

POUND'S LUTE: THE WEST AFRICAN VOICE
OF THE GESERE IN *THE PISAN CANTOS*

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In 1909, Leo Frobenius, on the second of his twelve trips to Africa, camped in Bassari in the north of Togo, having already travelled through much of what was then French West Africa. Like Yeats and Lady Gregory going from cottage to cottage in the west of Ireland, Frobenius was collecting stories, trying to prove Hegel and other nineteenth-century Germans wrong, that Africa not only had a history but an incredibly rich culture. These stories were coming from griots, the West African singers and players that Frobenius could not resist comparing to the medieval troubadours of Provence, having scattered from the former empire of Ghana at about the same time that the troubadours fled the south of France for the comfort of courts in Italy, Germany and England. Unlike the troubadours, however, the griots had thrived in exile, passing their songs and tales from father to son for centuries. Frobenius had apparently heard that some of these griots had scattered to northern Dahomey – or what is now known as Benin – and he sent one of his assistants there to find them and bring them back to Bassari. Among the tales he was subsequently told was “Gassires Laute” – or

“Gassire’s Lute” – the story of the original African troubadour, whose civilisation had just been destroyed and who now discovered himself outcast in the desert, weeping and singing his song of loss and lament. It is the same West African voice of loss and lament that Pound puts on in the first few Pisan cantos, with his civilisation seemingly in shreds and himself shut up in a cage, chanting “Hoo Fasa”, just as Gassire once did.

This story is absolutely central to the oral tradition of West Africa, since its performers almost always portray themselves as poets in exile, having lost the empire that was once their first and best home. The griot who agreed to go to Togo with Frobenius’ assistant and sing this song was a perfect example of this posture. He would almost certainly have been what the people who live in the Borgu region of northern Benin and northwestern Nigeria would call a *gesere dunga* – or a master griot (de Moraes Farias 146). In both *Spielmannsgeschichten der Sahel* and *Monumenta Africana*, Frobenius reports that this griot was a speaker of Djerma, which tells us today that he would most likely be a descendant of the Songhay empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But Frobenius believed the griot could trace his roots all the way back to Ghana, the earliest and certainly the longest of the West African empires (SS 49-50). There is good reason for this mistake. Most Songhay griots, including those in the Borgu region, claim Soninke descent and still sing their songs in a language derived from Soninke, the language of the Ghanaian courts and of the people of that medieval empire, now spread throughout West Africa. Since their audiences cannot understand this esoteric language, the griots either employ an interpreter to translate what they sing into the local language or provide a running translation themselves. Some Songhay griots even admit they no longer know what some of the words or some of the phrases that they sing mean, the original sense having been almost completely lost with travel and time

(Hale 142-43). Even the title *gesere dunga* asserts this distance and this otherness from their Bariba-speaking audiences in northern Benin, with *gesere* the old Soninke term for griot (the plural being *geseru*) and *dunga* a variant of the Soninke word for king, probably coming from Dinga – the legendary first ruler and founder of the Ghanaian empire (Levtzion 16-17).

Frobenius thought, of course, that he was getting much more than the story of how song first entered West African culture in “Gassire’s Lute.” He thought he was also getting West African history, even if in a rather condensed and somewhat enigmatic form. Frobenius believed this story was the missing piece of the puzzle, connecting the Soninke diaspora with those early Africans described by Herodotus in the fifth century BC and routed some centuries later by the Romans. Convinced that these people were pushed further and further south by the Tuareg and Fulani nomads of the north, Frobenius began to play some rather unwise games with the names of Saharan and sub-Saharan settlements, suggesting that Dierra, for example, must have been Djerma – or the oasis now known as Murzuk in southwestern Libya – and that Agada could only have been the Tuareg town of Agadez in west central Niger. He also assumed that the ancient empire known as Wagadu in the bardic tradition of West Africa must be the same empire that the early Arabian historians consistently called Ghana. While almost all Africanists today dismiss Frobenius’ literal reading of “Gassire’s Lute” as sadly misguided, they almost all agree with him that Wagadu must be Ghana – despite the fact that none of the Arabian historians ever uses the name Wagadu and that none of the *geseru* ever mentions the empire of Ghana.

It is obvious, though, from the early Arabic accounts of this part of the Sahel, that the inhabitants of the empire of Ghana spoke Soninke and more than a million Soninke now live in a small section of the western Sahel that they still call

Wagadu, an area that straddles the borders of eastern Senegal, southern Mauritania and western Mali. The medieval empire of Ghana was, of course, considerably larger than that, occupying most of the land between the Senegal River to the east and the Niger River to the west. Although archaeologists now suggest that the ancient capital of Ghana was almost certainly Kumbi Saleh in southern Mauritania – deserted since the thirteenth century, but once supporting a resident population of fifteen to twenty thousand – historians note that it was not unusual for West African empires to change capitals, moving as the power moved from clan to clan (Bathily 19). The Mandinke empire of Mali, which eventually swallowed up the struggling Soninke clans of Ghana, also seems to have had various capitals at various times in its history (Levtzion 61). No one really knows when the Ghanaian empire began – some historians suggest as early as the fourth or fifth centuries AD – but it clearly reached the peak of its power in the tenth and eleventh centuries, mostly trading West African gold for North African salt, sometimes measure for measure. It finally fell apart as the Mandinke took more and more control of the Sahel, expanding their empire well beyond the borders of Ghana, eventually extending all the way to the Atlantic coast. As a result, the Soninke became somewhat of a homeless people, wandering with their sad songs of Wagadu all over West Africa, including the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast.

If the Soninke themselves are now seen as essentially exiles and outcasts from a great empire that must have lasted for the better part of a thousand years, the *geseru* who still live amongst them are often seen as the exiles of the exiled, the outcast of the outcast. As Frobenius knew all too well, West African people may fear these griots, but they certainly do not respect them (SS 37). This was obvious to the earliest visitors to West Africa, including the Portuguese explorer Valentim Fernandes, who wrote the first European

description of griots in the early sixteenth century:

In this country and in Mandingo there are Jews who are called Gauland – they are black like the other people of the country. But they don't have synagogues and they don't hold the same ceremonies as other Jews. They don't live with the other Blacks, they live by themselves in their own areas. These Gauls are often buffoons and play the viol and the cavacos [stringed instruments], and are singers. And because they don't dare to live in the villages they live behind the homes of the noble and sing his praises at dawn until he orders that they be given a ration of millet, and then they leave. And when the noble leaves his house then the Jews go out ahead of him and sing and shout their buffooneries. They are also treated like dogs by the Blacks and don't dare enter into their houses except for that of the chief, and if they appear in the village people hit them with sticks. (qtd. in Hale 82)

As Hale points out, Fernandes was no doubt looking for a familiar form of social discrimination in order to describe the way in which griots were treated by their own communities and could only think of the treatment of the Jews in Spanish and Portuguese communities at the time for comparison. This suggestion, though, that West African griots were actually diasporic Jews, was clearly more than a convenient metaphor for Fernandes, since many Portuguese colonists seem to have believed it and, even today, the Wolof word for griot along the Atlantic coast in Guinea Bissau is derived from the Portuguese word for Jew (Hale 83). In fact, this word seems to have caught on quite quickly amongst the Wolof, since a British trader, Richard Johnson, was taught it by the locals themselves in the seventeenth century and also noted another odd practice of social discrimination:

Howsoever the people affect musicke, yet so basely doe they esteeme of the player, that when any of them die, they doe not vouchsafe them buriall, as other people have; but set his dead

corps upright in a hollow tree, where hee is left to consume. Whenever one of the foreigners would play a musical instrument, the Africans would in a manner of scorn say hee that played was a Juddy. (qtd. in Hale 84)

Although there is no evidence that this was ever a practice of the Soninke, burial of griots in baobab trees seems to have been quite common throughout the Senegambian region where many Soninke migrated. Another seventeenth-century British trader, John Barbot, was told that griots were buried in trees for fear that they would pollute the soil:

These men are so much despised by all other Blacks, that they not only account them infamous, but will scarce allow them a grave when they die; believing the earth would never produce any fruit or plants, should it be defiled with the dead carcasses, nor will they throw their corps into ponds or rivers, for fear of killing the fish, and therefore they only thrust them into the hollow trunks or stumps of trees. (qtd. in Hale 92)

Hale argues that this treatment – or obvious mistreatment – of griots, demanding in the most extreme cases that they live apart from others and be buried apart from others, suggests that some West African communities see them as “different almost in an ethnic sense. In other words, griots and other artisans constitute what amounts to a separate people in the minds of the people among whom they live” (201).

Griots themselves explain this difference in their songs of origin, including the story of “Gassire’s Lute.” In that tale, of course, Gassire becomes a griot by needlessly sacrificing seven of his eight sons in battle, upsetting the people of Dierra so much that they send him and what is left of his family into exile in the desert. While the men of Dierra are not afraid to fight when they must, they tell Gassire that he has broken one of the unwritten rules of their tribe: dying for fame alone. Other songs of origin also include the violation

of social taboo, almost always focusing on “an extraordinary act involving blood – spilling it, consuming it, or participating in a blood crime” (Hale 59). The most common of these songs tells the story of two noble brothers, undertaking a long journey when their food runs out. In one version, the older brother goes off to hunt on his own, fires a shot and returns with some meat which he urges his younger brother to eat, telling him he has already had his share. The younger brother soon discovers, however, that the older brother had cut the flesh from his own body in order to feed him, firing the gun as a trick:

When the two brothers arrived at their destination, the younger composed in honor of his elder brother praises in which he vaunted the courage and nobility of his character. The elder was very happy and showered the younger with gifts.

Thus, according to indigenous tradition, began the origin of griots, descendants of the younger brother who, by his own act, made himself socially inferior to his elder brother. (qtd. in Hale 61)

Although Soninke griots tell a version of this tale as part of the legend of Wagadu, the story of “Gassire’s Lute” is also about social abasement, with the old wise man Kiekorro telling Gassire that it is not his fate to be “the second of the first” and follow his father as king of Dierra but to be a bard, “the first of the second” (Frobenius and Fox 115). What Kiekorro also knows, of course, is that the lute will not play until Gassire has violated that social taboo, spilling the blood of seven of his sons upon it. Like the younger brother who cannibalised his older brother – in some versions, he simply drinks the older brother’s blood – Gassire accepts his abasement, acknowledging that griots are socially inferior to nobles while still significantly claiming that the very first griots were of noble origin.

What the early British and Portuguese explorers did not understand in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when

they did their best to describe the apparent mistreatment of griots by their own communities, is that this mistreatment also applies to other members of other West African castes – or what the Mande world, of which the Soninke are a part, would call *nyamakala*. Nyamakala are craftspeople – specifically, in Soninke society, griots, blacksmiths and leatherworkers. It is important to realise that, for the Soninke, griots are essentially those members of their communities who work with words and, although they are the ones responsible for remembering and retelling the old tales of Wagadu, their tasks also include working as advisers, diplomats, genealogists, interpreters, mediators, praise-singers, spokesmen, teachers, translators and various other functions for marriages, funerals and naming and initiation ceremonies. Like the blacksmiths and the leatherworkers, geseru are expected to live apart from the nobles or so-called free people, sometimes in their own neighborhoods and sometimes in separate villages (Tamari 231). This does not mean, however, that nyamakala are at the bottom of the pile in Soninke society. In this incredibly class-conscious society, nyamakala are somewhere between the free people and the slaves and, since the slave population could often be more than half of the total population of that society, there were considerable numbers below them – at least until the twentieth century. Craftspeople rarely represent more than five percent of a Soninke community and, even amongst themselves, the bards are seen as better than the blacksmiths and both consider themselves better than the leatherworkers (Tamari 230). There are some benefits to being part of a caste, however, since nobles in times of war can be made into slaves, but nyamakala, who are usually forbidden to fight, cannot be enslaved (Tamari 224). Although griots, blacksmiths and leatherworkers are not allowed to have sex with or to marry nobles, it is clear that the nobles depend upon the castes just as much as the castes depend upon the nobles:

If griots are different from other members of society, especially their noble patrons, they nevertheless remain quite closely linked to them, both in daily life and in a psychological sense. Beyond the functional difference of interpreting and preserving culture, the griot seems to constitute the other half, the other side, of a collective personality, one that is allowed to express things and behave in ways that are forbidden to others. Singing, music-making, and other loud behavior are seen as inappropriate for people of noble origin. But without these activities, the hard life of inhabitants in the Sahel and Savanna regions would lose much of its cheer. (Hale 208)

Among their other tasks, it seems to be the griots' job to point out occasionally this symbiotic relationship to their noble betters. As one griot once said to his patron, "If you are Noble, maybe it is necessary for me to be Griot in order for you to be Noble" (qtd. in Hale 215).

Pound would not have understood these rather fine distinctions of Soninke society, of course, when he began to read Frobenius in 1925 or 1926 (Davenport 35). Since Frobenius retells the tale of "Gassire's Lute" in both *Spielmannsgeschichten der Sahel* – a collection of tribal folktales published in 1921 as part of the twelve-volume Atlantis series – and *Monumenta Africana* – a much broader anthropological work published in 1929 as part of the seven-volume *Erlebte Erdteile* series, it is impossible to tell where Pound first came across the story. We do know, however, that he had a copy of the second book in his personal library, with some markings in the text itself (Redman 223). In either case, Frobenius' translation of the tale would have told Pound – even with his admittedly "broken" German (*Kulchur* 217) – all he really needed to know about the position of the poet in West African society, since the whole point of that story is that Gassire must learn that the role of a griot is not to lead his society from the front but to lament its demise – and his part in that demise – from the back of beyond. As the old wise man Kiekorro tells Gassire,

the Fasa have never had griots because they have always been noble and nobles are not allowed to play lutes and sing songs of their own heroic deeds, while griots are not allowed to take part in battles or to be among the warriors of whom they sing. Hoping it will help him realise his new role, Kiekorro tells Gassire that he now has the power to understand birdsong, one of the compensations for his demotion from future king to bard. When the Songhay griot told Frobenius the part of the tale where Gassire listens to the birdsong, he left a bit out:

Gassire went into the fields. Gassire heard the partridges. Gassire went close to them. A partridge sat under a bush and sang: 'Hear the Dausi! Hear my deeds!' The partridge sang of its battle with the snake. The partridge sang: 'All creatures must die, be buried and rot. Kings and heroes die, are buried and rot. I, too, shall die, shall be buried and rot. But the Dausi, the song of my battles, shall not die. It shall be sung again and again and shall outlive all kings and heroes. Hoooh, that I might do such deeds! Hoooh, that I may sing the Dausi! Wagadu will be lost. But the Dausi shall endure and shall live!' Hoooh! Dierra, Agada, Ganna, Silla! Hoooh! Fasa! (Frobenius and Fox 114)

Frobenius was thrilled to learn from this part of the tale that there might actually be a lost epic of Wagadu known by its ancient bards as the Dausi, but he was just as pleased with himself that he knew the bit that the *gesere dunga* had apparently forgotten. He included this bit in his rather dense introduction to *Spielmannsgeschichten der Sahel*, where Pound may have also come across it. What the griot had not told Frobenius is that, in a slightly longer version of the story, Gassire witnessed the battle between the snake and this bird – which becomes a more believable Perlhuhn or guinea fowl in Frobenius' introduction rather than a Feldhuhn or partridge (38). A python had just eaten all the guinea fowl's eggs. Gassire saw the enraged guinea fowl kill the python, then fly up to a branch and sing. What he thinks he hears in the pas-

sage above as part of his training to be a bard is almost certainly not what the guinea fowl actually sings. While this missing bit serves as a sort of premonition of Gassire's subsequent loss of seven of his eight sons in battle and the song he himself will sing following that loss, it is clear that Gassire completely misses the lesson that both Kiekorro and the guinea fowl are trying to teach him here, that he will have to lose everything, too – including his position in the tribe, his entire civilisation and most of his friends and family – before he will be able to sing his own song.

It is a very similar lesson that Pound also learns the hard way in the *Pisan Cantos*, where he picks up the chant of “Hooo Fasa” in cantos 74 (447, 450, 451) and 77 (485), with appropriate echoes of both lute music and birdsong in between in canto 75. Songs of origin serve many purposes for griots. One purpose is for griots to claim noble descent, especially in the last century or so, as slaves have largely disappeared from West African society and griots have suddenly found themselves towards the bottom of the social pile, not somewhere in its middle. Another purpose is to remind patrons of their responsibilities, that it is the patron's job to keep the poet's belly full and the poet's job to praise him for doing so. But perhaps the most important purpose of an origin song like “Gassire's Lute” is to remind griots of their place in society. They have a place at court, but they must keep to that place and not attempt to rise above it. They are not meant to be the heroes of their own stories, nor are their sons. That is the lesson that it takes Gassire far too long to learn, vainly placing himself and his sons at what he thought would be the centre of his song and vanity helping to destroy the first of the four dynasties of Wagadu. That is, to some extent, the lesson that Pound also learns in the *Pisan Cantos*, that perhaps poetry and politics ought not to mix. It is not the poet's job to make history, but merely to regard it, to record it and to remember it. Pound's job

description had certainly changed since the Chinese, the American and the Italian cantos and the broadcasts for Radio Rome and, from the cage, he blames his own vanity and his own mistaken sense of place in canto 81, just as Gassire blamed himself for the very same failings in his song. But as Frobenius tells us, Gassire's "rage melted" at last and the lute began to sing the Dausi for the very first time (Frobenius and Fox 119). Gassire led his sons into battle, thinking it would help his poem, and was sent into exile, while Pound broadcast for Radio Rome and was put into a cage for it. From that cage, Pound obviously saw the parallel between his own situation and that of the abased, exiled and outcast Gassire and picked up his chant of "Hooo Fasa," and the more one knows about the long history and the rich culture that produced that sorrowful chant, the better this West African voice seems to fit.

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