

# BOOK REVIEW

**Massa Makan Diabaté. *The Lieutenant of Kouta*.** Translated from French by Shane Auerbach and David Yost. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017. xi + 113 pp. Introduction. \$20.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1611862270.

Finally, there is an English translation of *The Lieutenant of Kouta*, written by the great Malian author Massa Makan Diabaté (1938–1988). Five of Diabaté's novels and his delightful transcription and translation of the Sunjata epic were published in French before the author's untimely death at the age of fifty. One might hope that this splendid English translation by Shane Auerbach and David Yost of Diabaté's first novel will inspire further translations of his complete oeuvre. It is time!

Diabaté is unique among west African writers. He came from a long line of celebrated griots (jaliya), masters of the word. He was the only writer of his generation to keep his patronym linking him to the caste of genealogists who performed in their native tongue and who refused the written word and French translations as betrayals of their tradition and a threat to their livelihood.

Many of the author's early works are retellings of Mandinka legends, including *Janjon*, which won the 1971 *Grand Prix littéraire d'Afrique*. In contrast, his trilogy of novels—*The Lieutenant of Kouta*, *The Barber of Kouta*, and *The Butcher of Kouta*—all center on characters adjusting to modern urban life in Mali. Written in 1979 and set in a fictionalized version of the author's hometown of Kita, *The Lieutenant of Kouta* tells the story of Lieutenant Siriman Keita, a retired *tirailleur sénégalais* (African soldier in the French Army) who returns to Kouta after fighting for the French in World War II. When the novel opens, Siriman Keita is living on a French pension. His story is told from the point of view of the local community, and the reader sees the main protagonist as he reveals himself to the townspeople. The Lieutenant's occupation of the town mirrors the town's occupation by the French colonial administration. Siriman is a source of gossip and amusement to the villagers. The novel paints the portrait of a man adjusting to civilian life and of his struggle to catch up with and participate in the unfolding history happening before his eyes—the transition of his country to independence. Siriman is arrogant and out of sync with the times, insisting on having a European-style house. He supports the colonial administration

while criticizing everything local, refusing the advances of the imam, the Catholic priest, the village elders, and most everyone else while surrounding himself with sycophants. Eventually, however, the retired lieutenant adopts a local boy, Famakan. In this poignant and hilarious relationship the retired officer at last finds meaning. Siriman can be seen as a take on the West African epic hero, Sunjata Keita, whose patronym the retired soldier shares. Siriman is an anti-hero, his journey at once similar to and a tongue-in-cheek twist on the epic hero's journey. He transforms from being an object of ridicule to being a leading citizen.

I was first introduced to Diabaté's work in 1988. I was visiting a friend in a small village in western Mali, just months after the author's passing. On my first night there, three young men in their twenties invited us for conversation. We sat on folding chairs at the edge of town drinking mint tea. It was a pitch-dark night, and I wondered how they could pour the tea so precisely without lights. We could not see each other, but our voices carried in the stillness. The young men made a polite effort to speak French with me, but at some point they drifted into Bambara. One spoke as the others laughed. After much knee slapping and deep throated chuckling, my friend explained that his neighbor had translated for them a book he had read in French, *The Lieutenant of Kouta*. It is gratifying to read this novel in English after being introduced to it so long ago.

Diabaté was descended from a distinguished griot family. He saw his life's work as extending the griot tradition through writing. He was trained by his uncle, Kélé Monson Diabaté, one of the most renowned griots of Mali. In keeping with his family tradition, Diabaté's characters are storytellers, spreaders of news and gossip, entertainers, and advisers.

Shane Auerbach and David Yost's translation gives us a perfect slim volume. The novel is enjoyable and funny, often to the point of slapstick comedy. The artful translation retains the author's voice and technique as if the reader were hearing and seeing the action unfold.

This work has an important place in the African literary canon, but until now it was only available in French. Readers finally have access to the genius of Diabaté and an opening into Mande society. *The Lieutenant of Kouta* is storytelling at its best, thanks to this masterful translation.

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### For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Belcher, Stephen. 2004. "Studying Griots: Recent Work in Mande Studies." *African Studies Review* 47 (3): 172–86. doi: [10.1017/S000202060003050X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000202060003050X)
- Hoffman, Barbara G. 2017. "The Roles of the Griot in the Future of Mali: A Twenty-First-Century Institutionalization of a Thirteenth-Century Traditional Institution." *African Studies Review* 60 (1): 101–22. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.8)