

Gafouré

*Songs of an
African Angel*

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ISBN: 9789464186703
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For Leon and Juliëtte Herckenrath - Mc Cormick de Magnan
and all of their offspring

With special thanks to Max Driessen (†), Felix Driessen (†),
Cornelie Herckenrath (†), Han Driessen (†), Agnès Driessen (†),
the Rosalie Driessen Foundation, the Municipality of Monster,
the Westlands Museum, Karen Mickel Bennett, Eduard Driessen,
Samba Touré, Maurits Kuypers, Joke Mensink, Johanmeneer, Paul
Scholder, Maarten Wansink, Wikipedia, Ancestry.com, Geneanet,
Genealogie Online, DeepL, etc.

Pedigree chart Massambou & Kandia - F. J. Kuypers :

Massambou Kouyaté- Kandia Sangaré

I

Ama Kouyaté - Unknown Saharian

I

Josephine de Magnan - Jacques de Magnan

I

Juliëtte McCormick de Magnan - Leonardus Herckenrath

I

Gerard Herckenrath - Cornelia Brouwer Ancher

I

Cornélie Herckenrath - Felix Driessen

I

Gerard Driessen - Jetty Mannaerts

I

Agnès Driessen - Lout Kuypers

I

F.J. Kuypers

*“We’ve been running round in our present state,
hoping help will come from above.
But even Angels there make the same mistakes,
in love, in love, in love, in love...”*

*(From the song “Sea Breezes”, written by Brian Ferry
in 1971, for the first album of Roxy Music)*

Song #0 : In the beginning

*In the beginning there was nothing.
Absolutely nothing.
But what existed outside of this nothingness ?
About that we know even less !
At a certain point in time it so happened
that, through causes hitherto unknown,
an accumulation of mass arose,
overflowing with energy. That much is certain.
And, about 13.7 billion years ago,
this culmination of energy exploded,
and through this explosion it formed,
out of nowhere : "Something".
Loose chunks of matter, impregnated with energy,
flew from the center of the universe
to all corners of the cosmos.
And after millions of lightyears of travelling
through the vast emptiness of space,
about 9 billion years after the 'Big Bang',
one of the smallest chunks of this energy
- a tiny flake of matter on a galactic scale -
had changed into a white-hot ball-shaped object.
It became the star that we now know as 'the Sun'.
This 'Sun', however, spun wildly around its axis
and as a result it created a group of satellites.
Four large ones, four much smaller ones and
an uncountable lot of the smallest chunks of matter.
Because of it's enormous gravitational power,
these so called planets and planetoids were forced
to keep circling in an orbit around 'the Sun'.
The four largest objects,
with their surface consisting mainly of gas,
formed four beautiful round balls,
silently idling at a large distance from the Sun.*

*The four smaller ones were situated much closer.
Because of the constant meteorite-bombardement,
particles of the still very unstable planetoids,
the four smaller planets turned into pock-marked balls.
The remaining planetoids were caught
in two bands of debris;
one band between the smaller and the larger balls
and one far beyond, at a great distance from the Sun.
About one Billion years after her birth,
the third planet from the sun,
which is now known as "Gea", "Terra", or "Earth",
finally cooled off to such an extent that it's surface
had taken on a more or less solid form.
And then, through a bizarre turn of events,
a composition of elements started to emerge on
Earth's surface, which created the opportunity
to form 'organic' material;
'Life...'
Single celled, still, but capable of multiplying itself
and thus renewing and changing it's capacities
and able to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances.
We now call these changes 'mutations'
and the process that has occurred on our planet
over the past 4.7 billion years : "Evolution."*

And God ?

*Somewhere far outside this universe
- we do not know where, yet -
He noted "Nothing" of these spectacular events.
His body was shattered by the Big Bang
and scattered throughout the Universe.*

*One of the splinters of his deity landed
- again purely by accident - on Earth,
on the African continent, in the river basin
that local residents would later call :
"the Djoliba..."*

Song #1 : Guide and companion

*I am the Passenger,
And I ride, and I ride, and I ride...
I see the stars come out in the sky,
Yeah, the bright and hollow sky,
Everything looks good tonight.
And all of it was made for you and me,
So let's ride and ride and ride...
Singing : "La, la, la, la, la, lalala, laaah !"*

My travelling companion and I sing along with Iggy Pop :
"Singing : La, la, la, la, la lalala, la, lala, laaah !"

We are driving along the rocky coast of southern Morocco in his Hyundai SUV.

This morning we have left the fashionable seaside resort of Agadir and we're driving now in the direction of the vast nothingness of the Spanish Sahara. These last few hours we are facing the setting sun.

Efjay is completely in his element here.

As a child he always proclaimed that his soul belonged to Africa. And even though he could not have known it at that time, his intuitive sense of belonging was absolutely right.

He has an African soul. And I 'am' that African soul.

Some people call us 'Ghosts', or 'Angels', and here, in the Arabic world, they call us 'Djinn'. But when they fear us we are called 'Shaitan', or in English : 'The Devil'.

In the not to distant past, all of my kind were referred to as 'the Gods', or 'the God-like creatures', but over time these qualifications have devaluated, since the word 'God' has become a name for 'specific deities', and thus it has lost it's 'All and Everything' encompassing nature.

I have called myself from the beginning of time "Gafouré", 'the Counselor'.

I am a water spirit. My voice sounds like the whispered sounds of nature along the banks of the river, the babbling of a mountain stream, the whistling of the wind, the crackling of a campfire, or the ticking of the rain on a zinc roof.

Efjay, my current travelling companion, usually calls me 'Gérard', or 'Gerardus' after his grandfather and his great-great-grandfather, because he is apparently able to sense that he owes my presence to them.

(Funny enough, some time ago, during an anthropological research in the Belgian province of the Ardennes, he has discovered that the name 'Gérard', or 'Gerhardt' was used as a veiled name for 'the devil' in the religious culture of the Celts of Western Europe).

My travelling companion also calls himself a 'shaman', because he is capable of almost physically perceiving our presence. He sometimes even literally 'talks' to us.

We cannot 'speak' to 'ordinary' people.

Their prayers do reach us, but we hardly ever answer them.

His mother usually calls Efjay 'her guardian angel', because of the care with which he always surrounds her. And when she talks about him to others, she often calls him "Nobody", because he once answered her dramatically sighed complaint : "Nobody ever puts my garbage bags outside", with the equally dramatic reply : "Okay ! In that case I must be "Nobody" because I did just put them outside !"

And precisely this extraordinary form of care, which is my daily 'job', is also the reason for my existence, the purpose

for which I was literally 'created' a few thousand years ago on the banks of the Djoliba River by a concerned future father who, with a spirited prayer to the gods, tried to get protection for both his wife and his unborn child from the dangers of living in the wilderness.

We are allowed to decide for ourselves who, why, when and for which amount of time we are going to 'accompany' somebody.

Our guidance, which is passed on from generation to generation, can sometimes be for a very short period - a few minutes, hours, days, or months, or years - but it sometimes can also cover an entire human life.

My current travelling companion was 'discovered' by me, when he was still in his mother Agnès' womb, in the birth canal, with his umbilical cord twisted three times around his little neck.

At the time I was active as the guardian angel of Gérard, her father and my travelling companion for quite a few larger periods since his birth in 1897.

It was the 20th of June 1959 and Gérard was living in Menton at that time, on the côte d'Azur in the south of France. And I was bored to death.

It was one of those typical lazy summer Sunday afternoons on the beaches of the Mediterranean sea, when Gérard suddenly sat upright in his beach chair, and out of nowhere cried out loudly : "AGNÈS !!!"

The sound seemed to come from his toes. It echoed over the beach and over the heads of the many sun-worshippers rubbed with Ambre Solaire, who were shocked to hear the sudden outburst of this very attractive man in his sixties, with his muscular, dark tinted torso.

And his 'wish' was my 'command'. I 'flew' north, crossing the French Alps, the Jura, the Vosges, the Ardennes, and then along the river Meuse, all the way to the village of Heesch, a suburb of Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

I was able to arrive there just in time to save the life of my current travelling companion on his way out of his mother's womb.

With the help of the obstetrician on duty I managed to free Efej in no time at all from the suffocating noose around his little neck, after which I was glad to be able to leave him again in absolute safety, drinking peacefully at the breast of Agnès, his proud mother.

I was relieved to see that those few minutes in which he had suffered from a lack of oxygen didn't seem to have caused a lot of damage to the otherwise healthy boy. I wasn't able though to prevent him from a whimsical amount of brain damage.

As a permanent reminder of the anxious first minutes of his life, little Efej would forever carry with him an almost imperceptibly small motoric disorder and, as I found out only a number of years later, his 'birth with the noose' had formed a solid basis for the special 'connection' that I would have with him in later years.

At that time I wasn't aware yet, that oxygen-debt at birth can also cause certain behavioural disorders in a child.

It may for instance result in a deficiency in dealing with the 'ordinary' world, which is sometimes compensated by a supernatural gift in relating to our world, to wit, the gift of being able to communicate with 'the world of the spirits'.

After Efej's birth, I returned to the peace and quiet of the Sunny South, where I would gradually get my hands full with protecting and guarding his grandfather Gérard and his

younger brother Henry, who had been in my care for 62 and 60 years respectively.

I was of course well aware of the fact that they would increasingly be in need of my guidance in the years to come, on their way to the final stages of life.

And so - from grandfather, to daughter, to grandson, and back again to grandfather and great-uncle - my life moves through generations like jumps of a horse on a chessboard.

I do not have any friends or family of my own, although I would sometimes come across some 'soul mates', such as mountain spirits, forest spirits, ancestral spirits, water spirits and guardian angels like myself, on my numerous journeys around the world.

I cannot tell you much more about my own 'self' either.

The only thing that I'm really sure of, is that I am very old.

I'm not able to express how old exactly in years, centuries, or millennia - the usual way of indicating time in the Western world - the only way for me to determine my age is to recite the continuous series of travelling companions that I have accompanied through the centuries, from one generation, to another generation, to yet another generation, in short, from 'the Beginning', to the present day.

My earliest memories as a djinn are all very similar. They consist of accompanying a long series of similar young men and women - generation after generation - all of them with similar life stories.

I would sit for nights with the fishermen on their rickety boats, waiting for a school of fish, willing to swim in their nets.

For days I would follow hunters in their search for game.

I would wander around with the shepherds and their cattle.

Day and night, month after month, year after year, season after season, I traveled around with farmers, weavers and potters, who sold their wares in the cities of West Africa. I went from village to village, from town to town, with brick makers, midwives and witch-doctors.

The latter were originally known as 'Farriers', or 'Okoumifo' in the language the Fouta Djallon, the range of mountains south of the Sahel, stretching from Ghana in the East, to Senegal in the West.

The sources of the River Djoliba where my origins lie. Nowadays these which-doctors are still called 'Fourgerons' by the locals, in French, the language of the white foreigners who first colonized and then plundered the beautiful and fertile land along the banks of the Djoliba River, now commonly known as 'la fleuve Niger' or 'the Niger River'.

It was the advent of these rough and crude 'Toubabs', or 'Pale-faces' that instigated the 'The big Journey', that was forced upon my unfortunate protégés and that eventually would cut them off from their roots. Together with their guardian angel, they were seperated from there relatives and forced to leave their homes and birthplaces.

Hunted, chained, dragged along, sold, bought, sold, freed, liberated, and hunted again...

From pillar to post.

From one part of the world to another...

Song #2 : Ma Kouyaté

Under a tree far away from his village in the suffocating heat of the brousse I sat down with my friend the shepherd, lazily humming a song, when I was called away by a shrieking cry, that only I could hear.

Had I had a physical body, I would certainly have bumped my head, when jumping up, against one of the peculiarly shaped fruits of the Baobab-tree, which hung full and ripe down from their long threads from it's crown. White South Africans call this tree "Turd-pear", because of the shape of the fruits, while in the Dutch language it is usually referred to as "Monkey Bread Tree". In English it's name sounds much more sinister though : "the Devil's Tree...".

According to legend, the devil would have once uprooted it, and replanted it upside down, with the roots sticking upward.

At that time, of course, I had no idea at all about this, or about anything like it.

Youssouf, the shepherd, woke up for a moment, looked around to see if there was something wrong with his flock, but when he saw that there was nothing worrisome to be seen in the whole area, he frowned for a moment, closed his eyes and dozed off again, back to the dream, which I had just whispered to him in his half-sleep.

Fortunately it was immediately clear to me that I could leave him to his fate in peace and quiet. His cousin Massambou, needed me much more than he did. Under the shimmering midday sun I moved effortlessly from Baobab

to Baobab, across the otherwise empty and barren plain, to the village of Gada-Woundou, situated against the eastern foothills of the Tangué massif, part of the Fouta Djalon mountain range in the northern part of the country in West Africa, which is nowadays referred to as : Guinea Conakry. Wringing his hands, as if waiting for me, Massambou frolicked up and down in front of the ramshackle wooden door of his mud hut. He murmured the last words of the prayer which had lured me to his humble house from afar. As it had been a prayer addressed directly to me. Inside the hut one could hear the gentle groaning of Kandia, his highly pregnant wife.

The first time Massambou had met her was at a visit to the house of his aunt Nja Kouyaté, who lived a day's journey away, near Tougoué, where she owned a piece of land with fruit trees and a herb garden. Little Kandia was playing with her homemade flax dolls on the neatly wiped soil of his aunt's courtyard. She was only twelve years old at the time, but her body was already showing the first signs of femininity. She was the daughter of the midwife, who entrusted her daughter to the care of her neighbour Nja Kouyaté, when she was called away to help a young woman with the birth of her child,.

After having watched Kandia for some time, playing with her puppets, Massambou had carefully inquired with his aunt whether this wonderful young lady had already been promised to a local young man. Nja had frowned at him and had asked if he was serious. This was after all only a child ! But he had immediately reassured his aunt of his honest intentions and told her, that if she was free and her mother was willing to allow it, he would come to pick her up in a few years. "And", he added, "I will treat her as if she were my very own mother !".

"Well, that really won't be necessary", his aunt replied with a big smile, "As long as you take good care of her and will never forget how beautiful and carefree she once was, the first time you saw her playing with her dolls".

And this was exactly what he had done from that day on.

Now, many years later, they had already been together for six rain-seasons, and after having prayed to the ancestral spirits for a long time, they recently had, finally, received the approval of the gods to give birth to their first child.

According to the teachings of 'the Prophet' of their official religion, they were only allowed to believe in one God, but when Allah, 'the Supreme Being' had been ignoring their prayers for such a long time, they had turned their prayers in all secrecy to the spirits of their ancestors, who in these remote regions were still attributed greater powers than this strange 'God' of the white men from the North.

Many nights they had prayed together to Djá the shepherd spirit and to Ama, the spirit of Massambou's grandmother.

When it became clear that a child would soon be born, they had together built this paltry shelter.

Massambou had baked crude bricks from the clay that he had collected at the riverside, and one by one they had carried the bricks to a plot at the edge of the village, which the village chief had assigned to Massambou in exchange for the meat and intestines of five sheep.

From the skins and the wool of the first four sheep, Kandia had made a large bed for Massambou and herself and the fifth skin she had kept for the child's cradle when it would be born.

Together they had piled up the bricks in a circle with a diameter of 6 steps, with recesses for a door on the east and two windows on the north and west. From the bark and the

branches of a fallen tree, Massambou had made the palisade for the roof, the doorposts and the beam above the door.

As they saw that the work was almost finished, some of the villagers had come over to their neighbours' new house carrying large bundles of the stems that remained after the millet harvest, and Kandia had skillfully woven them into the large mats that were used for the roof.

The last helping hand in the construction of the house was provided by the son of the village chief, who arrived on the last day of construction, carrying a large door of rough wooden planks. It had been kept by his father after he had built a new, more representative accommodation on taking over the role of village chief from his predecessor.

After the door was placed, Massambou had slaughtered another sheep to celebrate the baptism of the house.

The whole village had gathered in the yard in front of their new house when Massambou appeared from inside.

He was fully dressed in the clothes that he always wore on this kind of official occasions, complete with facial painting and feathers. The villagers witnessed how he sprinkled the blood that had spewed from the sheep's throat against the doorposts, singing incantations against all the evil spirits.

For me, however, their door would always be open.

Arriving at their doorstep I passed Massambou without him noticing my presence. I could hear Kandia's moaning becoming louder and louder, so I knew that the birth of her baby was imminent, and after entering the house through the closed door, I immediately saw that there was no time to lose. If I didn't provide her with a soothing thought very soon, both mother and child would not survive this day.

I whispered to her the proverbs that I had always whispered to young women in distress. A smile curled around the corners of her mouth, and her eyes began to shine again,

despite the fact that her contractions were now getting even more powerful. With one last very fierce contraction she squeezed out the head, shoulders, belly, buttocks and legs of a beautiful little girl.

This last effort was accompanied by a sigh so loud that Massambou was able to hear it outside and, completely taken over by the tension that had kept him in its grip over the last few hours, he stormed into the house.

His restlessness turned out to be unnecessary though.

Exhausted but satisfied, Kandia was fast asleep, with her newborn daughter peacefully resting in her arms.

Massambou fell to his knees to thank us, the spirits of his ancestors. He promised that he would always protect his little girl with his life. And to express his thanks for our divine intervention, he told us that he would call her Ama Kouyaté, after his grandmother.

In the years that followed this joyful day, "Ama Kouyaté" soon became "Ma Kouyaté", because she would behave like a real mother from the earliest days of her childhood.

She took "motherly" care of the chickens, the goats and the sheep in the yard. She played 'mother' with the dolls that Kandia crafted for her. As she got older and started playing with the children from the village, she played the role of concerned and caring mother for her playmates, and from the tender age of seven, she already became the regular babysitter of the younger children of the neighbours.

In short, she had the ideal combination of qualities of Kandia, the daughter of the midwife, and Massambou, the shepherd's son.

Life in and around the yard of Massambou and Kandia looked exactly like that of the other villagers, but in essence it was completely different.

The population of Gada-Woundou, like that of the surrounding villages, was made up almost entirely of farmers, hunters, fishermen and shepherds. Simple people, who lived from day to day, from season to season, all according to the pattern of the lives of their parents and ancestors. Millet was sown and harvested twice a year. The sheep, goats and cattle were taken to another pasture every day. In the rainy season nets were thrown out in various streams nearby and in the dry season sometimes hunters went into the brousse or the mountains for weeks in order, armed with bow and arrow, spears, stone garlands and bird nets, to outwit as many hares, deer and birds as possible. The women from the village were mainly engaged in processing sheep's wool, milling millet, braiding mats, cleaning fish, picking guinea fowl and cooking meals. Some had a garden with yam roots, okra, garlic, ginger, peppers, groundnuts and other vegetables and herbs, to give the meals a little taste. These vegetables and herbs were exchanged with the proceeds of the hunt and surpluses from the slaughter of the cattle owners. Money did not yet exist in the Fouta Djallon and was not needed for anything.

There was only a form of ceremonial money, consisting of beads, precious stones, gold and silver objects and special pottery, which served to express the power of the village elders and to impress the very occasional visitors from other villages and regions. Massambou and Kandia, however, fell outside this extremely simple but effective arrangement of life. As the daughter of a midwife and also because she originated from a remote village, Kandia had been assigned completely different tasks than the 'ordinary' women in the village. Her mother had taught her all that was necessary to assist young women at giving birth and to teach them how to take care of their newborns and was

therefore widely known as a midwife, baker and minstrel. She, too, was 'paid' with the proceeds of the land and the products of cattle breeding, but she never had to work on the land herself, and not in the household either.

Midwife was in fact the only 'liberal profession' practiced by women in the Fouta Djallon, and it was also the only female profession that included being on the road for long periods of time, travelling from village to village and often staying in the yard of strangers for days at a time.

The midwife was held in high regard, but she was always a semi outsider; Because of their knowledge of the healing herbs, which they used during childbirth, and because of the magical sound of the words that they whispered to young mothers, midwives were often attributed supernatural gifts.

They were therefore feared as probable practitioners of 'Gri-gri'; the black magic that totally controlled the life of the whole population of West Africa, but always had a hint of illegality around it, if only because Islam, the religion of the white men from the north, strictly forbid sorcery.

Massambou had a similar position in the community.

His profession was actually close to that of a veterinarian, but his activities far exceeded simply keeping the cattle healthy and taking care of sick animals.

Okoumifo - horsmith, or farrier - was the official name of his function, but everyone in the Fouta Djallon knew that this term stood for much more than the shoeing of donkeys and of the, in this district, rarely seen horses. The farrier was the unnamed, but widely recognized mediator between the common people and the spirits.

Massambou danced and sang at weddings, funerals and baptisms. He knew the old secret prayers for a good harvest and the incantations to protect against dark forces.

He practiced the dances associated with the festivities for the appointment of village chiefs with the young villagers. He knew the songs to be sung at the harvest and slaughter festivals and he could also recite by heart the Soundiata, the heroic epic that sang of the victories of the legendary Malinké king Soundiata Keita.

Without the efforts of the farriers, the old customs of Malinké culture would have long since been forgotten and the inhabitants of the Fouta Djalon would have been completely at the mercy of the forces of nature.

Massambou had learned all these skills from his grandmother Ama and his aunt Nja, who sprang from an ancient lineage of 'griots', the traveling minstrels, who for hundreds of years sang about the history and culture of the fertile land south of the Sahara and thus preserved it for posterity. And little Ma Kouyaté sucked up all these skills of her father and all of the knowledge and skills of her mother, like a thirsty foal.

The domestic life on their own property was in the eyes of the other inhabitants of the village mainly characterized by an unusual silence. Only on rare occasions Massambou and Kandia were at home at the same time. There would always be someone, a neighbour or the wife of one of the village elders, arriving at their yard in the morning, afternoon and evening, with a full bowl of 'Tóh', a kind of polenta made of millet flour, with a spicy okra or pepper sauce on top.

When Ma Kouyaté was still too small to go with her father or her mother herself, she would usually occupy herself with braiding the little dolls which her mother always gave to families with young children, or else she played elsewhere with the children from the village.

Later on, she increasingly went on trips or maternity visits with one of her parents.

The shepherds taught her how to drive a herd of cattle over a stream and how to seduce goats into coming to you, or to enter their corral by whistling, the mule drivers taught her how to steer their donkeys in the right direction, by gently tapping their shoulders with a stick and her mother taught her how to swaddle babies with long cotton wrappers and how to make them drink from a gourd.

Her mother also taught her how to recognise wild herbs, fungi and roots, and how to use a mortar to grind them into porridge, drink, ointment or pomade.

She did not receive any real instruction in the rituals that her father performed as a shaman, but she was always there when he performed them and she knew all the herbs that he took to get into a trance, and occasionally she also caught fragments of the incantations he used to sing.

He did teach her to write like the white men from the North and she thus learned to read the language in which their 'holy' book the Kor'an was written, and to pronounce and understand some of the texts in it.

Ma Kouyaté was in the eyes of the villagers a 'strange' girl, and as she grew older they began to warn their children that it might be unwise to be too friendly with this freaky child.

But as long as the sun was shining in their courtyard, Ma Kouyaté was able, to read, learn and meditate on "The Only God". and on how He related to the djinns of her ancestors, without having to cook her own meals and far away from the chatter of the village women and the bickering and screaming of children playing,.

When the sun was gone, she would sometimes spend hours looking at the Moon and the stars, thinking about the concept of 'destiny', which the Kor'an was full of, and about 'the meaning of life'.

She gradually came to the conclusion that, if everything had been determined by powers from high up, she would be better of completely ignoring the past and always keeping her eyes fixed on the future.

When she bled for the first time, the sign that a girl had turned into a woman, I decided to take the chance of bringing Ma Kouyaté into direct contact with me, the spirit of her great-grandmother Ama, after whom she was named. I carefully whispered the words to her, that I had whispered to her father years ago when he was ready for my presence : "Fear not, little girl, I am the soul of your ancestors. I have been watching over you since you were born".

Alarmed, she looked down at the red spot that had stained her woollen bedspread and then she looked around; "Where did that voice come from?", she thought, and tried to see in the half darkness, if there was anyone else in the room.

She wrapped her bedspread around her loins and got up. With her free hand she pushed the blanket which separated her room from the rest of the house aside, and looked tense into the living room. There was no one to be seen there either. She turned around again and tormented her eyes to see if I was hiding behind her bed, but when she couldn't find me there either, she took a deep breath, breathed out again very slowly and then spoke in a quiet tone : "I have heard you, Djinn, and I welcome you into my life".

I had never expected our 'contact' to come about so quickly and with so much ease, and therefore I held my breath for just a moment as well, but as I looked into her resolute eyes, I answered her : "Thank you !". And I knew right away that we had forged a stronger bond than I had ever experienced with any of my former travelling companions.

From that moment on, as fate had decided, Ma Kouyaté and I would be inseparable, for as long as her life would last.

Song #3 : The Great Water

With a dull look in his eyes, my current protégé, Ejjay, looks out over the unimaginable vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, which stretches from here, the coast of the Spanish Sahara, to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean islands.

He cannot imagine the endlessness of the sea voyage that his great-great-great-grandmother must have made about 250 years ago, and neither can he imagine the horrors of slavery, which were forced upon her at that time,.

Ejjay left home 5 days ago, in the Hyundai SUV that he had bought for his mother's Malian foster son, in order to be able to talk with me for hours and hours, far from home, on this endless journey through the Sahara, on his way into the heart of West Africa where his ancestors have once been taken away from, first to the Atlantic coast and later across this vast body of water, towards an unknown and uncertain future.

Occasionally he asks some short questions, but otherwise he stares in the distance; At the road in front of him; At the golden yellow of the sand hills on his left and - like he does now - at the deep blue vastness of the ocean, that stretches from my side of the vehicle to the horizon.

"Did she suffer badly ?" he asked, as he peered past me, towards the calm surface of the sea, "or did your protection and her thorough education give her a head start over the other victims of this cruelty ?"

I answer him by giving him a comprehensive account of the mental resilience with which Ma Kouyaté managed to survive the horrific experiences during her forced journey, and I tell him about the way in which I tried to shield her from the greatest amount of suffering...

It was about two rainy seasons after Ma Kouyaté's first menstruation, when I whispered to Massambou early one morning, that he had to ask his wife and daughter to join him on a voyage to Tougoué, to visit his aunt Nja.

By the standards of the inhabitants of the Fouta Djallon, Nja Kouyaté had now reached an age, which invited her to ponder the possibility that life might be finite. And for that reason, my request to go and visit her, did not in the least surprise Massambou. According to his philosophy of life, it would always be better to say goodbye to your loved ones well before the inevitable end came, than afterwards

The sun barely let its first rays shine across the lowlands west of Gada-Woundou this early in the morning, but their warmth was already almost palpable, and the mud houses of the village looked like they were on fire because of their reddish glow.

Massambou and Kandia had loaded their donkey cart with a lot of presents for all the acquaintances they hoped to meet in Tougoué, and with a few bundles of wool which could be used as a nice cushion to sit on during the trip, and upon arrival it could serve as payment for all kinds of goods that were scarce in Gada-Woundou.

Behind the donkeycart Massambou had tied a young cow, which his in-laws had asked for, the last time he had visited them.

Ma Kouyaté was sitting with her back to her parents at the backside of the cart and, as she saw how her native village step by step was disappearing into the morning mist, she could not suppress the feeling that she would never return here, to her beloved Gada-Woundou, the place where she was born almost fifteen years ago.

She had been expecting this moment for a long time.

During the last few years, every time when she gone away on a trip with her father or her mother, she had already felt, that there would come a day when she would have to leave her village for good. A day when she would go to see more of the world than this small narrow community in which, over the years, she had come to see herself more and more as an outsider, but until now she had always 'known' that this moment had not yet come. Today, however, she felt really sure about it. She had to keep her tongue between her teeth to keep from sharing this thought with her parents. She did not want them to worry about these thoug.

For the time being she couldn't think of any reason why destiny would take her someplace else, and if it did, she had no idea whether or not her parents would be able to join her on this uncertain voyage.

The road meandered up to the plateau on top of the Tamgué massif. In the distance Ma Kouyaté could see the mountains on the other side of the plain where, according to legend, Soundiata Keita had once started his triumphal march into the valley of the Djoliba River, where he had laid the foundation of his mighty Mandinge empire. An empire that had extended from here to the great desert in the North.

Then, suddenly, after a bend in the road, Gada-Woundou had dissappeared out of sight. A slight shiver went down her spine, but fortunately there was a very old djinn sitting right next to her on the donkey-cart, and he whispered a soft incantation into her ear: "Don't worry, Ma Kouyaté !", he sang, "I am, and I will always be at your side, to watch over you, wherever fate takes you."

She took a deep breath, charistically raising her shoulders, and then, by forcefully breathing out again, she blew all the dark thoughts that were still on her mind away from her.