

The
Birago
Diop
Trilogy

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Diop
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Birago Day

The Baobab Monologue

Sasabonsam Street

Birago Day

**Celebrating Birago Diop
part I**

Introduction

Born into the Wolof people of Senegal, the poet and folklorist Birago Diop, trained as a veterinary medic in France. Between the thirties and fifties, he worked for the government; in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast and Mauretania. During this time, he wrote the folklore classic, *Tales of Amadou Koumba*. Following the aforementioned colonial employment, he became a diplomat for his newly independent homeland, before going into private veterinary practice. Throughout and above all, his love of folk tales remained, collecting them wherever he went.

This small collection of writings recognises the essential service he gave to the farmers and herders of Francophone Africa, as well as paying homage to his iconic status in African folklore.

The first three pieces pass a brief spotlight over his childhood and the formative influences; grandmother, mother, elder siblings and French literature. The other pieces focus on his care of animals and love of folktales.

I hope that one day, December the eleventh – his birthday – will be honoured as Birago Day: celebrating African and Caribbean Folklore.

Dedication

to all the folklorists
and all the veterinary staff

Sweet Grandmother Time

to his mother, Sokhna Diawara

Tell me a story grandmother,
Make it long and incomplete.
So I can sit again tomorrow,
Listening,
While oiling your worn out feet.

The Mentors of Ouakam

Youssouspha,
Massyla,
Come let us chant of them:
First mentors of a celebrated writer.

Chanted

They laid the stepping stones,
Leading to Amadu Koumba.

Older brothers,
Watching over,
Come let us chant of them:
First mentors of a lauded ambassador.

Chanted

They laid the stepping stones,
For the envoy to Tunisia.

Guidance

Please guide me Birago.
I've read de Beauvoir and Baudelaire,
Du Maupassant and Eluard:
Haven't turned the pages of Hugo.
Point me in the direction,
Of those topping your list,
The ones I do not know.
Guide me on this intermittent tour,
Through the literature of France.

Calabash Man

I see you Birago, in the evening time - after dealing with an infestation of sheep - your back against a silk cotton tree, surrounded by the grateful residents, while the storyteller plays the drum of his name and craft, *bendre*: calabash. The chief must value you highly – as do the people - to have the *bendre* played.

Chanted

Calabash,
Calabash,
Burkina Faso.
Calabash,
Calabash,
In Tankudugo:
Story of Mba Kaongo.

I see you Birago, your face illuminated by the fire, puffing on your pipe, smiling, as fireflies flit, the breeze massages one and all and the little ones begin to get sleepy.

Chanted

Calabash,
Calabash,
Burkina Faso.
Calabash,
Calabash,
In Wogodogo:
Story of Mba-Wobgo.

Samba Gana

During your time of work in Mali, there in Timbuktu, when the camel caravans came in. Surrounded by hundreds of the ochre-coloured ones; munching, burping, farting, as you dodge the dung. While providing remedy, you think again of Samba Gana, the hero of the *Dausi*, the epic of the Soninke. You ponder him, surmounter of all the barriers, like a patron saint of positivity. While dealing with diarrhoea and pox, you contemplate once again, the legendary installer of laughter.

Little Zarma Girl

Don't worry, Little Zarma Girl,
Your favourite goat will be alright.
Don't worry, Little Zarma girl,
You'll sleep sweeter tonight.
Your number one goat,
Won't need a death note,
So sleep deeply till morning light.

Silimaka

After helping a Fulani herder with the difficult pregnancy of one of his cows, the herder invited the vet to have a drink of hibiscus and a bowl of fura. Knowing your love of the oral traditions, while orange came through and the fisherman came in, he began to tell you of a hero called Silimaka and a tree named tamarind; continuing on, as the sun went to sleep and the stars began to wake up.

Tidnit

He's heard the xalam, kora, ngoni, koende and other stringed accompaniment to the story telling; now, after a wash to clean away blood and remnants, after a necropsy on a horse, he'll hear live, for the first time, a member of the Iggawin, play the four-stringed lute known as tidnit.

After the cutting of flesh and interaction with entrails, he's looking forward to sitting down, lighting his pipe, sipping mint tea, while word and sound float around him and out across the Mauretanian sand.

Deepest Gratitude

I know that if they could, they would. That all those he's ever treated – whether camel, cow, goat, horse, dog, sheep or chicken – would write a letter of deepest gratitude, to the University of Toulouse, giving thanks to that institution, for the training that it gave, to Veterinary Doctor Diop.

The Donkey of Kiffa

I sense that you felt it Birago, seeing that donkey, hobbling. As you touched the area, it winced and your heart went out to it. Who wants to see pain? Who wants to watch suffering? But I'm sure there was a glint in its eye, after the tearfall, as you continued the mending of the broken leg.

Tell me Birago, during that treatment, did you think again of that story, about *The Donkeys of Jollof*? The donkeys who cried, weeping for the chief. That story that you must have first heard in Ouakam, more than forty years ago.

Konderong

His mind still caught up in the work of late afternoon; in the preventative, the thought of quarantine, as he checked out all the dogs in a village near Korhogo. A time to check, as no wants the results of zoonosis. Then the singing of the children brings him back to the present, as he hears the song he taught them yesterday, about some little people from Wolof folklore.

Konderong ate ten elephants,
Relieved he's not partial to me.
Glad that he prefers them,
Doesn't partake of humanity.

Chanted

Konderong, konderong,
Watch out as you go along:
Make sure you treat him with respect.

After the pachyderm lunch,
Returned to the baobab tree.
Home to sleep it off,
Before twenty warthogs for tea.

Chanted

Konderong, konderong,
Watch out as you go along:
Make sure you treat him with respect.

Searching for Amadou

I've looked everywhere Birago: and I'm still looking. Searched via Amazon, Abe Books and another possible source, whose name I cannot recall right now. Asking in the antiquarian section of Blackwells, the assistant introduced me to Via Libri and we saw one copy there: yes, finally! But by the time I got back home, about forty five minutes later, it had gone. I'm still searching Birago: for a copy of Tales of Amadou Koumba.

Birago Day

From this day onward, let December the eleventh – his birthday - be known as Birago Day: celebrating African and Caribbean Folklore.

In schools, read his poems during assembly and hang his photo in the hall; and in geography, let Senegal be the subject of the day.

His poems to be displayed in shopping centres and a stand of his writings, installed in every central library.

Fly the flag of Senegal here and there, or the African flag of your personal preference.

Let the names of two other icons of African folklore be heard also: Bernard Dadie and Amadou Hampate Ba. Quotes and excerpts of their writings, to be placed on walls around the town.

And in the evening, in community centres and youth clubs, amongst the theatre and songs, let at least one story be told, of Leuk the Hare and Bouki the Hyena.

Glossary

Youssouspha and **Massyla** – his older brothers

Ouakam – his place of birth

Bendre – calabash drum and storytelling tradition, amongst the **Mossi** of Burkina Faso

Tankudogo (now Tenkodogo) and **Wogodogo (now Ouagadougou)** – cities of Burkina Faso

Mba Kaongo – guinea fowl

Bobo-Diouosso – second largest city in Burkina Faso

Bobo – a people resident in Burkina Faso

Mba Wobgo – elephant

Timbuktu – city of Mali, famous for its medieval university and trade

Soninke – a people found throughout parts of West Africa: founders of Ancient Ghana, known as Wagadu.

Leuk the Hare and **Bouki the Hyena** – central characters in Wolof folklore

Zarma – a people found mainly in Niger

Fulani – herders and scholars of West Africa

Necropsy – autopsy on an animal

Fura – mixture of millet and milk

Iggawin – caste of musicians in Mauretanian society.

Kiffa – a town in southern Mauretania

Konderong – dwarfish figures of Wolof folklore

Korhogo – city in the north of Ivory Coast

Zoonosis – a disease transferred to humans from animals

The Baobab Monologue

Celebrating Birago Diop
part II

Introduction

Apart from the general information on the net, I don't know the deeper facts and details, of the life of Birago Diop; there is no biography and I do not know of an English translation of his two volumes of memoirs. So like part one, this is a piece of imagination, interspersed with historical fact, imbued with folkloric aroma.

The Baobab is the national tree of Senegal; it is also the home of the konderong, dwarfish figures of Wolof folklore. I wanted to place the tree in this story by a river; my made was made up, when looking for the Latin term for the tree, I came across a photograph of one, rooted right by the water, its branches hanging over it - and I was off; I could see the heron standing there and the lizard on the trunk.

This is part of the campaign to have his birthday – December 11th - celebrated as African and Caribbean Folklore Day; if not by the African Union and the UN, by you and I.

Dedication

to the early supporters
of the December 11th campaign

The Baobab Monologue

Voice chanting

I miss you,
Adansonia digitata.

Baobab

I am baobab,
So I sing of him;
Of the man who sat against me,
Contemplating tradition.
Root, branch, leaf and fruit,
We sing of him,
Chanting Birago Diop.

Baobab

Not only me; everyone sings of him, animals and birds too, including Parrot. Whether squawk, or the more dulcet tone, all the feathered ones want to add their voice in celebration. You see, they've heard how he treated chickens, during his veterinary work, so they all want to add their voice in homage, to the one who took time to care.

So many have sat below these branches; lovers, picnic eaters, practicing musicians, tired fisherman and so on, but his is the only human name that I remember.

I felt like the chosen one, as he rested his back against me, his favoured place of rest and meditation. Sometimes it'd be just him, Heron, Lizard and I: he loved being beside the water. As well as a sense of soothing the slow moving water gave him, he knew that across sub-Saharan Africa, rivers and lakes, were the abode of the ancestors

Voices chanting

Whispering, listening,
Weaving of whispering,
Ancestors threading in and out.

Baobab

Yes, as much as the river, he loved me; came here as often as the antelopes and the elephants. Whenever he went away – on his studies or for work – on his return to Ouakam, he always came here to greet me. I remember when he came after wartime in France. I'd never known him as a religious man, but after kissing and embracing me, he knelt and prayed. And for the next hour, seated, he went from grinning to crying, crying to grinning, until a niece came looking for him, her favourite uncle. No, not a religious man, but I think of him as a spiritual one.

Yes, I have seen him weep and I have seen him laugh. Like the time he came back, from one of his breaks from the school in Saint-Louis, weeping for the girl that he didn't get; Lizard croaked a dirge and this part of the river went quiet for awhile. You see, he was our cherished one even then; he never threw stones at the birds, or battled the smaller animals with catapult. And mentioning his education, I'll always remember his jubilation, at the news of his acceptance, to study veterinary science at Toulouse University. He couldn't stop smiling. With the letter in his hand, he did a little victory dance, then sat against me, singing; and the birds within me, sensing his happiness, added their vocals in harmony; Heron bowed to him and he returned that respectful gesture.

That's all he wanted sometimes; just to lean against me and look upon the water. To him, that was very close to peace on Earth. He'd come here sometimes and let his thoughts flow out; I became a kind of sounding board for him. During wartime in France, in a letter to a friend, he addressed a thought to me. He spoke of the shrouding of light, by a dark philosophy. His friend came and read it to me. Here is what it said, as I have retained it word for word.

I wonder Baobab, what will happen to the items of our traditions? What will the Nazis do, with the Ngil mask and the Baule pendant? What will happen to the Ife Head and the Luba headrest? I have heard what they have done to the art by their own people, what will they do to ours? I wonder, have they taken out certain items, from the museums in Dresden and Berlin? If so, will they do the same in the Museum of Man? Anyway old friend, they can't take away Leuk the hare, Bouki the hyena and Golo the monkey; they are embedded where they cannot touch them. Hope to see you soon wise one; please give my respects to Heron and Lizard.

Yes, he would just sit here sometimes and let the words flow out. I heard the first draft of many of his poems and 'Souffles' is still my favourite.

Voices chanting

Whispering, listening,
Weaving of whispering,
Ancestors threading in and out.

Baobab

I have been privileged, to have been present during some of the sweetest conversation to pass human lips; like the time he sat with Leopard Senghor, during their time of studies in France. They spoke of everything; of Jean Price-Mars and Nazi camps; the master gewel and their French tutors; Aime Cesaire and Jean Paul Sartre; of Mandinka and Lebou: of independent Senegal. And while they spoke of everything, hardly a sound was heard; the fluttering in the branches ceased, Heron deferred his stalking and Lizard lay still on the trunk. Along this stretch of the river, we still remember that conversation as Senghor Day.

And after his time of ambassadorship to Tunisia, older then, he sat against me and spoke of that North African country. He told me of endless meetings and the need of patience, couscous and makroudh, the souks and the Zaytana Mosque; but his conversation reached its crescendo, when leaning back against me, puffing on his pipe, he told me of Tunisian folktales; of Akarek the tailor and of Zabra, lauded for her beauty. He was older then, and finishing his working life, as a veterinary medic in his homeland.

We give what we can, don't we? My fruit I give as food and medicine, my leaf as fodder for the animals and human food in time of famine: I'm also storage of water. He gave also; of his skills, time, and that gargantuan heart: saving the animals and enriching humanity.

He knew the value of them, so he collected the stories from wherever he went. From Burkina Faso, amongst the Mossi, stories of Mba-Soamba, the trickster hare. Mali produced one of the great epics of Africa, of Sunjata, hero of the Mandinka. Coming from Niger, I heard tales of the Zarma and of the Hausa; from the former, tale of a girl called Sana, another of a man called Sanda; from the Hausa, of Yan Dawa, the little people who protect the forest and Zankalalla, always escorted by a group of birds: he's the small one who defeated Dodo the monster. From the Baule in Ivory Coast, the manueverings of Anansi the spider. Mauretania gave him another great epic: the Dausi of the Soninke. He brought them all back with him and we heard them all, Heron, Lizard and I. I know as much about West African folklore, as you do, dear reader.

He brought them all to me; so on many evenings, the river went to sleep with his voice: our soundtrack of lullaby time. But he has gone now, sitting amongst those he spoke of; they are happy he is there: because he held the torch and never let it go out.

Voices chanting

Whispering, listening,
Weaving of whispering,
Ancestors threading in and out.

Baobab

He is gone from us now, but while he was here, he was the custodian of all that is worth saving. He spent a thousand moonlit hours, chanting with the children. Now and again, Heron, Lizard and I will get together and reminisce; sometimes we'll weep a little and dry each others tear fall. And sometimes, when the river is at its quietest, we can hear the gentle echo of his voice: and sometimes he chants of me...

Voice chanting

I miss you,
Adansonia digitata.

Baobab

I am baobab,
I'll always sing of him;
Of the man who sat against me,
Channeling ancestry.
Heron, Lizard and I,
We eulogise him,
Praising Birago Diop.

Sasabonsam Street

**Celebrating Birago Diop
part III**

Introduction

This, the final part of the Birago Diop Trilogy, was written to give organisations and communities, ideas for hosting an event on December 11th. By utilising local talent, resources and networks, every individual, community project, school, college, or library, can make a contribution to Birago Day.

Dedication

to the African Books Collective
for its catalogue of folklore literature

Sasabonsam Street

Remi

Once again Chio, many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for the Gizo Gazette. The readership are very much looking forward to what Fireside is presenting on Birago Day.

Chio

I feel privileged Remi. Gizo Gazette is one of the leading folklore magazines in the world! So a massive thank you to the Gizo, for supporting our contribution by offering a publicity source.

Remi

Our pleasure. Now, we know this is envisaged as an international celebration, so please tell our readers, what will be happening here.

Chio

Well, the first part of our contribution, will take place at the primary school on Little Hero Lane, just past Sasabonsam Street, which you'll see on the map. During the assembly, after an introduction to Birago Diop, they'll hear the tale of how a miraculous child, defeated the dreaded one that the street is named after. The school is using the African folktale assembly, to introduce a project about the Ashanti of Ghana, beginning straight after the morning gathering.

Remi

So they'll be learning as well as having fun, which is how it should be.

Chio

Yes! And folktales are a perfect way of introducing African Studies to the younger ones; well, to everyone, but especially to them.

Remi

Never thought of that before, but that makes sense.

Chio

I think so, because after laughing with them about Anansi the spider and Sasabonsam the monster, we can introduce a city called Kumasi and a cloth known as kente.

Remi

Lucky children!

Chio

Lucky teacher!

Remi

Yes, that's true also. So what's the next thing on the programme?

Chio

The exhibition! Students from the local secondary school were encouraged to sketch, paint and sculpt, on the themes of animal care – remembering that Diop was also a vet – and animals in folklore. The art museum in town, on Charcoal Crescent, off the Calabash Crossroads – you might have passed it on the way in - will be hosting the exhibition, which will be opened by the mayor at eleven. The young artists will be given time off school to attend and I hear they're looking forward to having their faces and names in the regional press.

Remi

I shall be going to see their work for sure.

Chio

Good! Then tell everyone else to go!

Remi

I shall! And we shall give reminders of it, through our website and Facebook page.

Chio

Bless you.

Remi

You're welcome. So what will be next?

Chio

At midday, the over fifties centre, located where Jali Junction and the Griot Gardens meet, will be hosting a story telling session, to be facilitated by its Caribbean members. They'll be encouraging all to share their stories from childhood, which they now tell their grandchildren.

Remi

Ahhh, that will be wonderful.

Chio

Yes, it should generate a lot of laughter and a little teasing too! They are the original storytellers of present time.

Remi

That will be one to record!

Chio

I agree, so I'm hoping it will be filmed. They'll hear stories such as the Moongazer, a giant from Guyanese folklore; Papa Bwa, the protector of the forest in Trinidadian tales; River Mumma, the Jamaican River Guardian; and the Nimitas, the ancestral fireflies of the Dominican Republic.

Remi

Maybe the week following the event, I or a colleague can come back and interview a few of the elders.

Chio

That's a great idea Remi, so please do.

Remi

Good: let's make it happen.

Chio

Yes!

Remi

What's next on the Fireside agenda?

Chio

The youth club, within the community centre, will be running two after school workshops. The centre is next to the Moonlight Monument, which overlooks Sunset Square. A workshop on flag painting, where the youth get to paint the African or Caribbean flag of their choice; or they can learn how to make jollof rice and peanut sauce.

Remi

Yummy! I want to attend that one also, but my age would forbid it! I'll send my son instead, with strict instructions about leftovers and doggy bags!

Chio

Don't worry my friend, as there'll be more great food at the finale! This will take place in the main hall of the community centre; an inter-generational setting: the evening jamboree. There will be a mix of readings, dance, songs, theatre and storytelling. And of course, the poems of Birago Diop will be heard, as will a tale or two of Amadou Koumba, in the storytelling segments. It will begin at six and finish at eight. All the talent and brilliance on show, will be local, with a couple of guest artists, friends of the performers.

Remi

So from nine in the morning till eight at night, Fireside will have something going on, in celebration of this great man.

Chio

Yes, that's it. Either here, or through Fireside residents in the town centre. Folklore is people, so we shall gather together, to celebrate someone who loved people: who did his best for animals, as well as us.

Remi

I think that night will be magical.

Chio

Me too.

Remi

Well, thank you very much Chio, for letting the Gizo Gazette know what will be happening here on Fireside, for Birago Day. If the great man could attend, when first walking in, I think he'd shed a humble tear, then smile for the rest of the day.

Chio

Ahhh, bless you Remy and all the Gizo staff and readers. See you on the 11th

Remy

Bless you too Chio. Yes, see you on the 11th of December.

Glossary

Remi – Remi Adedeji, Yoruba storyteller and writer

Chio – Chio Enwonwu, Igbo storyteller and writer

Gizo Gazette – Gizo is the trickster spider of Hausa folklore

Fireside – imaginary council estate

Sasabonsam – monster of Ashanti folklore

Anansi – trickster spider of Ashanti folklore

Kente – a cloth made by the Ashanti and Ewe peoples

Kumasi – second city of Ghana and heartland of the Ashanti

Jali Junction – the Jali is the traditional storyteller amongst the Mande peoples, such as the Mandinka. He is also historian, advisor and envoy.

Griot – another term for the jali

Sunset Square and **Moonlight Monument** – In most sub-Saharan societies, storytelling took place in the evening - after work was finished and food was eaten - in an inter-generational setting, around the central fire.

Amadou Koumba – The Tales of Amadou Koumba by Birago Diop, were published in 1947.

Here are the links to the two online folklore projects
YAN DAWA and NUNU

yandawa.substack.com

<https://reggaediscography.blogspot.com/2021/11/nunu-celebrating-african-and-caribbean.html>

and AFRICAN SCHOOL website

africanschool.weebly.com

An African School Production