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Plato and Africa Are Not Very Far From Each Other: Interview with Musician, Story Teller, and Writer Souleymane Mbodj

Gastón A. Alzate, June 21, 2011

> *In my view Plato and Africa are not very far from each other. History, men, have distanced them.*
> (Soulemayne Mbodj)

In this interview with Gastón Alzate, Souleymane Mbodj discusses several issues relating to the interweaving of performing cultures. These include the unity of literature and the performing arts in Africa; his views on African and Western philosophy; his experience playing Bach's second prelude in C minor with Lebanese and Armenian musicians; the appropriation processes and cultural fractures resulting from colonization; and the essential value of black music in the Americas for African communities to recover cultural ties shattered by the slave trade. He shares his thoughts on the crossroads and divergences between Africa and the West regarding ways of thinking and conceptions of art. The interview took place in the context of the Kosmopolis International Literature Festival in Barcelona (March 24-26, 2011). Souleymane Mbodj performed alongside Nicolás Buenaventura and Marta Gómez in a show entitled Giving Birth: The Adventure of Thought.

***Gastón Alzate**: Why is it that storytelling and music cannot be separated?*

Souleymane Mbodj: I was born in Senegal, West Africa.[1] My mother passed on the stories to me. My mother and father used to tell me stories every day. I started to memorize them when I was five. My parents died early but left me many stories and a great desire to carry on this task. Also at five, I started learning percussion at home, always through stories and with stories, because each story has a rhythm. For example, if I have to learn a triple meter measure, such as the waltz, for me it corresponds to the antelope story because when the antelope runs it produces such a rhythm. When people say triple meter rhythm we say antelope. When we say lion, it is a 4/4 meter, because when the lion goes hunting it does so in 4/4 rhythm. This is how I learned both music and stories. There is a rhythm for every symbolic animal, a song, and a story. In Western music conservatories rhythm is studied through note reading, which is completely abstract. In Africa one learns rhythm along with words, by ear. When I tell stories I always play the music that corresponds to the tale. In Senegal we have a saying: “a story without music is like a plant without sun.” This is why in my stories there are always chants, rhythms, and melodies. Music for us is neither ornament nor decoration. Music in Africa is not an accompaniment. It does not exist separately. It is not an art that can be played for its own sake, just to be listened to. It is related to stories, animals, and the movements it generates in our bodies.

[1] Souleymane Mbodj was born in the Saint-Louis region of Senegal. As a child, he learned percussion and storytelling from his family. He studied drama and music in Dakar, after which he obtained a grant to travel to Paris where he graduated with a DESS (*Diplôme d’Études Supérieures Spécialisées*) in international economics. Simultaneously, he took courses in philosophy and the history of religion and studied classical percussion and jazz guitar at the *Conservatoire International de Musique*. He became a French citizen and currently lives in Paris. He is dedicated to the transmission of African oral literature, philosophy, percussion, and musicology. He has taught and lectured at several institutions and universities, including the CFMI (*Centre de Formation de Musiciens Intervenants*), *Université Paris-Sud*, *Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres*, and various conservatories. He frequently presents his storytelling in festivals, theaters, museums, television, and radio. Souleymane also plays jazz and contemporary music with various ensembles and orchestras, has recorded several CDs, and has published several books on African tales with Milán et Oskar Jeunesse editions.

***Gastón**: Can you talk about the importance of music and storytelling for social life?*

Souleymane: Sure. Before talking about my work, I must talk about storytelling and education in Senegal. In my country the key experiences for child development, what in the future will be the child's moral and philosophical beliefs, are given to children through tales, proverbs, riddles, and sayings. It is a highly intellectual education because we must constantly discover and decipher the meaning of tales, and solve riddles and enigmas. Education through oral literature—tales, legends, and myths—is fundamentally a lesson in civics and morals. From the moment the child is able to differentiate his right hand from his left hand, he must learn to limit his whims and control his selfishness. Children must always be surrounded by adults and this is how we go from family life to collective life without even realizing it. From very early on children know they are part of a group that is constantly engaged in activities such as celebrations with dance, stories, and percussion. This is how I started to learn stories when I was five.

***Gastón**: How did your relationship with French culture begin?*

Souleymane: Immediately after I began learning stories from my family, I also started to attend a French school, because French is the official and mandatory language of Senegal. However, in my family we speak Wolof and Fulani, two languages widespread in West Africa and almost throughout the entire continent. Wolof is the native language of 40% of the Senegalese, and 80% of the people in the country speak it. Other languages are Peul, Diola, Mandinga, and Soniké. French arrived in my life along with my parents' stories. Then, when I was eleven, I went to Dakar to study at what in France they call a *lycée*. When I was fifteen I went to drama school. In Africa, theater, dance, tales, and music are studied and produced together. We consider them the same art. They are not meant to be separated. This corresponds to the fact that Africans do not separate word, music, and the body. This is a huge difference from the West. This is very similar to what I saw in Colombia [Latin America]. Word and music are connected at the level of popular culture.

***Gastón**: What type of texts did you read when you were at school?*

Souleymane: At school I learned from teachers who knew African and European literature. There was not really a separation. For example, I learned whole fragments of *Le Cid* by Corneille. We learned it the African way, which means that it was a spoken text with a rhythm. In Africa we say: “When something is good I make it my own with my heart.” For example, if you give me a text by a Colombian poet or a Latin American story, we will take it but we will do it the African way. This is how we worked on many stories written in the West. Africa is a mixture of many cultures and has endured many encounters throughout history; some violent or forced like slavery and others that were friendlier cultural exchanges. For example, the Portuguese brought the guitar to Africa, not the Spaniards. Africans took the guitar and tuned it in accordance with African music and voice. It is a learned cultural skill. It is our way of studying, doing research, and producing new culture: appropriation.

***Gastón**: When you play the guitar do you change the tuning according to the music you are playing?*

Souleymane: Exactly. I change the chords because it is not just a matter of tuning but also the fact that we do not have semitones in the African range. We have the pentatonic and the heptatonic range. For example, the guitar in the West is tuned in E, A, D, G, B, E. We switch from E to F in order to avoid the semitone, and that is a problem when playing chords because the position of the fingers also changes. This has been the African way of appropriating the guitar. When the Portuguese brought the guitar we played it with the kora and the balaphone, which are pentatonic instruments. Since it did not sound good with the balaphone we rubbed down the wood until it did, and this is how we can play these instruments together. It is a contribution from Portugal and this is the way in which we have incorporated it into our culture. And everybody came: the Spaniards, the French, the English, the Dutch, and the Germans. We took something from every one of them.

***Gastón**: Departing from your musical background, how was your encounter with European musical training when you arrived in France?*

Souleymane: When I arrived in France I didn't know how to read music. It was all by ear, because music in Africa is learned that way, not through the eyes. We say: "what the heart says is understood by the ear." When I got to France I had already been a percussionist for the Traditional Ballet of Senegal, and I thought I was a musician. When I started at the conservatory I discovered the metronome and music reading. I had been playing much more complicated things for fifteen years but I had to study and comprehend the Western musical structure. So for five years I studied classical percussion, timbales, vibraphone, and jazz guitar. I established many comparisons between the European and the African musical worlds. For example, when I read dotted half notes, I used to see the African plain because this is how the horse-antelope runs, slowly, and also more complicated things. For example when I wrote the 6/8 measure I used to see the djansa, the dance of seduction, which is danced by many women in Senegal. To put it differently, when I see six eight-notes in a measure I immediately see this dance. This is the way I found to join together both musical traditions. The most difficult thing was counterpoint because we don't have this type of theory in Africa but I forced myself to study it in order to speak the same [musical] language as somebody who does not speak the African languages. I am not the best reader but I can speak the Western musical language. The way in which African musicians learn from an early age onwards allows them to have an excellent ear but they cannot read music. They can play anything but must hear it first. When I play with African musicians we have no score. Even though there are conservatories in Africa, music is played by way of the ear, not via the eye. These are two different ways of understanding music. Thanks to my musical education in France, I can play with American jazz players or French musicians.

***Gastón**: When you play contemporary music do you use a score?*

Souleymane: It depends. Once, I was invited to play contemporary music with the Radio France Philharmonic. I played with the leading percussionist and was forced to read from beginning to end. However, in every section I had the same vision I have always had with written music. I read the music, the measures, and at the same time I was imagining an African story. Because contemporary music produces sounds that are quite similar to the sounds of the African jungle, plains, and the forest. When I read or play contemporary music I always think of Africa. I was invited because the composer knew me, and he wanted an African percussionist in his piece. He asked me to play the djembe[2]. He wanted me to tune it for pentatonic music, the African way.

***Gastón**: And when you play jazz or classical music, how does it become interwoven with your African background?*

Souleymane: It is easy in jazz because the rhythm and the percussion are almost the same. In blues, it is even easier because it has the same rhythmic base. In classical music, it is harder. However, three years ago, I recorded a CD with my group, Trio Rhea. It was named *Bach to Beirut*. It is Bach's second prelude in C minor. I played it with Wassim Soubra, who is a Lebanese pianist, and Vasken Solakian, an Armenian musician who plays saz[3]. I played five African percussion instruments. The pianist would play the original score while the Armenian and I entered and exited the piece. We took it to the Beirut International Festival (*Festival de Francophonie*). We performed a concert and the technicians who recorded the performance told us we should make an album. We didn't think it was a good idea because Bach connoisseurs were going to call us blasphemous and disrespectful. So we went back to Paris and played it again at a church and were told again we should record it but we were still afraid. The third time we played at a jazz club and a professor, a Bach specialist who had attended incognito because we didn't know

2 The djembe is an African drum that can produce a wide range of tones when played by advanced players.

3 The Saz is an instrument similar to a long-neck lute.

he would be there, told us he would be very happy to listen to this kind of music. He said Bach's music didn't belong in a museum. It was the same African idea of taking what is good and changing what does not work. So we decided it was a homage to Mr. Bach. In a modest way, of course, but, nonetheless, we were paying him homage.

***Gastón**: How did it feel working on that? What did you do with Bach's prelude?*

Souleymane: I studied the score and realized that the rhythm is not completely precise, it is in 4/4 meter but there are also many rhythmic subtleties. I then listened to it and let myself be carried away with my drumsticks to enter the composition. This mixture of Western culture starting from the African perspective is my thing. If I had been born in Europe I wouldn't be able to do it. Because I may not know where I am going but I know very well where I come from. Africa has allowed me to understand other cultures, to appreciate Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Stravinsky, to enjoy Mahler's *Lieder*, as well as contemporary music, and all of this because I had already walked a path in African culture.

***Gastón**: How did your storytelling work develop in France?*

Souleymane: Stories and music cannot be separated, either in Africa or here in Europe. The first thing I did was tell stories on Radio France (*France Culture*), and this is how I was discovered somehow by Milán et Jeunesse editions. They asked me to write the stories that come from my family; my mother and grandfather told them to me. There are also stories of mine that join together African culture and Platonic philosophy, which I studied for a long time. I took these two sources because deep inside I don't want to be labeled "African," or "African musician," or "African storyteller." I dislike it and do not find it right. I prefer to be labeled human.

***Gastón**: Why Plato?*

Souleymane: Because Plato allowed me to understand African philosophy much better. For example, when one reads Plato on morals, or on life or death, one finds African traditions on these topics. Plato gave me theory. In Africa we don't explain things but we listen to words and stories. Plato gave me the keys to understand many of such stories from a theoretical perspective, particularly metaphysical. An example: the myth of the cave. We have almost the same story but in the African tale there is a group of men that live in a village surrounded by a forest and because of this they cannot leave. The men's thoughts, their philosophy depends on what they can see and experience in the town because they do not know the outside. One day, a goat escapes from the town, and sees the world and understands that life in the village is very limited. Departing from the goat's experience the villagers change their worldview. In Africa we have a saying: "He who travels much, sees much." That means truth does not stop at the tip of our nose. For me every individual, every people, contribute with a stone to the building of thought, of philosophy. Senegal gives one stone, Ghana another one, Colombia, why not, another one. If a person thinks that philosophy is only what has been established as a system in Europe, my words will seem ridiculous or absurd to him. For me Plato and Africa are not very far apart. History, men, have distanced them.

***Gastón**: Are there other Western thinkers and philosophers that are part of your stories?*

Souleymane: Yes, but *à la africaine*, without hierarchy or order. They are present in an intimate manner. Spinoza, for example. From him, I was interested in the history of faith. Although he received a rigorous Jewish education he put dogma in doubt. In Africa we have thinkers that may be placed between Plato and Spinoza. Every reality is nothing other than a manifestation of God Himself, which is a unique, eternal, and infinite substance. It is a naturalistic view of the world, almost animistic, for which the essential aspect is controlling passions in order to be virtuous and then reach happiness. Man, not religion, faces divine truth. What to do about this conundrum? For Africans divine truth is a revelation. Spinoza unites divine and earthly issues. Truth is explained through revelation. For Europeans this

is very Christian but it is also animistic. For us it is neither Christian nor animistic. Truth is found in revelation and every person must adapt it to his understanding and interpret it in the way in which he feels he can accept it with utmost conviction. For me that is a very African way of thinking. By reading Spinoza I got to Kierkegaard. I was particularly interested in *Diary of a Seducer*. When one enters a church, one becomes a contemporary of those who built it, people who died hundreds of years ago. I am interested in the idea that you enter a space and can comprehend why humans have built something with faith and love. It is the philosophy of love and faith departing from what has been realized. I am not a practicing believer of the church, the synagogue, the mosque, or any temple, but I respect people's spirituality. This is the reason for my interest in elements from Socrates, Plato, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, and Diogenes, for example. There is much of traditional African philosophy in the Greek cynics. Diogenes lived in a barrel in order to teach. Real *griots*[4] live under similar conditions. For Africans the real teacher, he who has wisdom, teaches under similar circumstances. He distances himself from everything and lives humbly and freely. In Africa we say total freedom is to not own any property.

***Gastón**: Like Spinoza, who did not accept a directorship at a University in order to be free to think and write.*

Souleymane: Sure. If one owns a house, one is already a prisoner. One has to find a stick to guard the house so that strangers do not enter. Even if the cynics' philosophy about absolute humility and freedom to teach is very far away in time from us, it is very close to the African way of thinking. Diogenes left the academy and any institutions and went to live in a barrel. Seneca is also close to this worldview, which has allowed me to go back to Africa through Western philosophy. Studying philosophy has helped me reencounter and rethink African thought and tradition. I have found a universal philosophy, not in the Eurocentric sense but in an inclusive sense that melts together all human philosophies.

[4] Griots are storytellers who are masters of words and music. They maintain the memory of the community and perform many other key societal roles.

***Gastón**: What is the building process in your stories? Do you depart from an African tale and little by little start incorporating elements of Western philosophy?*

Souleymane: Everything I narrate relates to what I believe in. When I write a story I take the motif from the African oral tradition that I know, and I join it together with the old Greek philosophical tradition, or other traditions, like Maimonides'. He is another philosopher from the Middle Ages who is of great interest to me, because he made an effort to link faith and reason. I take the elements I care about from diverse places. As beautiful or interesting as an element may be from a narrator's perspective, I always start from something I strongly believe. I may read and enjoy other things but I don't talk about those. As I said before, I do not have a label on my forehead saying "African," "Parisian," or "Senegalese." I believe this way of facing Western culture and other cultures in general is what has allowed me to know the world, to know you, for example. If I had stayed in Africa inside the African formal tradition it would have been very hard for me to see others. There are people who can do it but it is really difficult. If the door is closed, and my house has no windows, I cannot see what is going on outside.

***Gastón**: In another conversation you mentioned that in your country every musician plays a social role within the community, that there is a connection between what is played and the social role of musicians.*

Souleymane: In Africa, the musicians whom we call *griots*—which can also be women—have a special place in the community, but among instrument players every instrument also has a special role. For example, he who plays the dum dum must first learn all the other drums, because dum means deep and it is the heartbeat. It is the Ph.D. of instruments, and when you get to play it you are already old. You must first know all of the other languages. For example, when I began to play, I learned Bambara, which is the language of Mali. Then the one from Guinea, and when I got there the first thing the master asked me was if I had learned Bambara. If I hadn't I couldn't be there. After five or six years my master told me "this is the limit to my knowledge, now you must go learn the language of such and such," and so on until the master tells you: "Since you already know all the languages you must now take care of the whole house"; and it is when you play the

dum dum, you can now play with anybody. Of course, when one gets there one's hair is already gray. This is why we say that the elder plays the dum dum, even if he is young, because it is a manner of speaking. An elder in Africa is the one who knows, the age doesn't matter.

***Gastón**: How would you compare these roles with those in Western ensembles?*

Souleymane: Maybe the most important difference is that the one who plays solo in Africa is the novice, the apprentice. In the West the one who plays solo is supposed to be the best. The typical rock guitar player is the star or the pop diva. In Africa this is the one who knows the least, who doesn't know all languages. This is why he is in charge of improvisation, because he is searching for the road. A road she or he has lost. But the one who takes care of the rhythm is the one who must fix things when the improviser gets lost. He is the one who reminds him of the right road, what music should be, and from which the novice mustn't stray too far, but just a bit due to his inexperience or lack of knowledge. This happens in all kinds of music, be it traditional, classical, jazz, or contemporary. He who keeps the beat, using maybe the bass or the contrabass, or sometimes the director, is the one who allows improvisation but gives notice to the divas and soloists to go back home. In Africa this is only possible because of the elder. Without him everything would be chaos. The good musician plays with others. A soloist is unthinkable in Africa because he is not performing according to the essence of music, which is listening to others. The ideal would be having, at the same time, the technique and the company. Artists, if we may use that term in Africa, are the intermediaries between god and humans. And this also happens with sculptors, poets, not just musicians or storytellers. Those who offer happiness and knowledge to others are the intermediaries because men cannot understand the gods by themselves.

***Gastón**: What is the relationship between music and the gods?*

Souleymane: In Africa we believe that many gods retire. For example, the god of rain. People make the rhythms, the specific chants to get rain, but if, for example, the rain doesn't come, the god of rain is fired. People go in search of another god, and in order to do that they need a musician-storyteller because artists can make that connection, the mediation. However, today with globalization, modernity has ruined this a great deal. Traditionally musicians only worked with music. The community would build his house, would provide him with food, every year peasants would give him part of their crops, rice, beans, bananas, dresses for his wife, so that he could only play. It was a life dedicated to artistic creation and communicating with the gods. An artist cannot be a musician today and a construction worker tomorrow. If an artist must earn a living it should be through music and through teaching music and storytelling to children. He is the people's maker because he is part of the process of transmitting tradition. Transmission is a very important word in Senegal. For sculptors who make masks and for theater artists it is the same thing. This is how society was organized. After colonization many things changed. There were universities. Historians must learn there, and those who do not attend are just peasants and should stop doing music. We had the government which came from France with French law. For example, many shamans were jailed for practicing traditional medicine. This happened because there was a law in France then that stated that it was unlawful to practice unofficial medicine. To put it differently, during colonization those who kept the traditional knowledge of the community went into hiding because they were very afraid of being sent to prison. Now not only us, the natives, but people from European universities go into the bushes to find shamans who can explain to them about certain roots and plants, which they know are good for our health, but the damage has been done.

***Gastón**: Obviously, it was unthinkable for African people that something traditional could be illegal. How was music affected by French colonization?*

Souleymane: No African would have ever thought that something from nature, which was intended to heal, could be a reason to be jailed. But a European could because it somehow threatened their power, the hegemony of a type of science, and rationality. So, in order to protect their families, people in Senegal stopped talking about the tradition until it was almost extinguished. Only very recently Western culture understood there is more than one way of thinking and understanding medicine. What is paradoxical and contradictory about it is that such a way of thinking goes against Greek philosophy, which is supposed to be the cradle of Western philosophy. Knowledge in Greece was not dogmatic, it was open; one could contest others' ideas, and a philosopher could oppose his master. But the colonial system, as many other institutions do, forgot its own essence and denied other thought systems. The same thing happened with music. Not even curiosity led people to listen to it; it was simply labeled as inferior. It is only in modern times that Western curiosity has tried to fix such errors. And the reason for doing this is a negative one: the West has exhausted its musical search, got to the limit of its superiority, and now is in need of the others. Many Africans do not know their traditions because they were educated in the colonial system, and they were sent to the conservatory in Dakar. By doing this they were not allowed to be part of the transmission of the tradition. This is, they can read music but as we say in Africa "they cannot listen to music." Obviously, with independence, this situation began to change, but it is a very recent change from a historical perspective, since 1960, and from 1965 in many countries like Mozambique. It was many years, three hundred years, of damage to traditional cultures.

***Gastón**: How has this lost cultural dynamic been recuperated?*

Souleymane: To a great extent by following the steps of the slave trade, because those who left as slaves took those traditions with them and, due to the isolated life they had in America, kept them. Meanwhile in Africa, the elderly died and the young were educated in the colonial system. To put it differently, there was no continuation in the transmission of tradition, which is so important for keeping culture alive. By following the path of slavery we have been able to recuperate stories, tales, myths, and we have reencountered folklore. It is possible to say that real African music is in Latin America. Musically speaking, slavery made people from different places in Africa play together, for example all of those who were in the Western coast: Benin, Togo, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal. All of those closer to the coast were enslaved, but once they got there [America], and even on board ships, they did not speak the same language. In order to communicate they had to play the drum and this is why they kept and transmitted the tradition. We lost many of those languages during colonization. Before, a town could speak to another by playing the drum. When the Cubans began coming to Africa in the sixties and seventies (and many are still coming), the old percussionists told their pupils: “listen to this because it is the original drum.” The African paradox is that in order to learn how people played in the past one has to go to the Caribbean, Cuba, Puerto Rico. When I listened to the musicians in Cali (Colombia), I knew it was the pure rhythm, and not just the rhythm. There was a boy who sang in a really high pitch. A voice we have lost. This register is ethnographically studied in universities, it is something isolated that does not exist as a tradition anymore. We say it is a voice from the soul, with a really high register because the soul leaves the body. We call it “ba,” which is the soul going away. Something similar happens with Cuba and Brazil. They have rhythms we do not play anymore. There is a gap that lasted three hundred years. Somehow we have the two ends of the process: the moment of departure (what is played in Latin America) and what is left after the colonization process (how people play nowadays in Africa), but there is a huge gap between both. What we can do is try to establish a connection between both ends of the rope to whatever extent possible because there are many things that are irrevocably lost.

***Gastón**: It seems like music had, and still has, a paramount role in bringing together people who suffered immense cultural fractures.*

Souleymane: I would almost say that it is the element that saved us from total dispersion. There were two very serious problems as a result of slavery, which have been solved by music, or at least music has shown the way to solve them. Whether or not people choose to use that road is another thing, but the road is there. The first one is family separation. Families, like cultures, were divided. The father was taken to New Orleans, the mother to Jamaica, and the son to Cuba. Same for those who remained in Africa. We lost the experience of a life within a family structure. Those who were taken as slaves and the few of us who remained had another type of community organization for three hundred years, based not on the family but on leaving home. So many blacks in the U.S.—and in many other regions such as Guadeloupe—follow a kind of dynamic without knowing why, in which the man leaves the home. It does not matter if he is happy with his wife and sons, if he works, has a brother, or ten children; he still must go. It is a cultural impulse that comes from slavery, an ancient memory. The second product of slavery is the existence of the mulatto. Black crossbreeds were inevitably children of improper relationships between the white master and a black slave, the result of rape, and that has produced an intermediate race that was not accepted from the beginning by either whites or blacks. Even in the sixties Billy Holiday could not go to a hotel for whites, because she was mulatto, but she could not go either to the hotel for blacks because she was not black enough. Music has partly solved these two major dilemmas that even today afflict the black communities in America and Africa.

***Gastón**: How does it do that?*

Souleymane: The music brought us all together: the orphan, the fatherless, the mulatto, the single mother, because in music if you sing and play the rhythm, you speak the language. You are part of the tradition, regardless of your skin color; you either play or don't. In blues, jazz, and Afro-Cuban music, there has been a coming together of African rhythms, Western harmonies, Spanish melodies, Arab and Christian melodies. The music, in this sense is a very serious thing; it is not entertainment. It can be as important as a religion, as a philosophy. Like a doctrine, which brings together a community, not by fanaticism but by its power of congregation. It can resolve irreconcilable problems. Obviously, we have understood what happened also with the help of history, anthropology, philosophy, and literature, and this has made it possible to have a process of recovery of the memories lost over three hundred years.

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The original interview was in French; it was translated into English by Paola Marin.