



The Contribution of the Griot Kulba Baaba Seebeeri to Cultural Renaissance in Niger

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Article History

Received: January 25, 2021


Revised: February 24, 2021

Accepted: March 2, 2021

Published: March 6, 2021

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the heroic songs of the griot Kulba Baaba from Niger. It aims at contributing to promote culture, especially the Songhay-Zarma one, through cultural Renaissance in Niger. It puts emphasis on the respect of the principles of the constitution by encouraging the Nigerien citizen to have certain moral values such as courage, dignity and loyalty. Its core focus is to show that oral literature can be one of the means to sensitize the Nigerien citizen to a change of mentality for the well-being of the nation.

Keywords: Heroic poetry; Culture; Cultural renaissance; Moral values; Courage; Dignity; Loyalty; Kulba baaba; Niger.

1. Introduction

To justify their arrival and settlement in Africa, the European missionaries qualified the Africans as peoples without “culture”. For Henri Lopès (Quoted in [Chevrier \(1986\)](#) :

Deux données ont longtemps été utilisées contre l'Afrique subsaharienne : le petit nombre de monuments, l'absence de bibliothèques. L'Occident en a tiré argument pour justifier sa « mission civilisatrice » auprès des « sauvages » sans culture. Depuis lors, l'étiquette n'a pas été facile à arracher et ses morceaux collent encore à notre peau. (Two data have long been used against sub-Saharan Africa: the small number of monuments, the lack of libraries. The West has used this argument to justify its "civilizing mission" to the "savages" without culture. Since then, the label has not been easy to tear off and its pieces still stick to our skin.)¹

It is still true that “its pieces still stick to our skin”. But while “cultural renewal” is regaining interest, managing cultural awareness has become one of the central challenges of our period. The [Human Development Report \(2004\)](#) warns that:

“at a time when the notion of a global “clash of cultures” is resonating...around the world, finding answers to the old questions of how best to manage and mitigate conflict over language, religion, culture and ethnicity has taken on renewed importance.” (7)

In fact, the issue of cultural Renaissance for socio-economic development is a current concern for researchers in the world in general, particularly in Niger. I am personally interested in this theme which focuses on cultural values that is likely to lead the people of Niger to a change of mentality in order to face the stakes and challenges of development.

The influence of culture has been understood by the African leaders, the Head of States in first position, who manage their best to implement cultural awareness through a set of moral values in their countries. The expressions of these values enable a people to be in harmony with itself, identify itself, recognize itself in its distinctive features and be on good terms with other peoples.

Since the Pan African Cultural Art of Alger in 1969, a lot of meetings were convened on the African cultural issue. In 1976, at Port Louis, Mauritius Islands, the tone was set by the Head of States through the adoption of the African Cultural Charter. Several decennials went by and meetings succeeded to each other: Nairobi, Bamako, Brazzaville, Libreville, Abidjan, Dakar, Paris... The Head of States gave directions through the adoption in 2006 of the charter for African Cultural Renaissance (by the 6th Conference of Head of States) which channels and gives accurate axis for the control of our destiny, in terms of culture. Despite this displayed disposition there is a lot to do.

In this paper, I intend to study the contribution of the oral artist Kulba Baaba Seebeeri to cultural Renaissance in Niger. To do so, I will show how the oral artist incites his audiences to value their cultures by developing qualities

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

such as “courage”, “dignity” and “loyalty or devotion”. By choosing to work on cultural Renaissance, my purpose is to highlight positive cultural values, from Sekou’s songs, that can be the pillars of national integration, development and well-being in Niger and in Africa. In fact, as the [Human Development Report \(2004\)](#) warns the world,

“If the world is to reach the Millennium Development Goals and ultimately eradicate poverty, it must first successfully confront the challenge of how to build inclusive, culturally diverse societies.” (7)

2. Methodology

This paper is an analysis of the epic songs of Kulba Baaba Seebeeri on the issue of cultural Renaissance based exclusively on a library research. The theoretical support of this paper is an interdisciplinary approach based on a mix of linguistic, sociological, anthropological and literary perspectives. Kulba Baaba brings his contributions through the promotion of some social values such as: courage, determination, integrity, honesty, hospitality, dignity, loyalty, so on and so forth. But, who then is Kulba Baaba Seebeeri?

3. Discussion

3.1. Kulba Baaba

Even though he is well known as Kulba Baaba, this name is not his true name. It is a nickname. His real name is Moumouni Sékou. Moumouni Sékou is a *jasere*. A *jasere* simply means a griot in the English language. Both his father and mother are *jasere* too. He was born in 1899 at Seebeeri in the district of Kollo, the region of Tillabéri in the Republic of Niger.

Talking about the most famous *jasere(s)* of Niger, [Bornand \(2005\)](#) writes: “le plus ancien d’entre eux est Koulba Baba, de son vrai nom Moumouni Sékou. Né en 1899 à Sébéri dans le canton de Kouré (arrondissement [aujourd’hui département] de Kollo), il est mort à Niamey en 1975. Tant son père que sa mère étaient d’origine *jasere*. S’il a d’abord appris son métier auprès d’un oncle paternel, il s’est ensuite rendu en Côte-d’Ivoire et Mali auprès du grand griot malien, Bansouma Cissoko.” (the oldest of them is Koulba Baba, whose real name is Moumouni Sékou. Born in 1899 in Sébéri in the Kouré canton ([today department] of Kollo), he died in Niamey in 1975. Both his father and his mother were of *jasere* origin. If he first learned his trade from a paternal uncle, he then went to Côte-d’Ivoire and Mali to meet the great Malian griot, Bansouma Cissoko.)

Before his death, he composed many epic poems such as: Soumayla Gakoy, Mayatchi, Sambo Soga, Gorba Dikko, Jibrilla, Sourou, Fatima Bidaani, Jelaajo and Hambodeejo Paate. ([Mounkaila, 2008](#)) affirms that : “Moumouni Sékou dit Kulba Baba est l’illustration du talent multiforme de ces *jasere* diseurs professionnels qui excellent aussi bien dans la relation de textes de haute facture comme l’épopée, que dans celle de récits récréatifs, ... ou de fables sociologiquement édifiantes... » (“Moumouni Sékou known as Kulba Baba is the illustration of the volatile talent of these *jasere* who excel in the relationship of high-quality texts as well as in the recreational stories, ... or sociologically edifying fables ...”) Only the poem of Soumayla Gakoy will be analysed in this paper.

Moral values or qualities are found in the oral compositions of Kulba Babaa which are essentially epic songs and we know, as [Kesteloot \(1971\)](#) puts it, that:

Par son sujet et par son envergure, l’épopée se présente donc comme une œuvre importante. De plus, elle exalte les qualités morales majeures : la bravoure, le sens de l’honneur, le sens du dévouement, la fidélité à un pays, aux compagnons d’armes, à la parole donnée, l’horreur de la lâcheté et de la trahison ; ce sont des qualités nobles et viriles que tout jeune homme souhaite d’acquérir. L’épopée lui propose des modèles.

By its subject and its size, the epic is therefore an important work. Moreover, it exalts the major moral qualities: bravery, the sense of honor, the sense of dedication, fidelity to a country, companions in arms, the word given, the horror of cowardice and betrayal; they are noble and virile qualities that every young man wishes to acquire. The epic offers him models.

The government of Niger Republic has the same objectives as Kulba Baaba. Through the program of Cultural Renaissance implemented by the Ministry of Cultural Renaissance, Art and Social Modernization, the Nigerien government aims at encouraging and promoting cultural values by putting emphasis on behavioral qualities such as those developed by Kulba Baaba in his epic narrations. Like Kulba Baaba, the Nigerien leaders come to the evidence that for a country to develop, its populations must be aware of their positive cultural values.

Culture is defined by the [Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary \(1989\)](#) as “art, literature, music and other intellectual expressions of a particular society or time. The customs, arts, social institutions, etc. of a particular group or nation.” Moreover, the charter of African Cultural Renaissance affirms “that any human community is necessarily governed by rules and principles based on culture; and that culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive linguistic, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of the society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

So, culture occupies an important place in the process of development as mentioned in the program of Cultural Renaissance: “La culture étant un des leviers des transformations sociales, politiques et économiques, la modernisation du pays ne peut s’en passer. Il faudra donc recenser les valeurs séculaires sur lesquelles la société peut s’appuyer pour amorcer son développement. » (Culture being one of the levers of social, political and economic transformations, the modernization of the country cannot be achieved without it. It will therefore be necessary to identify the secular values on which society can rely to initiate its development.)

3.2. Courage

One of the best characteristic moral values promoted by Kulba Baaba is courage. The same dictionary mentioned above defines courage as “the ability to control fear when facing danger, pain, opposition.” Kulba Baaba incites his listeners to be like their forefathers who, in their life time, showed great courage and determination. He calls his audience to be brave. Bravery is a quality that normally should be found in any individual from the society. He calls his listeners to be courageous and convinced about all the project that they intend to fulfill and to give themselves the means to reach their goals. One example is provided through the hero Soumayla Gakoy whose name has been given as title of the poem.

In fact, Soumayla unknowingly lost his dearest wife who had been married by one of the biggest warriors Hamali Seyni of the neighboring kingdom. When Soumayla got the information, he decided to go and take his wife back home. The decision of facing the kingdom of Hamali was a courageous one, but the courage of Soumayla on the battle field is worth mentioning:

Abinde na guwo jare;
 A na daɗ kuray wo-ne ra;
 A naa saatu; a koy fatta.
 A ye ga guwo jare,
 A na a dan I ra koyne;
 A na laawal ka, kala wando nda izo do;
 A na Bara candi no-din.
 A ye ga bare nda a;
 A na guwo jare kala, kala a kanda
 Ga candi wando nda izo jine,
 Kala ce-bandey furo wando cire;
 A na foobu ga ka;
 Hala a ga du sorro hinza,
 Kala wangaari hinza kaɗ go ga kay!
 Curo wala gorɗo si koyne.
 Boro kaɗ bu, bu;
 Boro kaɗ na ni boɗ ceeci, na ni boɗ ceeci.
 He then took his horse
 And threw him on one side of the enemy army
 That he swept to the end
 and did the opposite way with the horse
 he stepped a second time into the army.
 having made a large breakthrough, he returned again to his wife and child
 and braked his mount
 Then he went back on the back of Bara
 Brought him back to his wife and son
 The hind legs of the animal almost under the woman's legs
 he then removed the animal;
 He took it up again and left for a third gap,
 But he found only the three warlords.
 There was no soul alive in the place! not a guinea fowl; not a hen!
 those who could not escape are dead;
 Those who could do it, fled to preserve their lives.

Cultural Renaissance is but the reappropriation of these different values as stated in the program of cultural Renaissance:

La Renaissance Culturelle est une dynamique d’appropriation par les citoyens, des principes et valeurs socio culturelles fondamentales, endogènes et exogènes, axés sur le progrès en vue de produire chez eux une prise de conscience leur permettant d’opérer individuellement et collectivement les changements qu’exige la modernisation sociale, politique et économique du pays. Il s’agira de créer les conditions de renforcement de nos capacités d’action collective, renforcer la cohésion sociale, consolider les institutions démocratiques, promouvoir une économie compétitive en mettant en contribution nos valeurs culturelles. (6)

(The Cultural Renaissance is a dynamic of assimilation by the citizens, of fundamental, endogenous and exogenous socio-cultural principles and values, focused on progress in order to produce an awareness that enables them to operate individually and collectively the changes that requires the social, political and economic modernization of the country. It will create the conditions for strengthening our collective action capabilities, strengthen social cohesion, consolidate democratic institutions, promote a competitive economy by bringing our cultural values into play.)

3.3. Dignity

There are many ordeals in life and Kulba Baaba asks his audience to overcome them with dignity. Not to follow paths of corruption that lead us to the loss of self-esteem. Dignity is a serious quality defined by the *Longman*

Contemporary English Dictionary as « the ability to behave in a calm controlled way even in a difficult situation. The fact of being respected or deserving respect. » The illustration of such a quality is shown through the family of the beautiful lady married by Soumayla Gakoy. Before the griots discovered her, they lived in extreme poverty that they had to live the town they were living in for the bush.

Still, their situation never pushed them to commit immoral acts. That is the reason way the mother of the beautiful lady was surprised and anxious when she found her daughter very well dressed. After scrutinizing her for a while, she questioned her worriedly:

Nyaŋo na a guna beene, a na guna ganda;
 A ne: « ay ize, man no ni di jinayey wo?
 Ay diraw banda,
 Ni koy ga ni boŋ neera no »?
 A ne: « wallahi, ay mana ay boŋ neera, ay nya ;
 A ne yawey kaŋ go tuuro cire,
 Ngey ga ay noonda »
 A ne « ni ga i bay no »?
 A ne: « ay walla si i bay;
 Maabe yaw yan no ».
 A ne : “dey, mate kaŋ ay nda ni baaba bara nda wo,
 Talkataray se i di gai ri wow
 Kala iri ye kwaaro banda,
 Nga no ni ga koy di maabe yaŋ jinay ka ta”?
 She looked at her daughter from top to bottom.
 My daughter, she said: where did these clothes come from?
 During the time I was absent,
 Did you go to sell yourself, or what?
 By Allah, she said, I did not sell myself
 It's these strangers under the tree
 Who offered me these clothes
 But where do you know them from?
 I do not know them, she said
 They are Mabé griots of passage.
 You who know what our situation is for your father and me;
 Who for indigence, had received so many insults
 That we had to take refuge outside the city;
 How could you accept the gifts of unknown griots?

From the above passage, it is easy to notice the lesson taught by Kulba Baaba. He wanted to remind his audience the secular value of dignity which is theirs since old time. He drew the attention of his listeners to preserve their moral values no matter the situation. The father of the beautiful lady has the same reaction as his wife when he sees the sudden change of his family members. He asked the two ladies what they had gone through or had they committed what they should not done.

3.4. Loyalty

Loyalty is another quality treated by Kulba Baaba in his poetry. According to the same *Longman Contemporary English Dictionary*, loyalty is « the quality of remaining faithful to your friends, principles, country, etc. » It is the quality of being honest and strong about what you believe to be right. A quality such as loyalty is highly promoted in the cultural Renaissance programme : « La Renaissance culturelle s'appuiera sur des valeurs issues de nos traditions dont la diversité est avérée et les valeurs universelles qui offrent un modèle de comportement exemplaire pour le citoyen nigérien. » (The cultural renaissance will be based on values from our traditions whose diversity is proven and universal values that offer a model of exemplary behavior for the Nigerien citizen.) The following two passages are examples of loyalty in the text of Kulba Baaba:

Baabo ne I ma koy izo hã ;
 Izo ne, i ma si nga hã ; i ma nga nya hã ;
 Zama nga wo,
 Da i ne, tuuro wo kaŋ cire ngey bara,
 Da I ne tuuro-wo ka ti nga kurnye,
 Nga si miiri tiksa ga,
 Ga koy tuuri fo cire koyne,
 Kala da a bu wala nga bu !
 Hay kaŋ i ga te kulu i ma te.
 The father says, the answer belongs to my daughter.
 The girl replied that it was up to her mother to decide.
 Because herself, as far as she is concerned;
 If his parents gave her the tree under which they sit,
 In place of husband,
 She will not move from its trunk

In search of another tree,
Until death separates them, she says.
In this passage, the beautiful lady is showing respect and loyalty towards her parents.
A ne, nga kurnyo na nga hiiji ga ka sojo,
A mana bay hala nga ya wayboro no;
Ba nga fafey, a mana kambe dake i ga.
Nga mana nga boŋ taŋ a se mo
Sanku a ma kambe dake i ga.
Nga ga miila kurnye go nga se banda se.
Dey, da ya no nga bay a ga kokoro nda,
Doŋ nga ga gay ga nga boŋ te a se wande.
She tells him that since her new husband married her,
He was not able to see whether she was a woman or not;
That he has never even been able to put a hand on one of her breasts,
Not allowing him to dare to think about it,
All the more reason to fondle them!
Because she thought she had left a husband behind.
Alas! if she could have imagined such a lapse,
She would have offered herself as a wife for a long time.

In this second passage, the lady is showing loyalty to her husband. The loyalty of the respectful lady to her parents and husband is so deep that she is ready to sacrifice herself. For her, the satisfaction of her parents and husband comes before her own. The message of Kulba Baaba in these two passages is to put forward the common interest. The individual interest will come later for it is linked to the common one. It is also an address to the citizen to ask what they have done to the country first instead of asking what did the country do for them. For him, if only the Nigerien citizen can respect the values of courage, dignity and loyalty he would contribute in a large extent to the development of the country.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this analysis of the heroic songs of Kulba Baaba has thrown some light on the crucial role that can be played by oral poetry in the process of socio-cultural and economic development of Niger in particular and Africa in general. The epic singer Moumouni Sékou better known as Kulba Baaba sings about positive cultural values that are in harmony with Cultural Renaissance in Niger. He has shown that cultural values such as courage, dignity and loyalty can be a good foundation for the development of a country.

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