Apprentices and Kings

Œ *do* fe *baro be do* son *hakili la:* Talking to one man sharpens the wits of another.

(Bambara proverb]

Djelimady Tounkara has powerful hands. His muscled fingers and palms seem almost brutish to the eye, but when he grasps the neck of a guitar and brushes the nail of his right index finger across the strings, the sound lifts effortlessly, like dust in a wind. In Bamako, Mali, where musicians struggle, Djelimady is a big man, and all of his family's good fortunes flow from those hands.

Since the early 1970s, Djelimady (pronounced JEH-lee-MA-dee) has played lead guitar in the Super Rail Band of Bamako, the only "Manding swing" orchestra to survive into the 1990s in Mali. When I first visited Bamako, in January 1993, the Rail Band still performed on weekend nights at the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, right next to Bamako's red stone, colonial-era train station. I found Djelimady there, rehearsing with the band in a cave-like concrete store room by the tracks. In return for government paychecks, the eight or ten core members of the Rail Band met there to rehearse on weekday mornings. I went as a journalist, hoping to record the band and their story for American radio, not imagining the musical apprenticeship that would unfold.

I had spent a decade exploring African music and had visited five African countries. I had heard countless recordings

of traditional and contemporary music from around the continent. I knew the beauty of Manding music, but not its power. For Manding griots, more properly called *jeli*s, do not simply amuse their listeners. *Jeli*s can persuade the mighty, dignify ordinary lives, and sometimes their music can make them as wealthy as any musician in Africa.

I showed up unannounced at the Buffet Hotel practice room, but Djelimady greeted me warmly. Standing more than six feet tall, with broad shoulders and an open face, he clasped my hand and smiled as I introduced myself in rudimentary French. Djelimady's jet-black hair and mustache were trimmed short, and he wore a colorful shirt and pressed white trousers. Furrows traversed his brow as he studied me. When he smiled, his face opened into a mask of joy, but when the smile passed, the furrows returned and the mask became inscrutable—vaguely bemused, a little stern and wary.

Djelimady spied my guitar and asked to play it. It was a modest instrument by professional American standards, a chestnut brown Yamaha acoustic, slim and light. But it played easily and produced a bright tone. Djelirnady inspected the instrument and began to play. I had known he was an extraordinary guitarist, skilled at transferring the rapid, flowing lines of Manding traditional instruments onto the guitar. But his reputation and the recordings of the Rail Band I had heard did not prepare me for the direct experience of his musicianship. He cradled the instrument with the confidence of an old Delta bluesman, and he tickled the strings with his forefinger, producing impossibly fast and fluid melodies, music of startling clarity, boldness, and innocence.

Djelimady noted my gaze and offered to show me something. He played the accompaniment to the central epic of the *jeli* repertoire, "Sunjata," the story from which all the others flow. The full-blown song recounts the miraculous life of Sunjata Keita, first king of the thirteenth-century Malian Empire. All I heard that day was a brief, stately cycle of notes, simple but bristling with tough certainty. Djelimady laughed as I labored to imitate his articulations on the guitar. I could reproduce the sequence of notes, but not the emphasis and timing that made them Manding guitar music.

When I returned to the Buffet a few days later, Djelimady was surprised to see I had made progress, and he showed me more. During the month I spent in Mali, I returned to the Buffet whenever possible, and before I left I had learned the accompaniment to "Sunjata" passably well. Pleased, Djelimady invited me to his family compound west of town one

night and let me record a musical session with him and some of his relatives. The result was the most satisfying recording I had made in Africa.

When I met him, Djelimady already embodied an epoch of modern West African history. Raised in a *jeli* family near the western city of Kita, Djelimady came to live in Bamako in 1965. He arrived during the turbulent years that followed the country's independence from France. Modibo Keita, a socialist and an Africanist, was Mali's president at the time, and he had established a system of state-sponsored musical ensembles that epitomized the idealism of that era. Modibo Keita believed that by melding the cultural expressions of the territory's many peoples, he could build an African nation. As a talented young guitarist in the capital, Djelimady rose quickly through this system to earn a seat in the Ensemble National du Mali.

The state-funded dance bands of that era were forging a new music for a new society. They transformed the ancestral airs of the griots (pronounced GREE-ohs) to create a sound that professional urban couples could dance to in Western-style clubs. Sassy horns. The swing of dance band jazz. The lilt of Cuban *son, mambo, cha cha cha* and *rumba.* All the musical strands of that time were interwoven with the melodies and flourishes of Manding music, a core that reached back to the glory days of the Malian Empire.

In learning "Sunjata," I had come face to face with a legacy far older than the Rail Band's venerable swing. Everywhere I went in the country, when I took out my guitar and played "Sunjata," I made friends. That brief sequence of notes could short circuit a hustle in seconds, and its effect had nothing to do with Djelimady's prestige or the caliber of my playing. It had to do with Sunjata himself. Sunjata Keita was Mali's George Washington and Thomas Jefferson rolled into one, a founder and a philosopher, a figure whose story and song are known to every Malian child. John Johnson, the Manding scholar, has called the Sunjata epic "a virtual social, political, and cultural charter of society."

The Sunjata epic is a story of magic, transformation, and delayed justice. It has many variants, but most begin with a hunter's prophecy to Sunjata's father, then the ruler of a small kingdom. The lung is instructed to marry a hideously ugly woman brought to him from the land of Do. The woman, Sogolon, is actually a buffalo in human form, and the king must struggle to consummate their marriage. Driven by the prophecy that they will beget the future king of Mali, he persists, and at last they produce a boy. But Sunjata begins life as an invalid child, unable to walk or speak, an unlikely candidate for such an august destiny.

After the old lung dies, another of his sons takes the throne, and Sunjata's mother gradually loses patience with her indolent seven-year-old. Her final humiliation comes when she is forced to ask another woman for leaves from a *baobob* tree, a cooking ingredient, and then must endure the other woman's taunts.

"Oh son of misfortune," Sunjata's mother wails in one telling of the epic, "will you never walk? Through your fault, I have just suffered the greatest affront of my life! What have I done, God, for you to punish me this way?" Sunjata replies, "Very well, then, I am going to walk today. Go and tell my father's smiths to make me the heaviest possible iron rod. Mother, do you want just the leaves of the *baobob* or would you rather I brought you the whole tree?" The boy then bends the iron rod into a bow while lifting himself to his feet. As his griot composes the "Hymn to the Bow," Sunjata dislodges a young *baobob* tree from the dry earth and lays it down before his mother's hut.

Suddenly mighty and dangerous, Sunjata is driven into exile by fearful rivals, and during his travels he befriends the leaders of neighboring kingdoms, all of whom will later become his vassals. The story climaxes with Sunjata's victory over the sorcerer king, Soumaoro Kanté, at the battle of Kirina. Sunjata wins the battle by exploiting Soumaoro's occult vulnerability—a spur from his totemic animal, the cock.

It is a victory found in myth. It would have been dismissed by historians as African superstition were it not for two brief passages in the writings of Arab political historians. Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun both visited Mali during the century that followed Sunjata's death. These writers confirm the existence of a lung named Sunjata Keita who established a vast, peaceful sovereignty supported principally by the mining and trans-Saharan gold trade. Those two passages have forced historians to consider the tales of the *jeli*s in a serious light. Malians, of course, require no such substantiation. The pride stirred by Sunjata's story, while especially potent for the Manding people, touches the modern descendants of many Malian ethnic groups: the Bambara, the Fulani cattle herders, the Bozo fishermen, the Tamasheck and Songhai of the north, the Bobo of the south and east, even the remote, cliff-dwelling Dogon, famous for their preservation of animist religion.

As I left Bamako, Djelimady said to me, "You've learned well. I think if you came here for *six* months, I could teach you to play the way I do." Those words would stay with me. Back in the United States, the more I read and listened, the more I understood that Djelimady's offer to teach

me was an opportunity. I wrote to him from Boston and sent him $100 as a contribution to the new house I had heard he was building for his family. I told him that I had saved some money and was prepared to move to Bamako and study with him, leaving my job, my apartment, and my band.

We spoke just once on the telephone before I left. I told Djelimady that I expected to pay him for putting me up and teaching me, but I wondered if he might like part of that payment in the form of something I could bring from the States. "Yes," he said. "An amplifier. Bring me a Roland Jazz Chorus guitar amplifier."

I found a used Roland for around $500 and a 1,000-watt power transformer that would let the amplifier run off 220v current. I built a wooden box to protect the amplifier during the flight. I assumed that this would be only a down payment on my eventual debt to Djelimady, but it seemed a start. The physical difficulty of bringing such a thing to Mali would provide evidence of my seriousness. In October of 1995, nearly three years after I first watched Djelimady's hands move across the frets of my Yamaha guitar, I flew from New York to Bamako, loaded to capacity with a heavy metal trunk, two guitars, and the Roland amplifier.

Flying into Bamako on a Monday night, I looked out the airplane window to see dim patches of light separated by miles of darkness. I felt a wave of apprehension and scrawled in my notebook, "What have I done?" Even in all that darkness, I could see the reddish dust of the city, coloring the occasional lights with a smoky mist. As we landed, only the strip lights marking the runway and the blue neon glow of the terminal building emerged from the shadows.

Inside the dust-coated terminal, I spotted Djelimady as I waited in the passport line. He towered above everyone, emanating confidence. I knew instantly that his celebrity was working its charm on the officials, as he had made his way far beyond the barriers that restrained people meeting flights. Djelimady sent a security officer to speed my arrival, a matter of spiriting my passport to the head of the line, assigning porters to my seven pieces of luggage, and cajoling the customs man, who instinctively pulled aside my trunk, amplifier, black handbag full of computer gear, tape recorders, and camera accessories.

When the critical discussion over the release of my luggage began, I said nothing. I stood by smiling benignly while Djelimady shook hands and spoke in grandiloquent Bambara and his official directed the customs inspector in a sterner tone. The strategy worked. Before I

knew it, we were on the curb outside loading things into Djelimady's old white Nissan. The porters liked my U.S. $1 bills, but Djelimady's official seemed to disdain the ten I offered him. In fairness, I did underpay him; he had spared me the travel ordeal I feared most, a close customs examination.

Djelimady had come to the airport with his brother Madou Djan Tounkara and also a young man named Oumar Diallo, whom everyone called Barou. Even before I made it through the customs hurdle, I saw Barou waving from the crowd. A thin, animated fellow with light brown slun and curly hair, Barou grinned my way like a long lost friend. Apparently we had met during my first visit, though I did not remember him, much to his disappointment.

Knowing that my luggage would overburden any single car, I had arranged for two to meet me. I rode into Bamako with my second benefactor, a French expatriate named Philippe Berthier who operated Mali K7, a recording studio and cassette reproduction facility in Bamako. Philippe and Djelimady greeted each other guardedly as we loaded the car. Philippe, it turned out, was not a fan of the Rail Band; he considered them old-fashioned. For all his achievements in Bamako, Philippe had a mixed reputation among the city's musicians. I don't know whether these chilly tidings reflected any real malfeasance on Philippe's part or simply the normal animosities that exist between music producers and recording artists. Either way, in a city of many musicians and few producers, this was a deep divide, and though I was riding with the producer, I had cast my lot with the musicians.

As we drove along the increasingly busy road that leads from Bamako-Senou Airport toward the Niger River and the city, the sensations of Bamako returned to me. I peered into the night and glimpsed silhouettes and shiny faces etched by the light of bare, solitary light bulbs. The pungent sting of wood smoke blended with the dust and exhaust fumes and the tangy odors of ripe and rotting fruit. I saw brightly lit rooms opened to the street, with vendors selling cigarettes and drinks in neon parlors—cobalt blue, fire-engine red, white, and battleship gray. Women squatted around small, coal-fired stoves grilling beef brochettes, whole fish, and bananas, which they served on torn sheets of brown paper or skewered on wooden kebab sticks. Men in loose robes called *boubous* straddled bicycles and mobilettes (motor bikes) and wove among cars, pedestrians, and hucksters. I began to see

*bashée*s, pickup trucks, painted green and packed with commuters jammed onto wooden benches under a makeshift roof.

We crossed a modern stanchion bridge, newly opened since my first visit, and reached Avenue Sheikh Zayed, the main road leading out of Bamako toward Djelimady's neighborhood, Lafiabougou. Just past the Lafiabougou market, Djelimady—leading the way in his slow-moving Nissan—took a right onto a ravaged, packed-dirt road. Philippe slowed to a gingerly crawl, shifung across the road at odd angles to avoid deep holes. After about a quarter-mile, both cars turned sharply to the left, passing between newly painted white pillars into a tiny car park that was also the central courtyard of a concrete house, still less than half built. One day, this would be home to Djelimady's extended family. For the moment, the few completed rooms along the right side of the courtyard housed renters and family guests, now including me.

We got out of our cars in the neon-lit courtyard. People came forward and Djelimady began to make introductions. First he presented me to my immediate neighbor, a serious gentleman of fifty named Mamadou Keita. "This is the Colonel," said Djelimady, and Mr. Keita nodded dutifully. "He's a friend. You can trust him. I've told him to look after things here." I got the impression that Djelimady had hired the Colonel as a security guard. They both warned me that I must lock my room at all times because there were many "bandits" around. Turning to me in an aside, Djelimady advised me to give the Colonel a little money from time to time to ensure his good will. "How much?" I asked. "Whatever you like," he said, shrugging, "just something."

Djelimady introduced me to his eldest son, Samakou, a handsome fellow in his early twenties who shook my hand vigorously. Samakou lifted my 1SO-pound trunk from the back of Djelimady's car and carried it into my bedroom. He smiled with satisfaction as he put it down, barely seeming to strain. A gray, latticed metal door led into my two-room suite. Each room had a two-foot neon light mounted above the doorway and a single metal-slatted window, bolted shut. Aside from that, the outer room was absolutely empty and the inner room, the bedroom, contained only a woven reed mat spread over most of the floor, a wooden bench, and a foam mattress covered with fabric depicting cartoon images from the comic strip Dick Tracy. Speech balloons emanating from the comic strip characters' mouths read, "Stick 'em up" and "Eat lead."

Philippe, the producer, stepped inside to inspect. He had told me in the car that he might be able to arrange a room for me in his own compound in a few weeks, in case things didn't work out with Djelimady. Now he drew on his cigarette and blandly pronounced, "This is good." But the room Djelimady had prepared for me was better than good. It was everything I had hoped for—private, safe, wired for electricity, and large enough for me to set up a small office and write.

After loading my things into the main room of my new home, I dug around in my baggage for gifts—a digital sound processing unit that Philippe had requested by fax, the power transformer for Djelimady, and copies of my first book for each of them. *Afropop! an Illustrated Guide to Contemporary African Music* is a colorful reference book. Unable to read its English text, Djelimady admired the photograph of Senegalese singing star Baaba Maal on the cover, then turned right to the Mali section and noted that there was no photograph of him. "Next time," I told him.

At the Tounkara family compound, some two miles further into Lafiabougou, I met an overwhelming number of Djelimady's family members that night, beginning with his wife Adama Kouyaté, his tall, aged mother Ina and aunt Nene, at least three of his daughters, his brother's wife, and various half-brothers, nieces, nephews, and neighbors. In my jet-lagged haze, I despaired of ever learning all their names.

I then ate my first Malian meal, rice and sauce served in a metal bowl. Recalling what I had learned in earlier travels, I ate using the fingers of my right hand. With that simple gesture, everyone seemed to relax. It suggested that I might survive in their world. I declined water, explaining that I would prefer at first to buy a case of bottled water, just to be safe. I had feared this moment, not wanting to give offense but well aware that water presented the greatest danger to my health and that a precedent had to be established from the start. Djelimady, having already warned me that mosquito bites cause malaria, was sympathetic. He sent a boy to buy me a Coke.

By the time we had eaten, returned to my place, and sipped a couple of bracing shots of Malian green gunpowder tea prepared by the Colonel, it was nearly two in the morning. My new friends left me alone, but though I had scarcely slept in a week, I was too excited to do so now. During the next few days I would fall asleep constantly—in the car, at the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, at the Tounkara compound, even during rehearsals and concerts. People would laugh at me and I would wake abruptly, scarcely able to believe where I was.

Early each morning, Djelimady would either come for me or else send Barou in the Nissan. Within the peach-colored concrete walls that sealed off the Tounkara compound's large, square courtyard, the women's cooking and washing were generally well underway when I arrived at 7:30 or 8:00. I would sit with Djelimady, and his wife would bring us each a tall glass of warm, weak coffee, sweetened with sugar and thickened with powdered milk. She would hand me a section of day-old French bread. Never a fan of the continental breakfast, I found this African variation unsatisfying, but I ate every crumb, as there was no opportunity to eat during the Rail Band rehearsal, and we rarely made it back to the compound for lunch before 2:00.

The shock absorbers on both sides of the Nissan were shot, and it clanked horribly even on relatively good roads. Djelimady always stopped for gas at the Elf station at the corner where we turned onto Sheikh Zayed. He never put much gas in the car, just enough for the trip at hand. For 1,000 CFA (French African Community) francs, around $2, he would get two liters, just enough to make it into town and back. That way, if someone borrowed the car, they would not use Djelimady's gasoline. Running out of gas now and then when calculations failed was a risk worth taking in the interest of frugality.

On the way back from Bamako for lunch, we always stopped at a roadside fruit stand so Djelimady could buy a melon or papaya. The prices fluctuated, and Djelimady often fell into heated bargaining, sometimes driving off angrily to find a better price at the next stand. "Ever since democracy," he would complain, "prices are no longer fixed. People think they can charge whatever they like." Djelimady also suspected that the fruit-selling women jacked up the price when they saw a white person in the car. "It's racist!" he would growl. Tensions vanished, though, when we returned to the family to linger over lunch in the shade of the inner verandah.

Afternoons provided the closest thing I knew to free time during those early months. More often than not, by the time I had rested a little, fielded the stream of uninvited guests who frequented my house, and taken a moment to wash myself while it was still light, it was time to return to the compound for dinner.

The Tounkaras' courtyard was large for a single family, about five hundred square feet. Two smaller families might easily have shared the same space. But given the large number of relatives who had come to live there, the place felt crowded. Within the courtyard, Djelimady

always took the central seat just to the left of the doorway that led back to the main verandah and the largest bedrooms. Out in the courtyard, the men congregated on the left side, which included the compound's one concrete-walled lavatory and washing area and also the courtyard entranceway with its ramp leading down to the dirt street. The women occupied the right side of the courtyard with its cook fires, well, and food storage area.

Children were everywhere. One evening at dinner, I counted twenty sitting around the TV set or nestled in various mothers' arms. One little girl, not yet two, was terrified of me and cried whenever she saw me, to everyone's amusement. A girl of four usually cared for her, often keeping the baby swaddled and tied to her back or slung across a jutting hip. The older girl would flash me a coy smile as she moved off to quiet her bawling burden.

Two twin boys of ten—Lasine and Fuseini Tounkara—were especially extroverted and friendly to me. They were beautiful children. They had the trademark Tounkara poise about them, walking with shoulders back and chests thrust forward, smiling often. Lasine was almost always the first to greet me when I arrived at the compound. He would take whatever I had in my hands or else smack his firm little hand into mine for a quick slap handshake. "Benneeg!" he would bark. Lasine and Euseini were identical down to their slightly hoarse voices. Adults liked to say that they couldn't tell them apart and called either one of them using the word *fulani*, Bambara for twin. The twins' mother, Ami, had been widowed three years earlier by another of Djelimady's brothers, Issa, who had once been the bassist in the Rail Band.

Untimely deaths explained the presence of many women and children in the compound. The size and scope of Djelimady's household testified to his success but also to the substantial burden that all successful Malians must bear. Djelimady attributed his brother Issa's sudden death to alcohol, but, as with so many deaths I would learn about during my stay, nobody really seemed to know why Issa had died. In those early days, Issa's twin sons spoke to me constantly in Bambara, somehow expecting that I would magically understand them.

Every evening, two Tounkara children carried the television out from one of the bedrooms and placed it at the focal point of the courtyard for the night's broadcast. Since Mali's 1992 democratic constitution had legalized private radio, Bamako had produced around twenty radio stations. But there was still just one state-owned television station, Office de Diffusion

Radio et Television de Mali (ORTM). Private television was illegal, as in almost all African countries. ORTM broadcasted from 7:00 until about 11:00 P.M. every weeknight and all day on weekends. Bamako's radio stations could broadcast what they liked, and the more political stations, like the print media, could be very critical of the government. Television news on ORTM mimicked the appearance of Western-style media, but it ignored controversial events and aired only measured doses of debate between the government and its opposition. Still, Djelimady rarely missed ORTM's hour-long evening news program, *Le Journal.*

I found the broadcast dull, but I loved the conversation and cuisine that accompanied it. We ate rice and savory meat sauce or smoked fish, sometimes salad, beef brochettes, or fried potatoes. Sometimes the Tounkara women served a doughy millet porridge called *tow*, which came with a somewhat slimy but flavorful sauce made from the dried flower of the *datu* plant. Though *Le Journal* rarely reported on the United States or on anything familiar to me, I loved the way Djelimady and his brother Madou discussed the stories. They felt obliged to approve or disapprove of everything reported.

The Chinese foreign minister visited Mali. "That's good," said Djelimady. "The Chinese have been our friends since the time of Modibo Keita." Jacques Chirac announced that he would not abandon Africa. "He's a bastard," said Djelimady. "He was with de Gaulle in World War II when they wouldn't pay the African soldiers. You can't trust him." The Nigerian government executed nine dissidents, including activist author Ken Saro-Wiwa. "Very sad. That country is lost," said Djelimady. The Malian president's wife announced the opening of her annual two-day music festival, Tabalé, and told the nation that the proceeds this year would go to aid the handicapped. "She's a great woman," Djelimady boomed at the mention of the president's wife, "Mali's Hillary Clinton." The citizens of Quebec voted, by a hair, not to separate from Canada. "Excellent," he said as we watched the faces of stunned Quebecois learning of the razor-thin referendum defeat. "Canada is good. Why would anyone want to leave it?"

For Djelimady, the word socialist had positive associations—it was synonymous with democratic. During *Le Journal*, he would use these two words regularly to heap praise on figures as diverse as Bill Clinton, Mali's President Alpha Oumar Konaré, Yasir Arafat, and Francois Mitterand. Djelimady's list of global demons began with Jacques Chirac but also included Muammar Khadafy, Saddam Hussein, and American Republicans, whom he said were racists.

After dinner came music. Djelimady would call for his acoustic guitar and he and I would go out to the street. The twins would bring out a couple of lawn chairs for us, and we would generally work until around midnight. These were not exactly lessons. Djelimady would play things. I would record him, and when there was something I thought I could tackle, I would interrupt him and force him to repeat it. As I tried to imitate him, he would correct me, and it all went down on tape. There was no particular system. He didn't give me exercises to practice, and in the beginning he never asked me to play anything he had taught me before. When he talked, it was usually to dramatize the history of a song or to reminisce about the glory days of the Rail Band. "We did this version with Mory Kanté in '72. Oh, the people used to die for it!" That sort of thing. In this way, I found myself progressing little by little, and during those evening sessions on the stoop, I felt I was getting what I had come for; the frustrations and distractions I experienced at other times seemed unimportant.

On my second morning with the Tounkaras, I woke late from a deep sleep and was not ready when Barou arrived at my house to take me to the compound for breakfast. Djelimady scolded Barou for our delay, and I soon learned the reason. "Our brother in town has lost a daughter, nine years old," he told me. Impatiently gesturing as he described how children are always recklessly running around, he explained that the girl had fallen into a hole and died. We ate breakfast and headed out in the Nissan.

We maneuvered the busy roundabout near the train station, where the traffic circles a tall, French-style monument to the Republic of Mali. We bypassed the chaos of downtown and made our way to the Banconi neighborhood, a little way up one of the dry, rocky hills that skirt Bamako on both sides of the Niger. We parked on the street and walked into a compound about three times the size of Djelimady's. Some two hundred people were gathered, sitting silently on benches, chairs, and a large central mat, women on one side, men on the other. A few shade trees offered scant protection from the sun, even as they shed crisp, sickle-shaped leaves, a sure sign that the dry season had begun.

Among the Manding, the sons of your father's brothers are your brothers, and the daughters of your mother's sisters are your sisters. This causes confusion for the foreigner, especially when combined with the fact that polygamy allows for brothers and sisters with the same father but different mothers. When someone wants you to know that a sibling is a full sibling, he clarifies with the phrase "same mother, same father."

More often, the relationship is left ambiguous. At the time, sorting out such complexities was beyond me. When Djelimady introduced me to his grieving "brother," I simply shook his hand and retreated.

The brother sat surrounded by elders. He wore a dark blue *boubou* and a white skull cap. Djelimady and Madou took their places with their brother and spoke softly in Bambara before moving off to make room for new arrivals. From the street behind us came the tinny drone of a mosque where an Imam was intoning through a megaphone speaker. Soon the old, bearded Imam entered the compound, chanting. He made his way into the central courtyard, where he paused to speak a few words with the family members at the center. On his cue, the wake ended abruptly, and people began a quiet but rapid departure.

The death observed, Djelimady returned to himself. We drove on to the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, where the Rail Band was gathered for rehearsal. The musicians had news. One of Mali's popular young *jeli* singers, Fodé Kouyaté, had just been by to ask if the Rail Band would back him for his performance in the upcoming Tabalé '95 spectacle. This would mean performing in front of thousands of people alongside a lineup of African musical luminaries. It would also mean participating in the pet project of Mme. Konaré, that lovely and generous socialist. "And you will play with us," Djelimady told me with smile. It seemed a difficult undertaking for my first week in town, but Djelimady's confidence buoyed me.

That evening after dinner, I sat out on the street playing guitar with Sambry Kouyaté, Djelimady's seventeen-year-old nephew. Sambry was teaching me the one song he knew on guitar, "Kemé Burama." Two teenage girls lay across the hood of Djelimady's Nissan, one this way, one the other, chatting where their faces met at the center. Five or six children were gathered around on stools, the twins claiming the best seats. A half moon hung bowl-like in the sky. Djelimady came out to inspect our progress, and after a few minutes he asked whether I knew what the song was about.

"It's a very important story," he said, shooing away one of the twins to take his seat. Djelimady explained that the last great Manding fighter, Almami Samory Touré—who happened to be the grandfather of Guinea's first president, Sékou Tour&-had made bitter war on the French at the end of the last century. Touré's younger brother Ibrahima had been his general and a great fighter, and the song "KemC Burama" celebrates him. "Kemé," Djelimady explained, is Bambara for "one hundred," and it

refers to Ibrahima Touré's strength in battle, equivalent to that of a hundred men.

"Their war camp was just nearby," said Djelimady, gesturing to the end of the street where a flat, empty plain separated Lafiabougou from the riverside neighborhood of Djikoroni. "The Tourés made war on the Wasulu lungdom from here. It was brutal. They lulled and killed. But Kemé Burama spared the musicians. He spared the griots. He lulled or enslaved all the others. But there have never been slaves among the griots. Tounkara, Diabaté, Kouyaté," he said, listing names of griot families. "These were never slaves. Even the whites did not make the griots work. Ibrahima saw the griots as a weapon and treated them well. That's why they sing about him."

After the Wasulu wars, though, the Tourés faced the more imposing forces of the French. Djelimady explained that the brothers later fled to Guinea, where Ibrahima was killed. Years later, Samory was captured in what is today the northern Ivory Coast. "My father remembered seeing Samory paraded down the street in Kita," said Djelimady, in a way that deepened the silence of the children. "He was just a boy at the time."

A few days later, I was riding in the car with Barou, and I told him how impressed I had been by Djelimady's story. "Be careful, my friend," said Barou unexpectedly. "Apart from music, Djelimady knows nothing. Manding guitar, Bambara music—that he knows. Other than that, nothing."

"He knows history," I said.

"*Griot* history," replied Barou. "Griot history and actual history. Not the same thing."

By this time, I had spent hours listening to Djelimady hold forth on many subjects as we rode along Avenue Sheikh Zayed between Bamako and the Tounkara compound and lingered over long meals in the courtyard. Once when we were driving, I remarked on the large Khadafy logos painted on many of the green Sotrama minivans that carted commuters all over the city. Djelimady responded by pointing to the towering mosque that marked the halfway point of our route into town. "Khadafy built that for us," he said blandly. "They call it the Islamic Center."

"Really?" I asked. "Why did he do that?"

"Don't know," shrugged Djelimady. "He likes Mali, I suppose."

Djelimady informed me that many Bamako landmarks had been built by foreign benefactors. The new bridge across the Niger bore the name of the Saudi Arabian king who had financed it. The road we took into town

every day got its name from the man who had paid to pave it in 1993, HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates since 1971. Zayed, I later learned, was so proud of his gifts to Islamic countries that he took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to trumpet his virtues as an educator, an environmentalist, and "a statesman of vision and generosity." His gift to Bamako had reduced Djelimady's hour-long commute to a tolerable twenty minutes. Djelimady was forever feeding me such information, and it troubled me to have his veracity impugned by his own good friend.

Using the books at my disposal, I checked into Djelimady's history of "Kemé Burama." In fact, the warlord Samory had kept a war camp south of Bamako. He had captured plenty of land during his rampages, including a good deal of the Wasulu kmgdom to the south and east. Wasulu was mostly the land of the Fulani, who had come from the north and been displaced there as the result of an earlier war. Samory's purges seemed to have strengthened the survivors. The Wasulunké, I was often told, were known for their powerful fetishistic magic, and also for their music.

At the far extreme of Lafiabougou, beyond the Tounkara compound, a narrow valley cuts between two thousand-foot mesas, creating a perfect set for a guns-blazing, Hollywood western slurmish. The actual battle fought here at the village of Wayanko in 1883 pitted Samory Touré's army, led by his brother, against an exhausted and ill-prepared French regiment commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Gustave Borgnis-Desbordes. The Tourés had triumphed initially but had ultimately been routed by the better-armed French, who then claimed Bamako and made it their base of operations on the upper Niger. As Djelimady had reported, Samory's men then fled south into Guinea.

In essence, Djelimady's account was accurate. I couldn't verify some of the more colorful details, such as the claim that Ibrahima Tour6 spared the griots of Wasulu or that his men liked to kill French soldiers by dragging them behind horses over the rocky terrain surrounding the Wayanko mesa. But I had no reason to doubt them.

So why this skepticism from Barou! Barou, for all his closeness to the Tounkaras, remained an outsider among them. To begin with, he was not a *jeli.* Although he might play his portable keyboard, a hand-operated drum machine, or bass at the wedding and baptism parties where Djelimady and his young relatives earned much of their money, Barou did not merit respect as a musician among them, and he was

never well paid. Barou was also not Manding. His mother, a Fulani woman from Burkina Faso, had married a French military man, long since departed from the scene. This unusual background helped to account for the way Barou could blend smoothly in such a variety of situations. From the moment he waved to me from the crowd at the airport, Barou seemed be telling me that he was the man to mediate my experiences in Bamako. His caution concerning Djelimady's authority on nonmusical subjects was the first of many.

Barou lived with his mother, his two brothers, his wife, and their shy two-year-old daughter in a small compound at the Lafiabougou terminus, the final stop for the Sotrama minivans and green *bashées* that serve as public transportation into Bamako. This proximity to the Tounkara compound made it easy for Djelimady to send for Barou at a moment's notice. "*Fulani*," Djelimady would snap at the nearest of the twins, "get Barou. I need someone to take the car to the mechanic. Quick! Quick!" Barou would always oblige. If I ribbed him, suggesting that he did a lot for his friend, Barou would simply say, "I consider Djelimady the greatest guitarist in Africa. I am honored to be his friend."

Just as I used Barou to help me understand my experiences with the Tounkaras, Djelimady used Barou to communicate with me on sensitive matters. It was Barou who requested that I make a weekly payment for the food I ate at the compound. I volunteered 10,000 CFA, about $20.

"Thank you," said Djelimady, as though it had all been my idea. "Normally, I wouldn't accept, since you are a friend. But with my brother and his wife away in America, I have to earn for everybody. Money is a problem now."

With this matter settled, the pattern of my apprenticeship to Djelimady became clear. Life began to feel normal, and I took comfort in the illusion that I knew what lay ahead.