

## Jali Sweetness

(An excerpt from Chapter Seven from *Jaliya Crossing Cultures*, Lisa K. Feder, 2020)

### *Origins of Sweetness*

According to Manding history as jalis tell it, the very first jali was Nyanguman Duwa. In about 1230 AD, this man found the Emperor Soumanguru Kanté's balafon and despite the warnings of the eagle that guarded the balafon at the Kanté's house, Nyanguman took the balafon and played it. Sumanguru heard the sounds of the balafon and came running home in a fury. Much to everyone's surprise, Nyanguman showed no fear. He played and sang the king's praises so sweetly that he charmed the king out of his fury and the king proclaimed the man his first jali. He bestowed upon him a beautiful name, "Bala Fasegue Kouyaté." The Kouyaté family is the first jali family and it is said that a Kouyaté has no fear. Their role is to play and sing sweetly, to balance the listener's mind and put them into a clear and positive mood so they can rule effectively. This skill and talent is still part of jaliya today.

In chapters two and three, we were introduced to the concept of sweetness in the Gambia. Sweetness is in the patience, the love, the attention that humans give to one another. Sweetness can be transmitted through a secondary object, such as food when it is prepared with care, or through the tone in a speaking voice, or through touch, or the words we write. And it can be transmitted through music. This quality of sweetness is an intrinsic, recognized, and talked about value in Manding culture and jalis are specialized in cultivating and circulating sweetness in society. In other words, they can capture people's attention and admiration, just like they did with Sumanguru, and inspire them toward a positive state of mind.

Jalis still cultivate and pass on this talent today. Jalis living in Paris, New York, and other cities worldwide have developed a small but dedicated fan base, often scholars and musicians in their own right who learn to play with them. It is curious and beautiful to me that this talent works across cultural borders. We have become enamored by the skills of the jali, and we are eager to learn from them. And in our gratitude, we also become indebted to them. A result of being sweetened is becoming indebted, and jalis also use this to their advantage. This act of sweetened-to-indebted I call "being jaliied."

When we have been jaliied, the jali has succeeded in romancing us, so to speak, and under the spell of love, or a blissful state of mind, the jali can request favors of us that we might not ordinarily be willing to do. Similarly in my friendship with Sanna in Chapter Three, it was in his right to ask me for gifts as part of our sweet relationship. The up-side to the sweetness in jaliya is that the jalis cultivate and give us this good feeling to motivate us to rule well, to lead a life of service, to do good deeds for humanity, to overcome our ill-feelings towards others, to find our courage, and generally to make a peaceful and democratic society. The other side to this can be when jalis use their skills to get us to give them our money, which we will explore in detail in chapters 8, 9, and 10. As for this chapter, I tell a few anecdotes about how jalis have touched, inspired, and sweetened me with their music and words, the harmonious side. I only hint at the requests that follow, which can lead to great tensions and make both sides question the relationship. The reconciliation of the two opposing forces, which is represented in the interweaving cross-rhythms, is metaphoric for life.

### *When Jalis play for Jalis: Part I*

952 Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn, 2005

It is very early in my apprenticeship with Jali Famoro Dioubate. So early that I didn't know I was entering into an apprenticeship. At this time Famoro still lived in Brooklyn, but would soon move to Harlem, in Manhattan, and I would eventually move about ten blocks south of him. This was a mere beginning.

I've come to take a balafon lesson today. He is in his kitchen, wearing sweatpants, cooking shrimp in palm oil. We are listening to the Fulah flute CD, featuring Bailo Bah, the

flautist who lives downstairs. Bailo is from Guinea, but his ethnic group, the Fulah people (Peul in French) live in the highlands and have a different culture than the Malinké people.

Famoro is telling me that griots (jalis) know the history of their people, different than the other musicians in Guinea. The griots are well-respected. “The jembe drummers, they don’t know history. Here in America, everyone likes the jembe drummers. But it is the jali that are well respected in Guinea. “You see? Here griots here struggle in the USA. The people do not hear their music. They like the drummers!”

Famoro likes to cook for his friends. When I arrive for my balafon lesson, he tells me he wants to cook for me but he has no money. Our teacher-student relationship is new, but our connection is quite strong. I’ve already met his daughter and wife in Guinea. I know he has no money and has a reputation for being a fantastic balafonist with a character to match. He shows me about \$15, mostly in quarters. He has no bank account. So we go out and I buy him ingredients. Now he is in the kitchen, cooking for all of us. Soon Bailo Bah, the Fula flute player who lives downstairs comes up. Then Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté from Mali, and a surprise visitor, Djekoria Mory Kanté from Guinea, arrive. Djoss is always dressed well. Today he is wearing a chartreuse suit with a multi-colored and matching shirt. He wears black leather, shined up boots and light shades on his face.<sup>1</sup> He tells us that he is finally producing his own CD, and he is at the mercy of others. But money is always the problem. He must pay Peter Fand of Blue Monster Studios for recording, mixing, and mastering. Then he must pay for making CD covers. There is never enough money, and making albums piecemeal, as they can afford each step, is the norm. Soon Famoro would be struggling through the same process when making his album, Douniya with his band, Kakande.

Djekoria Mory Kanté plays guitar. They call him Djekoria Mory to identify him from the famous Mory Kanté who’s hit song, Yeké Yeké reached number one in Europe in 1988.<sup>2</sup> I am just meeting him today. Playing jali-style on the guitar is a lot like playing balafon; they play one note at a time in similar cyclical patterns and runs, and the improvisations are closely linked to the polyrhythmic cycles. The guitar, however, has the range to play more scales and keys, and therefore can blend more readily with other Western instruments and bands. Some call it the transitional instrument for jalis because they can play in any style. The balafon is fairly restricted to Manding-style music.

Mory started playing guitar in 1989 in Conakry after already learning balafon. The jalis used to gather at his house every morning before starting their day. Like the local café in Paris, the young jalis would fuel up on good energy before starting the daily grind. They would reconvene there later in the evening to wind down. Mory’s house was the hub. The jalis who took part in that time hold that memory in their hearts now that they live far off in Paris and New York. It is sweet, like the memory I have of sitting by the campfire in Borabá, the Gambia with Jali Basiro Jobarteh, the kora player, and his family. Adiata Baké.

The five of us are squished into Famoro’s studio apartment but no one minds. Three of us are sitting on the bed, and two sit on chairs. Famoro serves us the shrimp and palm oil. It is made with the typical ingredients, tomato paste, eggplant, okra, onion, garlic, bengbe (spice), oh, and maggi (that is packaged MSG, the kind I avoided in Guinea). Add water and oil boil a lot. I say smatterings of Mandinka from the Gambia and they hear my dialect and recognize where it is from. “You know Gambia?” they ask me. Then, they continue speaking Malinké to each other.

Famoro keeps apologizing that we aren’t having our balafon lesson, as promised, but I really couldn’t care. I’m reveling in the cultural experience. After lunch he starts me off, playing Lasidan. He is trying to teach me the old version of the song, the slow one, the one his grandfather played. The notes are staggered differently than the version I know. I feel the power

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<sup>1</sup> He is the same man with the mini-van that I met first with Abou on his way to the airport.

<sup>2</sup> Thirteen years later, in 2018, *this* Mory Kanté would be *that* famous Mory Kanté’s lead guitarist. And we would all be living in Paris together, recording a new album for Famoro.

behind the transmission—this song came from Famoro’s grandfather—and yet I cannot seem to get the feeling of the slow swing; it is so delicately particular. Mory watches me from his position on the bed. I am too shy to continue.

Mory and Famoro take over playing music. Famoro is sitting on one chair with the balafon stretched awkwardly across his lap because it is too close but there is no place to perch it. This does not hinder his playing, whatsoever. He plays with squinted eyes, watching his mallets whizz across the balafon with a sideways glance. The gourds under each key are reverberating and the overtones fill the room. Mory is playing guitar. His notes are also delicately placed, and each one is clear and bright, he plays with intention. Famoro and Djekoria Mory’s notes dance around one another, and the late afternoon sun streams in sideways, lighting up the dust particles in a long ray, stretching across the room. The melodies flow and weave in and out of each other, meeting together at certain points where their common beats intersect. Mory and Famoro know precisely where and how they intersect, and play with the degree of tension placed between the melody and the beat. They seem to never lose sight of one another as they play, and together they create an ambiance that it keeps moving and shifting, never quite the same at any given moment. The music is spritely, winding, lilting, and so tightly focused, all at once. It is drawing us together into a mutually shared mood, a relationship between each of us and the music. It is light-hearted and deep at once. It defies my understanding on many levels. I am swept into the mood. Even Djoss speaks up, saying how beautiful the music is. Famoro and Mory laugh as they play. It feels, well, blissful.

When we leave the apartment that afternoon, we pile into Djoss’s minivan with instruments and head toward Blue Monster Studio. We are together. On the way, Famoro asks if he could borrow \$50 and I tell him no. I know it isn’t a loan, and at the time I think that \$50 is a lot. Somehow, I feel his disappointment and it seems to disrupt an otherwise flowing energy between all of us. I feel bad for refusing him after what I just experienced. But who would give him that much money?