

**Bakary Sidibe and Ulla Fels**

# **Changing Times**

**A West African Patriarch  
tells His-Story**



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Editing: John Kirby  
Cover: Doris Peiter  
Publisher: tredition, Hamburg, Germany

ISBN

Paperback: 978-3-7323-9138-7

Hardcover: 978-3-7323-9139-4

eBook: 978-3-7323-9140-0

Printed on demand in many countries

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## Meeting Mister Sidibe

This book is about a person who introduced me into the complex historical, social, cultural and political background of his country. I tape-recorded our long conversations about his life during and after colonial rule and about the traditions and values of his West African Mandinka<sup>1</sup> society, which was part of the pre-colonial Mali Empire. My husband and I travelled with him, not only to different places and countries, but also into the past and we were led into the history of West Africa, which until today is hardly taught in European schools. This inspired me to edit and compile those interviews in the following book and to combine them with some of my own notes.

The first time I met Mister Sidibe was in 1988. Though the sun was about to slip below the horizon it was still hot. After a long, exhausting day of film work our all-female German Television crew was recovering in a little seaside restaurant. There we got to know Bakary Sidibe in the company of mutual German friends. He was introduced to us as head of the national Oral History and Antiquities Division of the museum in Banjul, the capital of The Gambia; a gentleman about the age of fifty-five, dressed in a grey, two-piece suit with a

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<sup>1</sup> Mandinka - part of the Mande, one of the largest peoples in West Africa (Mali, Senegambia, Guinea Bissau up to Guinea Conakry).

short-sleeved jacket, an attire state officials often wore in those days.

When he heard how little time we had scheduled for a total of five eight-minute films, he simply remarked: *Only someone who has no idea about this country can try that. Nobody else would dare.* Indeed, it was only a week later, while we were working on our last film that he had to bail us out.

In the meantime, we had travelled hundreds of kilometres on dirt roads and trails, bursting into remote villages, persuading people to co-operate in film projects they simply could not understand, putting our foot in it again and again by our much too direct and overhasty attitude. Finally, totally tired, we had arrived at our last destination in a village called Kusamai. For the following day, we had planned to shoot a film about talking drums and everything was scheduled to go like clockwork, because the day after we had to catch our flight back to Cologne.

But already in the evening - again, self-inflicted by ignorance of local habits and manners - we were caught up in a quagmire of contradictory and increasingly bewildering statements about our request to film in this village. Finally, the village chief turned down all attempts by our author to learn something about the talking drum the fast way. He stated categorically: *We won't let you hear the drum without reason, otherwise the people in the surrounding villages will think there is really something bad happening.*

Now, with the help of our German friends, Bakary Sidibe was called upon to be our trouble-shooter. In a cloak and dagger operation our author and the driver picked him up in his hometown Serekunda a hundred kilometres away. When he had arrived in Kusamai he explained our interests to the village chief in his own words. Half an hour later he had saved our film project as if by magic. The situation had

turned around and the atmosphere started to be relaxed and almost cheerful. The reason for this change of mood was not only his knowledge about the traditional forms of politeness unknown to us, but also his personality. Slowly I understood that Bakary Sidibe was not just some senior official, as I had originally thought him to be. In reality he was very influential in this country for reasons I did not know back then.

That night it got cold for the first time. Our interpreter Yusupha offered us a little hut populated by ants as the only possibility to stay over. We refused it vehemently. Eventually we ended up sleeping on bare wooden benches in a more or less unused kindergarten. A European development project!

The next morning the drummer started beating a Búgarabu, a big drum of the Diola people in Senegambia. We set up our camera and sound equipment and Bakary Sidibe instructed us in the various rhythms. Even the villagers now seemed to be having fun with our filming, though they had been totally reluctant to participate the night before. By playing different rhythms the drummer informed them about the following matters: *A fire has broken out! We need help with a common work project!* and *You must come altogether to greet an important person!*

Following these announcements, more and more groups of people coming from various directions gathered in the village square. The whole event reminded me of an elaborate, expensive fiction-film production. The only thing that seemed to be missing was a crane, from which the square could be filmed with the deployment of the people.

Later that day we ended up at a funeral service for an old lady. Drumming is normally men's business, but here the female contemporaries of the dead were drumming the traditional burial rhythms. Young women were singing playful

songs: *At last we got rid of you and we are happy that you are gone.* This kind of humorous insults is called sanawuya – joking relationship. It was their way of saying goodbye to the deceased, one of their grandmothers, even if they were personally affected and sad.

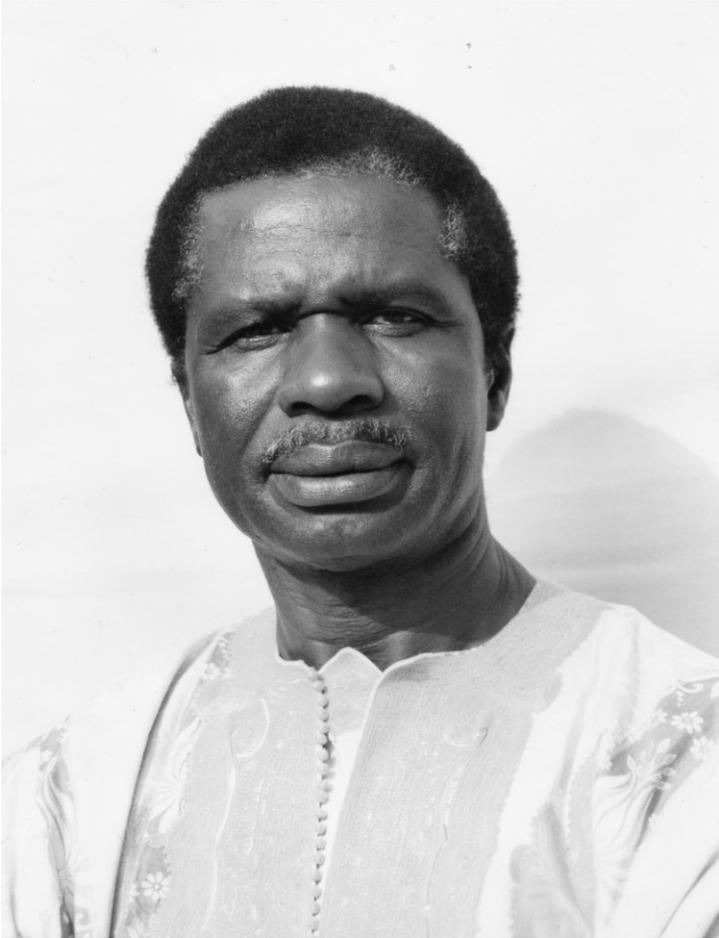
To learn more about these joking relationships was one of the reasons why I participated in this project as sound engineer. And every day I found out more about them. I often imagined how our own relations, not only with family and friends but also with strangers, would change if these institutionalised relationships were to be integrated in our European way of life; or if German labourers and employees could express themselves openly to their bosses as it is possible between the members of the castes and the so called free people in the West African joking relationships.

Even before our departure I decided to come back to do further research on this subject for a radio feature and a documentary film project with the assistance of Bakary Sidibe. One year later I returned with my husband. And this was not the last time.

Over the last twenty-five years we have travelled again and again through Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau. Bakary Sidibe was always our mediator and informal teacher. Without him we would never have been able to establish such close contact with the people, which was so helpful and important for our various projects.

Considering the many African refugees seeking Asylum in our rich European countries nowadays and our total lack of knowledge about their social background, Bakary Sidibe's stories about his life and his extensive explanations about diverse aspects of his society could be a helpful approach to feeling more connected with the newcomers. More knowledge about their social context helps us to understand

them as people with their own history and values. The details in Bakary Sidibe's stories also show us how the destabilising influence of the colonial rulers on the traditional social, economic and political structures of African societies still affects the life of the people even today. Their young men with no employment and no perspectives at home are now seeking their fortunes in Europe.



Bakary Sidibe

*For in remembrance there are no distances;  
and only in oblivion is there a gulf  
that neither your voice nor your eye can abridge.*

(Khalil Gibran: *The Garden of the Prophet*, 1933)

**2014 in Serekunda / The Gambia:** It is still dark, but I am happy to be on solid ground again. Twenty-five years ago, I used airplanes like busses; I stayed calm even if bad turbulence over the Bay of Biscay or heavy rainy-season storms came up, while the people around me were crying out loud with fear. Today my mind seems to be clouded by horrifying global announcements of terrorism and air crashes. What has happened in my innermost being? Did I in the past not let this kind of incident get under my skin because of my enthusiasm for new ideas and projects? Or did they really happen less often?

Anyway, back then I always loved to arrive in The Gambia very early in the morning, touching down on that single bumpy, red clay landing strip; Yundum airport itself was dimly marked by a few lights. Its only building was an open hall with a corrugated iron roof, where easy-going officers opened and closed passports and briefly rummaged with one hand through the suitcases which had been brought to the customs control on an old trailer tugged by a small even older tractor. Well visible behind the barrier, the waiting porters and drivers would dash out at any pale-faced, overtired person leaving the airport. I loved the ride in one of the shaky taxis or Bakary Sidibe's old VW in the still pleasantly mild dawn. The closer we came to the city the more often gas-lamps and charcoal fires lightened up the market stalls on the roadside where sales women were preparing breakfast for single clients. I loved arriving at Bakary Sidibe's large compound in Serekunda with our single-storey house in the back yard. The house was not ours; but my husband and I had helped to finish building it, so we could stay in the centre of events and not in a hotel during our work on radio and TV projects. In front of the house we had planted hibiscus and castor beans, on the property walls banana plants and in the middle of the garden an avocado tree that was still so

small that it was fenced in to be protected against the goats prowling around; it would be years before it started to bear fruit. The watchman, still sleepy, would open the big, red gate and help us with our suitcases. We usually fell right into bed and slept till noon. Then, feeling well rested, we went to greet the whole family.

Bakary Sidibe's second and third wives were living with their nine children in a duplex one-storey building on the front side of the compound which was protected from a very busy thoroughfare by a high brick wall that was overgrown with bougainvillea bushes in perennial bloom. A big old mango tree shaded the large yard between the building and the wall. Bakary Sidibe's office was located in a smaller out-building, where one of his daughters from his first marriage was staying as well. He had divorced her mother a long time ago, and we never caught sight of her. Their seven children were all grown up.

The two other wives had studied in the USA. One worked for various Government Ministries, the other for several development projects for women. Two or three maids worked in each of their households. They went shopping, cooked the meals and cleaned the rooms. Every day family members and friends came for a visit; some of them stayed only a short time but others settled down for weeks.

As head of family, Bakary Sidibe had to solve existential problems every day – settling a dispute, finding money for somebody who needed medical care, paying water or electricity bills, repairing the brakes of his car - and of course he had to deal with his own work.

All his life he dedicated himself to the development of his country. As a young man, he worked together with English scientists on the scripturalization of Mandinka, his native language. Later he gained national acclaim as a teacher thanks

to his innovative methods regarding literacy training for children and adults. In 1958 he was one of the founders of the first national party in The Gambia, and in 1971 he established the Cultural Archives, soon called the Oral History and Antiquities Division in Banjul, which was under the direct control of President Jawara's office. As managing director of this institute, Bakary Sidibe did pioneer work in the research of Oral History in West Africa.

Eighteen years later, at the age of fifty-five, he was forced to retire. This early retirement age was based on an old standard, set by the former British colonialists for their state officials working abroad. Still in impeccable health but entitled only to a very small retirement pension, he continued his scientific research on the history of Senegambia as a freelancer. His work was primarily funded by foreign research and development projects or endeavours like ours. Yet his commitment contributed considerably to the enlargement of international networks and scientific recognition of his country.

But let's go back to our arrival in 2014. A modern, well-secured and illuminated airport with restaurants and a shopping mall has replaced the shabby old building. The greater part of the rural area between airport and town has fallen victim to new houses and commercial-buildings - some finished, others under construction. On the roadside, my husband and I rarely see any charcoal fires and upon our arrival I do not recognize Bakary Sidibe's compound anymore. The garden, where the children played and sweet potatoes and maize grew a few years ago, has given away to multi-storeyed buildings - three on the main road, two behind them. The big mango tree and the old buildings where the maids had to put buckets under the holes in the roof when it rained heavily have been cleared away. Bakary Sidibe and his wives planned ahead for themselves and their

descendants and got things settled for the future by dividing up the property. But the red iron gate leading from the side road into the backyard is still there, and the avocado tree we planted many years ago, now provides ample shade for the porch and entrance area of the flat house, where we had stayed so many times.

Bakary Sidibe welcomes us in front of the house. These days he lives here by himself. The walls that once separated the two flats of the building have been removed; now, several sofas, armchairs, a TV and a dining table fill the big living room. On each side of that area two smaller private rooms are located. The kitchen is situated at the back of the house; it is the domain of the maids.

For some years now Bakary's second wife has been working in the Gambian Embassy in Washington. His third wife is now the executive director of the Women's Bureau in The Gambia and travels a lot. Their children have left and most of them are married. But the young relative who picked us up at the airport lives right next door to him in a small annexe, which also contains Bakary Sidibe's office.

On this first day of our visit a question is raised in our discussions that I have never asked before, because most of the elders born up-country in West Africa don't know their exact date of birth.

**Bakary Sidibe:** I think I am eighty-six now. I do not really know how old I am. But when my brother died a couple of months ago, we found a paper that showed he was eighty-nine, and he was always my elder brother. Two to three years older than me!

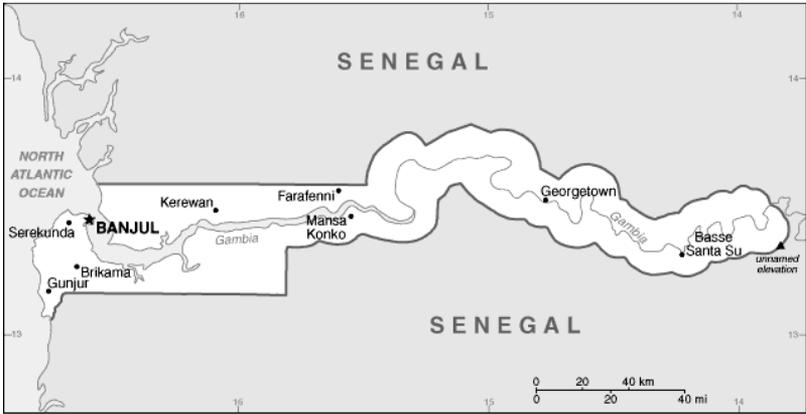
After lunch with chicken-legs in peanut sauce and rice I start to read to him my tape-transcriptions of the stories he

told us more than twenty years ago, about growing up in The Gambia.

**Bakary Sidibe:** It's very interesting, I did not know that I put so much detail in it. My memory must have been better in those days to remember all this and put it down in this proper sequence.

**Ulla Fels:** Like a griot...!<sup>2</sup>

**Bakary Sidibe:** All I need is a kora<sup>3</sup> player.



### The Gambia

In 1995 Georgetown was renamed Janjanbureh

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<sup>2</sup> Griot -- in Mandinka: jali, traditional caste of musicians and oral historians.

<sup>3</sup> Kora - instrument of the griot.

## Childhood and Youth in Georgetown

**Bakary Sidibe:** I grew up in Janjanbureh on an island in the river Gambia. The British colonialists called Janjanbureh Georgetown and the island McCarthy Island after Charles McCarthy, the Governor. They allocated the best parts of the island to Akus to settle there. Akus were liberated slaves and Euro-African half-castes brought over from England and other countries like Sierra Leone at the beginning of the 19th century. They occupied Georgetown, and I grew up in that environment under the influence of those people. The Akus provided the teachers because they were Christians. But although we were Muslims, we could go to Christian missionary schools. We also had access to the church. Sometimes we went there and observed them practicing their religion. We listened to them singing songs we did not know and saw the goblets they used. In fact, we thought that we needed some of those as well, because they looked nice. Not to drink wine out of them, but to put them up in our houses so we could look like a toubab, a white person. And I believe we did that! (Laughs).

Georgetown was really a happy little place. You had the Akus there. You had the migrant traders, who had moved from their hometowns and established themselves. You had chiefs from neighbouring places who came to the island to

go shopping or see the British Commissioner, and of course some other Englishmen lived there as well.

Once I had a fight with a British Commissioner. We went hunting and were after a hippo, but we did not find it. So, we had to row the boat all the way from Georgetown to the end of the island. All three of us got tired, but the Commissioner just sat there and did nothing. So, I said: *You'd better get up and row too, because we are tired!* He looked at me as if I was some kind of an upstart. I said: *You have to row, because otherwise we are going to put down the oars and just sit down like you.* (Laughs).

Later I also had a fight with his English assistant. He was very fond of pushing people into the river, finding out whether they could swim or not. And I was waiting, because I knew he would do it to me one day too. But I never told anybody what I was going to do to him. When he came to push me, I held him as if I was going to wrestle with him. I twisted my legs around his legs, so we were going down together. He put his hands up and said: *All right, I'll let you go!* I said: *You'd better not push me anymore, or we both go down!* (Laughter). I was about fourteen and already a strong wrestler. After that he left me alone.

I could not understand why they felt superior. Why they could treat me like a slave, do what they wanted with me or frighten me. I could not understand this at all! That's why, when I came to Bathurst<sup>4</sup>, today Banjul, I had a difficult time, because I saw how provincials were treated there, and I could not understand this. Why did they think they were

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<sup>4</sup> In colonial times today's capital Banjul was called Bathurst, The Colony. The provinces up country were called The Protectorate. But from now on I will use the name of the capital Banjul in this book.

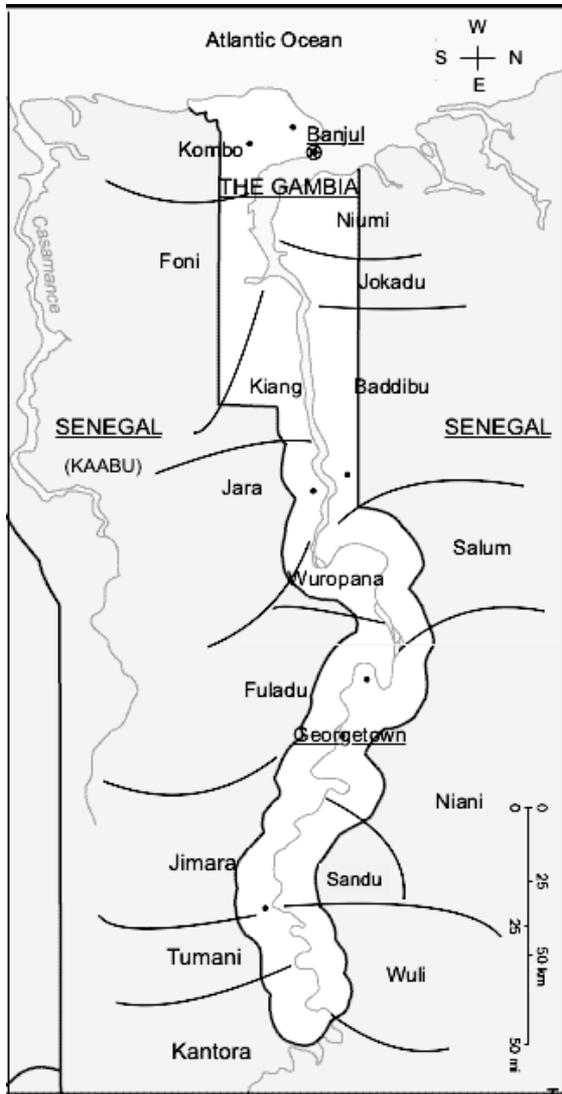
superior? I always felt that the people of the provinces - the natives, as they called us - were the original owners of the entire country, and therefore had prior rights over others who came later to join them by virtue of the colonisation of the country. Therefore, I also could not understand some African Banjulians, who took on the same attitude as the whites and thought they were superior. Why should they think they were better than the people who established the pre-colonial states along the Gambia River - the so-called provinces? They just copied the attitude of the British, and their European education placed them in positions that we provincials never held. Some of them were clerks and wore British clothes, and appeared very nice and orderly, while we wore our baggy traditional clothes. That's why they thought they were better. (Laughs).

Georgetown on McCarthy Island was a very important commercial centre, because of its historical connections to the whole region of the upper river, for example Niani, Jimara, Kantora, and Wuli<sup>5</sup>, which were some of the pre-colonial states of the Mali Empire. There was no Sami at that time; it was all Niani up to Sandu and Wuli. And Niani and Wuli kept quarrelling over Sandu; each of them felt it belonged to them.

From all these areas Georgetown attracted migrants, who brought their own cultural features with them and had tremendous influence on this little town.

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<sup>5</sup> See the map on the next page.



The colonial border of The Gambia and the borders of the Gambian River States around 1891

Up till the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Portuguese were the first Europeans to use the island as an upcountry trading centre and they kept most of their goods there. Back then juulas, long distance trading businessmen who primarily lived in the Wuli area, brought them commercial items in their little boats. And gradually most of the Africans who had a commercial link with these juulas began to come to the island as well to exchange their goods, which they brought from the interior: slaves, hides, ivory, gold. By the turn of the 18th century a small village called Janjanbureh had grown on the island, which had formerly been farmland belonging to the Niani people.

In 1823 the British took over this provincial centre of trade and established Georgetown. The English Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries built one of the first churches in West Africa and a school, to which all the children of the Akus - the freed slaves - went. It was to this Methodist school that my father and I, among many others, were sent later on. It is still there.

At about the same time, the British moved away from James Island, which was located in the delta of the Gambia River. The island had been an important gathering point for the transatlantic slave trade, but now the British founded Banjul as their main settlement on the coast. In Georgetown, the streets, the trading posts and the walls along the river were laid out just like in Banjul.

Georgetown continued to prosper and people kept coming. My father and his father were born in this hub of enormous commercial activity, where different cultures from west, east, south and north mingled. It was not until 1888 that British colonial rule began to take shape. But their relationship with the village chiefs and rulers of the different Manding states upcountry along the river had already begun a long time before.