*, 1999: 1:22:32). In a first pause of the metadiegetic story, we see Jacob with his knees bent to talk to the child, imploring him to understand the situation back then. The trouble of his fraternal conflict and ensuing hatred is visualised through the isolation of the characters and the position Jacob takes. Then he sits down and has the child sit in his lap – the only intimate moment in all of the film. After this moment of stillness, Esaü finishes the

story, calling out for vengeance. Then, the camera approaches Jacob from a slightly angled bird's-eye-view and slowly lowers itself to his height. Kouyaté, clad in a brilliant blue gown with blue head scarf, holds the child protectively in one arm and his cane in the other (*La Genèse*, 1999: 1:26:00). God will decide about Jacob's fate, not Esau. Thus Jacob fights with God, who shows his presence by lightning and speech in a childlike voice. Jacob's battle with God is filmed from a frog-eye view, emphasising the larger-than-life quality of the combatants. Eventually, after all these nightly scenes, we see Kouyaté in daylight, after the fight, a worn-down older man, deep wrinkles in his face, with grey dreadlocks. When he sends his sons away to Egypt to find Joseph and food, Jacob stands petrified, surrounded by his brothers and his daughter Dina – a tableau in brown, blue and creamy white on a yellowish background, rather than a living scene. Then the camera zooms in on his face for a few seconds (*La Genèse*, 1999: 1:33:21-1:33:30). His lips twitch and his body trembles. Jacob, now named Israel, is bearing their departure with pain.

Even though Jacob is the principal protagonist of *La Genèse*, he is mostly absent for two thirds of the film. When he is present, he tells a story, fights with God, and engages in short dialogues. His silence turns him into a detached figure. In contrast to Djéliaba's frequent interaction with others, Jacob withdraws from the others and becomes a surveying presence. Sissoko thus unites elements from *The Mahabharata* and from *Keïta!* in his filming of Kouyaté. With Jacob who becomes Israel, the actor again plays a larger-than-life mythical figure he imbues with a certain majesty which can alternate with an intimate proximity.

The Griot as Mediator: *Little Senegal* (2001)

After three major African films, including *Sia, le rêve du python* (2001) again by Dani Kouyaté, Sotigui Kouyaté began to work with French-Algerian director, Rachid Bouchareb, with whom he made *Little Senegal* and *London River* (2009), winning the Silver Bear of the Berlin Biennale for best actor in 2009. Even though the topics are different – *London River* tells the story of a white British woman and an African who are both in search of their children after the 2005 London bombings – both films tell stories of two people from different backgrounds, who gradually approach one another in a world filled with suspicion and aggression.

In *Little Senegal* (2001), Kouyaté, lead actor, is surrounded by many different characters and their various destinies. Kouyaté plays Alloune, a Gorée guide who fulfills his long-term desire to travel to the US to find traces of his ancestors deported during the slave trade. We see him in libraries as well as on huge Carolina plantations, where the tall man

becomes a tiny figure next to tremendous white plantation homes due to the establishing shot of the camera. Alloune's search is eventually rewarded and he finds a family descendant, Aida Robinson (Sharon Hope). He decides to gradually befriend this grumpy old lady, who has been hit hard by life. Kouyaté's expressions vary between an attentive, yet often appalled look, which indicates the withdrawal of the character into himself, and a very careful, tender approach towards another vulnerable human being, when he is with Aida. His face and his gestures express the anguish he feels since he does not know how Aida will react when he will tell her of their common ancestors. In the close-up, we see a slight turn of his eyes and head towards her as well as the silent movement of the twitching lips hesitating to start the conversation (*Little Senegal*, 2001: 1:07:00). While Alloune's self-assuredness comes from his family heritage and the knowledge he carries and wants to transmit about this heritage – thus fulfilling one role of griot – he is literally bowed down by the unexpected degree of violence and hostility and the strict separation between Africans and African Americans.

Conclusion

What Brook calls truthfulness and Ildevert Méda “being in a situation with all of one's being” (Bühler-Dietrich and Méda, 2014) can be perceived in Kouyaté's acting throughout the films, in tiny details as well as in his whole attitude. Both Sissoko and Bouchareb emphasise that their films would not have been possible without Kouyaté (Sissoko, 2011: 49) and Bouchareb adds: “With Sotigui Kouyaté, you cannot talk about directing the actor. With him, you talk about journeys to be made together” (Bouchareb, 2011: 57).

When one looks at the way Sotigui Kouyaté is cast in cinema, there are certain recurrent features as well as distinct differences. Recurrent is the long shot in which we see him walking, a slender figure making long steps. Recurrent are the long cloaks, too, which hide his thin body. Very rarely do we see him half clad. The connotation of asceticism is not far off. We also see the figure in isolation, roaming the streets of London, New York or Ouagadougou without companion, a feature which, due to the plot, gives way to community in *Keïta!*, *Little Senegal* and *London River*. By contrast, only Dani stages his father as a scheming warrior and politician, who decides about the kingdom's future, in *Sia, le rêve du python* (see Armes, 2006: 171-174). There he is like the nether side of noble Bhishma.

Appearing as a drunkard in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *IP 5* (1992), no doubt a side role Kouyaté received while struggling his way into international film business, he apparently changed the role. “I saw to it that he

wasn't a vulgar drunkard" (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 38:00),⁸ he says about the character. It would be impossible to imagine Kouyaté playing a vulgar character. Many of the people he worked with mention his elegance, which struck them (Ruelle, 2011: 20). He brings this elegance, a term which nowadays replaces terms like nobility or virtue, to all the characters he plays – thus it would have been very difficult to make him play the contrary.

Considering the films discussed, except for *Keïta!*, there seems to have been little immediate link between the actor and the griot. Yet the traces of "being griot first of all" can be perceived in all of his roles since the griot carries the heritage (*Keïta!*) and the spiritual knowledge (*La Genèse*), heals physical ailments but also mediates in social conflicts (*Little Senegal*). That this can be combined with the art of the great warrior is displayed in the role of Bhishma, which unites all of the above features. Kouyaté's major roles on stage or screen are thus related in one way or another to his being griot. Neither on stage nor on screen does Sotigui Kouyaté ever leave his Africanness behind, but obstinately maintains it.

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⁸ "Je me suis arrangé qu'il ne soit pas un ivrogne vulgaire" (*Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1997: 38:00).

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