Cinema, myth and representation in Sub-saharian Africa

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Abstract

Cinematographic productions in Africa often draw on the oral and written literature that is part of the continent’s immense cultural heritage, offering not only new hermeneutic keys to ancestral tales but also reflections on the dynamics of contemporary African society in the light of the individual and collective stories and of the precepts contained in these tales.

The purpose of this essay is to provide an interpretation of the myth of Sundiata Keita, founder of the greatest pre-colonial empire in western sub-Saharan Africa, through considerations on the dynamics of collective memory, the role assigned to griots, the modes of narrative and the connections between myth and rite.

Cinematographic productions in Africa often draw on the oral and written literature that is part of the continent’s immense cultural heritage, often offering not only new hermeneutic keys to ancestral tales but also reflections on the dynamics of contemporary African society in the light of the individual and collective stories contained in these tales.

Through the narration of myths, cinema introduces a new dimension of knowledge, often denied by the swift passage of time, though essential to the awareness of life. Italo Calvino wrote that: «With myths one mustn’t hurry; it’s better to let them filter down in the memory, to stop and meditate on each detail and to think about them without leaving their language of images» (Calvino 2002, p. 9).

It is the language of images that unites the mythological narration and the filmic narration that revolve around the figure of Sundiata Keita, of the mandinka ethnic group, founder of the Empire of Mali. This empire covered the present-day states of Senegal, Gambia, northern Guinea, Mauritania and southern Mali and it developed in the period between the 13th and 17th centuries AD (Gueye M., Gambi L., Bonatesta F. 1995, pp. 18-20; Niane 1999, pp. 11-13). The name “Sundiata” derives from that of his mother, called Sogolon (meaning “buffalo woman”) because of her hump, and from Iata (meaning “lion”), while “Keita” is the name of the clan Sundiata belongs to, like most of the later emperors of Mali (Niane 1999, pp. 11-13).

In Keita. L’heritage du griot, filmed in Burkina Faso, the director, Dani Kouyatè, introduces the spectator to the story of Sundiata Keita through the narration of the griot Djeliba Kouyatè. It starts when the griot Djeliba Kouyatè leaves his village to reach the young Mabo Keita in the city. Their families have ancient and close ties, and according to the tradition, the griots Kouyatè, repository of the sacred
story, are to pass on to the Keita clan their self knowledge, through their ancestors’ story. The old *griot* will meet many difficulties in accomplishing his duty, mainly because of Mabo’s school commitment. Actually, the contrast between the two forms of knowledge – the traditional one on the one hand, and on the other the Western one, learnt by Mabo at school – will be underlying throughout the narrative of the film, and finally worked out through the meeting between the *griot* and Mabo’s teacher.

In the following pages I will make a brief summary of the mythological tale, taken from *Sundiata. Epopea mandinga* (Niane 1999). Afterwards I would like to provide an interpretation of the dynamics of ‘collective memory’¹, the role assigned to *griots*², the modes of narrative, the connections between myth and rite.

### The myth of Sundiata Keita

The myth of Sundiata Keita is a long, complex narrative full of symbolic cross references, but still it can be outlined into three parts: the genealogy of Sundiata Keita, the narration of the hero’s life, and the epilogue.

Sundiata’s father, King Maghan, is one of the most important kings of his time. He is beloved and held in high esteem by both his people and other kings. He already has two wives and a rightful heir, but the oracle foretells that a woman, together with two hunters, will visit his court and that he will marry and have his heir by her.

It is not long before the event comes true, and from the union between the king and Sogolon, the woman, Sundiata Keita is born. The birth of the hero is announced and awaited by the whole community, and even the elements take part in the event. But, a few years after Sundiata’s birth, King Maghan is disappointed, because Sundiata cannot walk, and he moves only by dragging his four limbs.

Some years later King Maghan dies, and, in spite of his last will, Dankaran Tuman (his first wife’s child) is proclaimed king; since he is young, a regency council is appointed, and his mother, Sassuma Bérété, takes up full powers.

¹ Concerning the concept of “collective memory”, I use the thoughts and comments of Jan Assman who, in turn, refers to the works of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. On this, Assman writes: «The central thesis that Halbwachs adheres to throughout his work is the social conditioning of memory. He is not in the least interested in the physical basis of memory. He is not in the least interested in the physical, that is, the neurological and encephalological basis of memory, but establishes instead the social frame of reference without which no individual memory can either form or preserve itself […]. This is why the term collective memory should not be read as a metaphor, because while the group itself does not “have” a memory, it determines the memory of its members. Even the most personal recollections only come about through communication and social interaction». (Assman 2011, pp. 21-22).

² In order to try and clarify the *griots*’ functions, I will make use of the interview made with a distinguished representative of a family of *griots* in Senegal, Djibril Ndiaye Rose, to whom I am bound by the love for music and a long friendship. The interview was recorded in two separate moments in January 2008, in Italian, and faithfully transcribed. The only changes, regarding the use of some tenses, have been made to facilitate reading. As requested by the interviewee, some statements have not been transcribed.
Not even the miracle which allows Sundiata to walk on his own legs helps to prevent the succession of Dankaran Tuman and the regency of Sassuma Bérété. On the other hand, this event exacerbates the envy of the queen, who forces Sundiata and his mother to a long exile.

During their exile, Niani (the native village of Sundiata) is invaded by the powerful and wicked king Sumaoro, who is subjugating all the surrounding kingdoms. Sumaoro’s invasion leads the fortune tellers of Niani to confer about the fate of the reign, and to conclude that the legitimate heir to the throne would be the only person able to stop the invader. Some of them therefore decide to leave the village in search of Sundiata, and they find him after several weeks.

After being informed about the events occurring in his home village, Sundiata gathers all the rebels under his command and takes the offensive. The most difficult problem to solve is not represented by Sumaoro’s troops, though numerous and well armed, but by his magical powers: he is invulnerable and can make himself invisible. This difficulty is overcome when Sundiata rejoins his own griot and sister, who were held prisoners in Sumaoro’s kingdom, and during their captivity had managed to discover the secret of his magical powers. Relying on this information, Sundiata organises his troops, and arms himself with his bow and a special arrow, which, on the top, has a white rooster crest that can annihilate Sumaoro’s powers. During the clash between the two armies, Sumaoro tries in every possible way not to let Sundiata come near him; however, Sundiata finally succeeds in shooting his arrow and hitting his opponent, who, almost immediately, feels his strength deserting him.

After Sumaoro’s defeat, Sundiata is proclaimed emperor by all the kings, and he, strong after his investiture, assigns lands and power according to merit. In addition, Sundiata Keita grants the griots belonging to the Kouyaté clan the right to make jokes on any clan, including the reigning Keita clan; this right is one of the precepts of the myth, which is relevant even today.

The forms of collective recollection: communicative memory and cultural memory

In order to understand the modes of transmission of knowledge usual of societies with an oral tradition, it is useful to keep in mind that the process of historical recollection often comes from what the ethnologist Jan Vansina named floating gap. He writes: «All the narratives about origins, of both groups and individuals, are different manifestations of the same process at different stages. When the whole body of such narratives is collected, it typically emerges a tripartite. For the recent past plenty of information is available, but it tapers off as we move back through time. For earlier periods we may either meet a break, or just a few names mentioned with some hesitation. I will call this gap in the narrative “the floating gap”. For previous periods still, on the other hand, we come to meet again a mass of information concerning the traditions of the origins. The gap is often not very clear to the people of the communities involved, but it is usually manifest to researchers. Sometimes, especially
in genealogies, the recent past and the origins are fused as a succession of one single
generation [...] Historical consciousness operates on two levels only: on the level of
time of origins and on that of the recent past. Since the boundary between them
moves on as generations pass, I have called “the floating gap” the gap dividing them.
For the Tio people (Congo) in 1880, the gap was situated around 1800, while in 1960
it had moved on to around 1880» (Vansina 1985, pp. 23-24).

The two forms of historical recollection are closely connected to the notion of
time, inherent to African cultures, which is efficaciously expressed by two words of
the Swahili language, spoken in Kenya, referring to two categories of time: sasa and
zamani. The first word indicates the immediate instant, the “now and soon”, it can not
be considered as “lengthy”, and it includes what in Western thought is represented by
the near future or the recent past: in this view, an event is considered to be certain and
immediate when the subject feels she/he has lived it. The term zamani, on the other
hand, is far from being included in the western notion of the past, as separated or
antithetical to the present; it contains its own past, present and future, and overlaps
the sasa dimension. Events take place at first in sasa time; afterwards they are
absorbed by the zamani dimension (Mbiti 1992, pp. 110-111).

This notion of time has been effectively clarified by the anthropologist Jan
Assman, who associates two different typologies of memory to the two levels of the
past: communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory includes
those recollections referring to the recent past and shared by contemporaries; this is
the case of generation memory, which is rooted in a group, where it historically
grows, and disappears when the members of that group die, leaving room for a new
one. Cultural memory, on the other hand, finds its way thanks to some fixed points in
the past; the past is preserved through symbolic figures to which recollections are
linked: the narratives of the ancestors, the exodus, the wandering in the desert, the
conquest of the country, the exile, are just some figures of recollection
commemorated in festivities, which shed light on the present (Assman 2011, pp. 36-
37).

In such a perspective, myths are figures of recollection as well, so that a
distinction between myth and history has no meaning: for cultural memory, “actual”
history is not valid, recollections only are meaningful. The myth is a founding
narrative told to clarify the present in the light of the origins: through recollections,
history becomes myth, and during this transposition, far from being un-real, it
becomes real, as a durable, prescriptive and formative force (Ivi, pp. 37-38).

In addition, in his analysis of collective memory, Jan Assman further
differentiates the participation of the community in the two forms of collective
recollection, helping us to get a better understanding of the specific role of griots.
Assman claims that in the case of communicative memory participation is diffuse:
even if there are individuals who know or remember more than others (the elderly, for
instance), there are no specialists in this informal tradition. The knowledge involved
in this process is acquired together with language and everyday communication;
everyone is therefore considered to be as expert as everybody else. In the case of
cultural memory, on the other hand, participation is always specialized, and in Western Africa it falls within the griots’ competence (Ivi, pp. 38-39).

**Griots and narration**

In sub-saharan West African societies, knowledge is memorized thanks to what Bassirou Dieng calls “institutionalized memory”, that is those people who are in charge of preserving and handing down the traditional knowledge. These “repository-transmitters” play a key role in several African societies where selected events such as ceremonies, initiation rites, feasts and celebrations are organized, during which the “repository-transmitters” are called upon to revive historical memory in all its aspects (Dieng 2001, pp. 36-37).

Bassirou Dieng draws a distinction between “professional” and “non-professional” “repository-transmitters”. Amongst the latter he includes several figures who play a role whose importance varies according to the region and the ethnic group they belong to; women, for instance, who, through the narration of stories and proverbs, serve a playful purpose before the formal education of children, and elderly people, who, thanks to their experience are in a privileged position with regard to knowledge and are the guardians of religious and esoteric traditions. Griots are considered, on the other hand, the “professional” of words, whose status takes origin from the west African social organization, divided into three main categories: the aristocracy, which includes the reigning family, and small landed aristocracy; the socio-professional categories, which include artisans and griots; the slaves (Ivi, pp. 37-38).

Serge Latouche reminds us that, in African societies, the search for and defence of a status is the preliminary condition for every relation, and, in fact, one of the main functions of griots is that of genealogist. The importance of this function derives also from the necessity for each member of the community to know all her/his relîes, that is all the people having some kind of tie with her/him, whether of friendship, religious or family ties, and she/he needs to know them by name, and ethnic, social and family position. Moreover, every member needs to know the history of everybody else, as well as of their families, because without such preliminary recognition, no exchange can take place (Latouche 2000, p. 26).

At this regards Djibril Ndiaye Rose affirms:

«I think that his role of griot has not changed; on the other hand it has become much stronger, because in order to respect a person, to love a person, not to be afraid of a person, you need to know her/him; if you don’t know a person, you cannot love and protect her/him. The function of griot, long ago was to bring peace, to give life... they even say that the habit of asking for money derives from making people laugh, from bringing peace, because it was the griot who gathered people around the “arbre à palabre”.”

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Now this function has become even stronger because it is the griot who knows exactly who each Senegalese man is, it is him who can tell everybody’s family history. For example, when they see me arguing with someone, they call me and tell me: ‘Djibril, you’re quarrelling with this person, but do you know the family ties you two share?’ They don’t ask me to make peace with him because he is stronger than me, but because they let me know the blood ties we have; then soon after I avoid».

In order to maintain the balance among social strata, the community agrees to make members respect various obligations such as avoiding marriages between people of higher and lower rank: it is the griot’s duty, before the marriage, to acquaint the families of the marrying couple with their respective genealogies.

Because of the importance of order in African societies, both the reigning clan and griots have to perform their duties, and to respect the obligations deriving from their rank. This kind of relationship is also shown in the myth of Sundiata Keita; on the one hand, the Keitas undertake to support the griots of the Kouyaté clan so that they could live on their own art, on the other the Kouyates have to advise the kings belonging to the Keita family, to be a tutor to their children, and to mediate disputes between them and other reigning families. It is because of this ancient tie that the griot Djeliba Kouyaté, main character of the film, leaves his village to initiate the young Mabo Keita into Sundiata Keita’s story.

Regarding the relations between griots and aristocracy, Djibril Ndiaye Rose states:

«The griot needs to do two things while he’s playing, to be protected and not to feel sick. The first one is to have some water and stir it before drinking with the help of a ‘galan’ (a drumstick used to play the tamtam); this is a charm that protects you; the second thing that protects you from the evil eye and malicious talk is asking for money, because, besides paying the griot, to bring luck both to the one who’s giving and to the one who’s receiving, you have to give money as a present to the griot. It is more important to give a present to the griot than paying him because if you pay the griot, for example, one hundred euro and then you can’t give him any present, it is much better to pay him ten euro and give ninety euro as a present. This second thing is very important and it is called “woyan”. We do it during feasts or when we meet a ‘gèr’ (noble). To do this, for the griot, is not begging, it is asking for what belongs to him».

The importance of the functions of griots derives also from the concept of “spoken word”, which, while being addressed to an audience capable of
understanding its deepest meanings, needs also to be uttered by the person appointed by the community, who thus becomes the undisputed master of the word.

A concept of narration which is not mono-directional, but is based on the exchange of knowledge deriving from the close connection between the *griot* and his audience, contributes to the significance of the words.

The action of the *griot* takes the form of a real performance, during which he mimes the mythic events in time with verses and music. Because of its mimetic features, this performance does not leave the audience cold, but absorbs them, through the psychosomatic pleasure deriving from its visual and auditory aspects, so that they take part in the mimetic act and become actors themselves. In this way the members of the audience completely identify with the different characters of the narration.

In fact, the relations linking the *griot* to the audience are also shown by the African words used when referring to these artists. For instance, in Wolof language, one of the most widely spoken languages in Senegal, the equivalent of French *griot* is Wolof *gewel*, which translates the phrase “make a circle around someone”, and indicates that the *griot* is the person talking to the audience, which not only listen to, but also interact with him (Valgimigli 1994, pp. 130-131).

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5 On mimesis and imitation, I refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, to his thoughts about the different way truth is experienced in art compared to science, and to the relation between knowledge and imitation: «The concept of imitation can be used to describe the play of art only if one keeps in mind the cognitive import in imitation. The thing presented is there (*Das Dargestellte ist da*). That is the situation basic to imitation. When a person imitates something, he allows what he knows to exist and to exist in the way that he knows it. A child begins to play by imitation, affirming what he knows and affirming his own being in the process. Also, when children enjoy dressing up, as Aristotle remarks, they are not trying to hide themselves […] The child wants at all costs to avoid being discovered behind his disguise. He intends that what he represents should exist, and if something is to be guessed, then this is it […] We have established that the cognitive import of imitation lies in recognition. But what is recognition? A more exact analysis of the phenomenon will make the ontological import of representation quite clear to us, and this is what we are concerned with. As we know, Aristotle emphasizes that artistic presentation even makes the unpleasant appear pleasant, and for this reason Kant defined art as the beautiful representation of something, because it can make even the ugly appear beautiful. But this obviously does not refer to artifice and artistic technique. One does not admire the skill with which something is done, as in the case of a highwire artist. This has only secondary interest, as Aristotle explicitly says. Rather, what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is—i.e., to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself […] Thus the situation basic to imitation that we are discussing not only implies that what is represented is there (*das Dargestellte da ist*), but also that it has come into the There more authentically (*eigentlicher ins Da gekommen ist*). Imitation and representation are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence» (Gadamer 2004, pp. 113-114).
The myth, the rite, the feast

Amongst the instruments used by griots to diffuse knowledge, on the one hand there are several literary genres such as myth, fable, legends, epos, poetry, that help to make the knowledge enduring; on the other the representation of knowledge itself in the shape of “multimedia performance” where the verbal text is intertwined with voice, body, mime, gestural expressiveness, dance, rhythm and ritual action.

Being the source of ancestral knowledge, of which it is the memory, myth determines the principles to be followed in ceremonies and rites representing the sacred history. Umberto Galimberti argues that mythological narration discloses a meta-history in which the meaning of human actions is described and foretold in its good ending: «In history, when the negative besets existence, the individual is not overwhelmed, because he knows that there is a transcendental, meta-historical order, that mythology is in charge of describing, in which this negativity is absorbed and resolved» (Galimberti 2004, p. IX).

In this perspective, Galimberti continues, the individual deals with the existential crisis disclosed by every negative event relying on a sort of “just like” that is reasserted by the magical rite: “«Just like in myth a series of events finds its positive solution, a similar series of events occurring to an individual, at some point in his life, will find its own solution» (Galimberti 2004, p. X).

The ties between myths and rites constitute a way of sharing cultural memory for the group, which, in this view, initiate feasts and rites. These gatherings, thanks to their regular recurrence, provide for communication and sharing of knowledge, the guarantee of identity. Through feasts, lived as primary forms of organization of cultural memory, the notion of time in societies with an oral tradition is marked by ordinary and feast time.

During gatherings and in feast times, the temporal horizon expands up to the time of creation, of origins, and of the upheavals that gave rise to the world. Thus, myths and rites circumscribe the sense of reality: the world, together with group identity, is kept in action by following, conserving and handing them down with the greatest care (Assman 2011, p. 40).

It was along those lines that the ancient Greeks interpreted the function of feasts as that of a recovery from ordinary life. In his Laws, Plato describes how the education of children and boys perishes as life goes on because of ordinary cares. «But the Gods were moved to pity for the human kind, by nature oppressed by troubles. So they established some breaks introducing religious feasts; and they gave men as companions to the feast: the Muses, Apollo, the guide of their choir, and Dionysus, in order to regulate their customs» (Plato, 635d).

Plato’s passage suggests that there are not two separate temporal orders, one for the feast and the other for ordinary life, one for the sacred and one for the profane, without any connection between them: at the origin of it all there is only one feast and sacred order influencing and steering ordinary life. Feasts structure and mark the passage of time and they therefore institute the general temporal order within which ordinary life finds its own position.
This indistinct state of the sacred and of the profane order is at the roots of the way some African cultures (Mandinka, Wolof) conceive of the ancestors’ spirits, whose wanderings and activities on the earth shape all human activities.

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