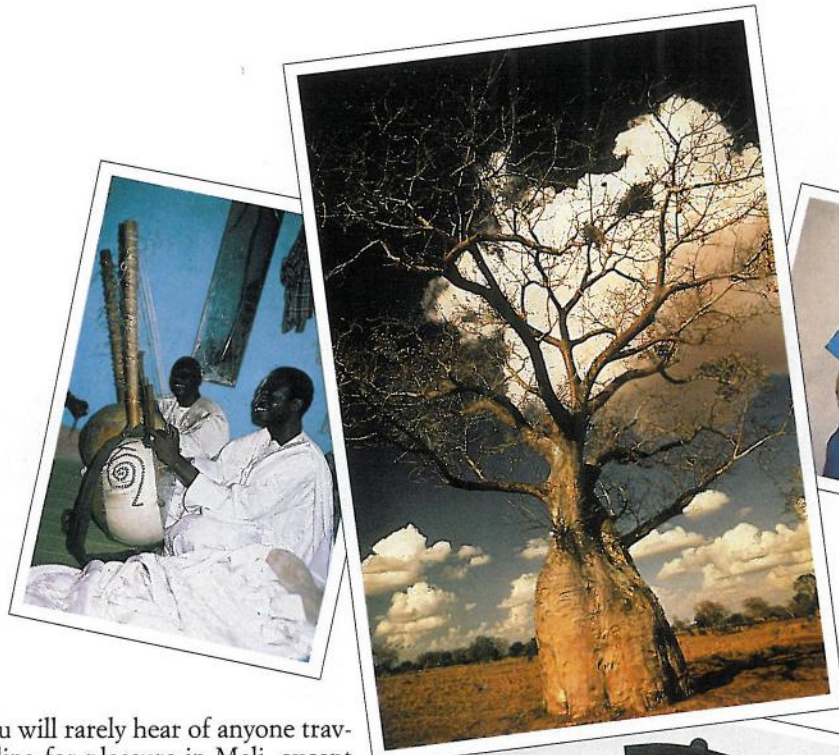


## RENDEZVOUS IN MALI

Discovering the land of great kings and lost cities in the songs of the griots

By James Fox



*Far left:* Griot Dembo Konte and pupil playing 21-stringed koras. *Left:* The baobab tree. *Below:* Author James Fox and singer Fanta Sacko. *Bottom:* The Bamako train station on the old French-built Dakar-to-Niger railway.

You will rarely hear of anyone traveling for pleasure in Mali, except to visit the great handmade mud mosques at Mopti or Djénné on the road eastward toward Timbuktu. But there is a way to negotiate these parts that can put you quickly in touch with the rich old culture of Senegal and Mali and, if you want, with much of West Africa and with some spectacularly dramatic landscapes. In April I traveled along the old French-built Dakar-to-Niger railway in search of the music of the savanna and the brilliant clear-voiced singers of Mali. For its sophistication and complexity it is the most beautiful music you will hear in Africa: sensuous, melodic, grand in sentiment with great subtlety of rhythm, quite unlike the reedy pentatonic chants of the Sahara to the north.

The key to this journey were the two griots I had as traveling companions and guides. They are powerful figures in this culture: hereditary praise sing-



ers, oral historians of prodigious recall, and keepers of the people's memory. In addition, they are often the protégés of rich and powerful men, and their network is immense. Their language, Mandinka, is spoken in Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Guinea Bissan, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, and the Gambia—the countries of the old Mali empire. They play the fabled kora, the 21-stringed instrument that is a mixture of harp and lute and whose range

and beauty always seem to astonish Western musicians hearing it for the first time; the griot's historic profession is traveling in search of patronage, and you could have no better companions on the road.

I already knew these two men well from their music: Amadu Jobarteh, 73, a revered musician from the Gambia who plays the stately Bach-like upper-river style and is an expert on the Koran, which he knows by heart; Dembo Konte, tall, handsome, imperious, a man of quick and caustic wit with more than one wife and mistress, who plays in the flashier coastal style. For both men politics is remote. Mali is simply the East, a mystical land, the spiritual home of all dispersed Mandinka speakers, the source of their musical inspiration and their repertoire; it is the land of great kings and lost cities, which their songs describe. "Without us," they sing, "the names of kings would vanish into oblivion. We are the memory of mankind." The greatest of all is Sunjata, the warrior king who

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### Dembo Konte paid a visit to a crocodile shrine, a small pool covered in dense vegetation where a collection of small white crocodiles has lived for generations miles away from any river

founded the Mali empire, who they compare in stature only with Alexander the Great. In Bamako the newspaper is called after him; he is on the matchboxes and soft-drink labels and in the lyrics of the electric bands.

Neither of them had ever been to Mali. It was indeed harder to get to than the United States, where they had given concerts. Like many musicians, their grandfathers had migrated to the Gambia in the late nineteenth century to be near the last remaining kings and chiefs along the Gambia River. It had been a source of great grief to Amadu Jobarteh, whose father was in his seventies when he was born, that he would never see his father's village before he died. Dembo Konte was in search of his roots, of proof that he was descended from kings, and of the "deeper style" of the Mali kora.

The griots in principal can support themselves on the road with their artful praises. When they recognize a name, they recite the genealogy of its owner, linking his forbears with great episodes in Mandinka history, their voice rising to a pitch of laudatory passion. For this, payment must be made. You will see the often impecunious victim cowering at the griots' approach, fearing the pointed finger.

I was in search of the forgotten genius of a singer called Fanta Sacko whose haunting voice I had heard on her only record made in 1972. In the 1960s she had been at the height of her beauty and fame. Since then, something had happened, some mysterious misfortune, and she had by all accounts become a recluse.

The fourth part of our troupe was Lucy Duran, a woman famous among the griots for her grasp of the Mandinka language and for her expertise as a kora player—the only woman in the world to play the instrument. Now a curator of the National Sound Archive of the British Library, she was searching along the railway for a singer called

Ousmane Sacko whose voice she had heard on French radio.

Unless you travel with a griot, you will not find the music, and without a quest you will have no purpose in the remote and extraordinary landscape of Senegal and Mali. Nor will you see behind the walls into the beautifully designed compounds with their thick cooling walls, and without the griots' eloquent speeches of announcement there is no ceremonial reception, killing of goats, or the fantastic dancing and chanting of the wives, and the journey may be lonely and difficult. Michel Leiris, the French Surrealist and anthropologist, crossing this landscape in 1931 and reporting on his journey in his classic *L'Afrique fantôme*, complained of frequent bouts of depression, or *cafard à en pleurer*.

We prepared for our journey to Mali in Dembo Konte's compound near the Gambian capital. We were blessed by a gold-toothed marabout (priest) who arrived smelling of lavender and pomade; there were prayers and songs of Mali. Dembo Konte paid a visit to a crocodile shrine, a small pool covered in dense vegetation where a collection of small white crocodiles has lived for generations miles away from any river. These beasts of magic, who lay asleep on the far bank while Dembo Konte drank the water of the stagnant pool from a rusty enamel cup, were said to have been transformed from a beautiful goddess who was unable to hide her beauty in any other way. The saddest, most moving song in Dembo Konte's repertoire is a lament for Alhaji "Bamba" Bejang, a slave trader and a generous musical patron whose praise name, Bamba (meaning crocodile), came from his love of feeding these reptiles in the Gambia River:

Let us cry for the crocodile and  
weep for the crocodile  
The crocodile of Samakunda  
The crocodile ruler is in heaven  
The world has no end.

We set out and traveled north for 200 miles by Toyota covered wagon to reach the railway line, crossing the savanna at the hottest time of year before the rains, when the jinns are considered to be at their most unpredictable. Amadu Jobarteh and Dembo Konte, however, had brought ample protection, with amulets and gris-gris, some of which "talked in your pocket," others that, it was said, could under certain circumstances cause death.

Much of the landscape was parkland of dry scorched grass with silk cotton, flame, and mahogany trees or huge expanses of baobab trees with their monstrous elephant-skin trunks and petrified branches. Each tree has spaced itself equally from the next to share water, their primeval forms stretching across the flat plain to the horizon like a procession of terror-struck chessmen.

Then at Tambacunda, our connection with the railway, we caught the true train of hell. Senegal and Mali both run their trains on the same line but nobody in their right mind takes the Mali train, except the hardened *commerçants*, who have to, or the odd travelers like ourselves. At midnight in the soda gloom of a single station light we saw some battered war-torn rolling stock sliding into the platform. As the blacked-out carriages came abreast the passengers appeared to be strangling each other, fighting for air and space. There was a surge of boarding passengers, and then the station was filled with clouds of pepper, thrown by thieves to choke and divert their frenzied victims. We knew it was a three day wait for the Senegal train. The Mali train had three carriages for a crowd that would easily have filled eight.

There was no turning back, so we charged the carriage in a spirit of brutality that we shared with our fellow passengers for the next thirteen hours. Instead of putting on more carriages the company had issued the guard

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with identical pairs of new track shoes so they could walk over us, back and forth, on inexplicable journeys. Each time they came, to protect ourselves we wearily pointed out the secret foot-holds hidden among us. We punched and climbed our way along the solidly blocked central aisle and came to a halt at a wall of rice sacks and polystyrene containers of stinking river fish guarded by two Wolof women glowering with anger, gaudily overpainted, smelling of a sweet sickly scent, shrieking in French. Most of the time they lay flat out, luxuriously but warily barricaded into a pen they had built out of stripped-away seat backs seized at Dakar, hogging it, endlessly eating and drinking, like the Three Fat Women from Antibes. "Look at those rascals," croaked Dembo, a word sadly lapsed in Europe. "Useless train," Amadu pronounced, shaking his head. "Useless."

At Kayes, near the Senegal border, we tumbled out of the Mali train, a ragged shell-shocked group. Dembo picked the one taxi driver in town whose father was a patron of Ousmane Sacko. In the white incapacitating heat we drove down dusty unmarked streets lined with the architecture of the Sahel, beautifully shaped mud houses with cool interior courtyards and thick rounded walls, a kind of gingerbread Romanesque.

In one of these houses Ousmane Sacko welcomed us with the assiduousness and openness that is part of this culture. A small neat man, he listened over the bleating of his sheep while Amadu presented Lucy's curriculum vitae. Then he spoke French in a formal declamatory style as if teaching primary-level lycée, fitting perhaps for his role as *fctionnaire* and Morse code operator at the central telegraph office. After a nap from which I was awoken by a chicken trapped in my room, we boarded Ousmane's Mercedes for a formal tour, as if we were a trade delegation. From the electricity station on a bank above the depleted Senegal River, where we met the entire staff and reviewed the dials and pumps, we went to the telegraph office. There Ousmane introduced us to his boss, responsible for the *fusion* of his life as musician-*fctionnaire* by giving him time off. Then on to the Hôtel du Rail, colonial style turned to third world with its cavernous and

empty lobby inside and outside the ragged topiary and dried-up fountain of the old garden terrace that must once have seen white-jacketed waiters serving the French just back from far-away stations along the line. Our waiter wore a designer T-shirt, called himself Hélène, spoke Mandinka and very camp French with his hand on his hip. Dembo Konte was shocked. He described him as a man-woman and

said he was turning God's work around. That night Ousmane Sacko killed a sheep for us and cooked it with tinned petits pois and with his two wives sang many songs in homage to Lucy Duran.

The Senegalese train to Bamako, in surreal contrast to the Mali train, had reserved seats and a bar that served cold beer. There were politicians on their way to the capital reading *Le*

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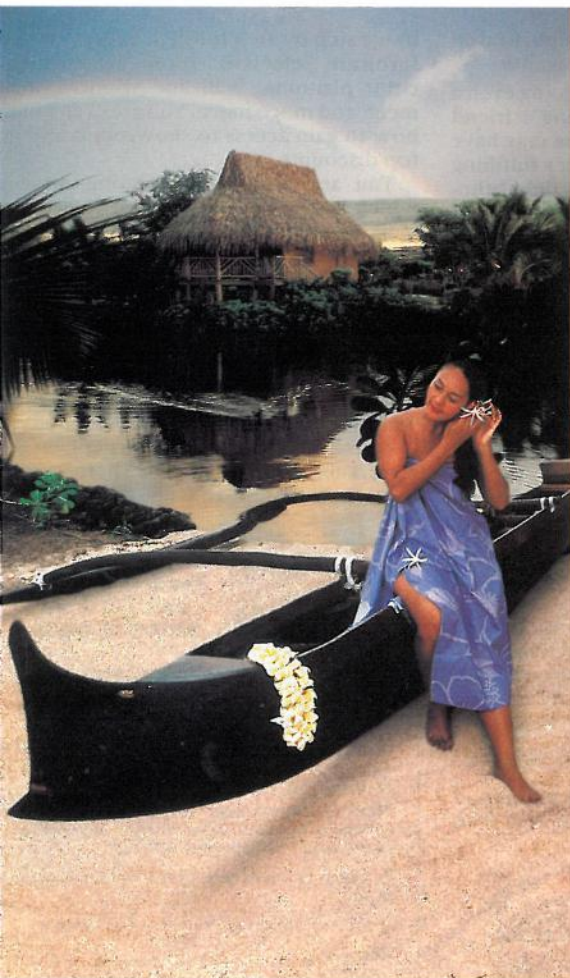
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## TRAVEL

*Monde.* As we crossed into Mali, the terrain changed: a vast landscape of eroded rock in isolated tables of Colorado proportions set in green vegetation, silvery rivers curling about them, an African Xanadu blasted by the sun.

Amadu went to the train window and peered through the shimmering waves of heat at an infinite plain of baobabs. He turned to me and said, "I

It was a vast  
 landscape of eroded  
 rock, an African  
 Xanadu blasted  
 by the sun

am *very* sorry." There were tears in his eyes, and he shook his head. "He says he is sad," said Dembo. "The baobab trees are the spirit of the ancestors. They remind Amadu of his father. He says that now, for the first time, we are in the East." In Mali everything is connected to the landscape: the music, the history, and even the language. Mandinka is described in the old songs as the "clear voice of the savanna" and Mali as the Bright Country, to contrast its open savanna with the dark forest of Guinea in the west, the "land of the cola."

Late one afternoon while Amadu and Dembo were sequestered in the compound of Sidiki Jobarteh, Amadu's cousin and the "King of the Kora," we followed a maze of uneven dirt roads through the baking concrete suburbs of Bamako and stopped outside a small metal door that led up a steep flight of steps in a mud wall. It was opened by a young girl who said that her mother, Fanta Sacko, was inside and we could come in. She showed us into an astonishing room, bursting with high-kitsch objects in rows, on sideboards, in cabinets, on every available surface except the chairs. It was like the den of some hoarding witch with a passion for funfair prizes. Five identical toucans sat on five upturned cups and saucers next to a row of gnomes with snowstorm globes for bellies. On the table were three large ashtrays in the form of giant toads and a large bowl of plastic flowers welded

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to a vase which weighed, disconcertingly, less than a paperback book. The walls were covered with many photographs of Fanta Sacko as a young singer and star. The effect was one of staggering unreality. A woman appeared, I judged about 45, thin with very black skin, her face wrapped carefully in a burnous of vivid black and white. She was enervated, smiling, and touched her face constantly. She seemed, then, almost overcome to see us and left the room. Later she said she had gone away to cry, remembering other white friends she hadn't seen for years. She reappeared in a midnight-blue gown and headdress and launched at great volume into the powerful Mali chant of greeting called "Calling the Horses." Her voice was still intact and beautiful.

She had been unable to work, she said, or even leave her house for some years because of her "illness." Perhaps if she could get to Europe she could be cured. Indeed it emerged—she revealed—that the skin of her face had been destroyed by hessal, the mercury-based skin-lightening substance she had used in her heyday which destroys tissue permanently. Hessal comes from a Wolof word meaning light-skinned and is legally manufactured and widely used, despite its known effects. Light skin is still perceived as a mark of distinction south of the Sahara.

She sang most of her repertoire like a young girl giving an audition. Between the vocal lines, she imitated the instruments of her departed accompanists. She told me the sense of clarity in the music of Mali came from a childhood sense of genealogical certainty on one hand, Islamic predestiny on the other. "Guinea is eloquence," she said, "but Mali is authenticity." We left her standing in her doorway waving and "Calling the Horses."

Lucy Duran and I, waiting to fly to Dakar, spent our evenings in Bamako at the Buffet de la Gare, the center of all activity, where we found ourselves, as ever, the guests of the Mali railway company. By a typical and imaginative African irony the best new electric band in West Africa, the Super Rail Band, is owned and managed by Mali Railways—the worst railway managers in the world with the best taste in music. So they can be forgiven. Even so, take the Senegal train, the "Smoke of the Savanna." □

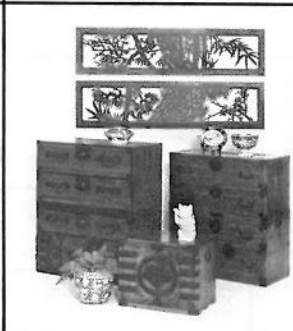
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