

**Debra S. Boyd**

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## *A Man from the River Niger:* Kélétiogui Abdourahmane Mariko

On Wednesday, December 3, 1997, Kélétiogui Abdourahmane Mariko (1921-1997), one of Niger's and the African continent's treasures, joined the ancestors. "Le vieux Mariko" (Old Mariko) or "Dr. Mariko" as he was affectionately and respectfully called, was indeed a man of extraordinary scientific and literary gifts who was greatly admired in the African community for his wisdom.

I met Dr. Mariko in 1992 during the second year of my Fulbright lectureship in Niger Republic.<sup>1</sup> Immediately I was drawn by the incredible energy and passion that he displayed at a time in his life when most people his age were in retirement. At 75 years old he was the living icon of the literary and political history of Niger. One of Niger's most prolific writers, Mariko's area of expertise consisted of socio-historical studies of the different ethnic groups of Niger, cultural studies, the preservation of oral history through folktales, memoirs and poetry. His preoccupation with Afrocentric concerns is clear in his books: *Les Groupements paléonégritiques nigériens (Black Nigerien Groups of the Palaeontologic Age, 1985)*; *Les Touareg Ouelleminden (The Ouelleminden Touaregs 1984)*; *Souvenirs de la boucle du Niger (Memories from the bend in the River Niger, 1980)*; *Le monde mystérieux des chasseurs traditionnels (The mysterious world of traditional hunters, 1981)*; *Sur les rives du fleuve Niger (On the banks of the Niger river – short stories, 1984)*; *Gizo da Kooki ou le roman de l'araignée en pays haoussa (Gizo da Kooki or stories of the spider in Haoussa land, 1988)*; *Poèmes sahéliens en liberté (Sahelian poems at liberty, 1987)* and also in the multitude of articles that he published on Africa.

Dr. Mariko's knowledge of African mysticism, beliefs, rituals, and cultural wealth places him in the same category as Amadou Hampâté

Bâ, Boubou Hama, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo. In a way similar to the experience of Birago Diop, he was able to collect oral tales through his veterinary assignments in several West African countries. The son of a military officer of Bambara descent and a Hausa mother, he also traveled much during his youth.

Although trained and educated as a veterinarian, Mariko demonstrated his anthropological tendencies. He created his own museum of artifacts that documents and authenticates the geological history of the Sahel. Most importantly he was committed to environmental issues. For several years he was the President of SOS Sahel International and directed the Niamey bureau at the time of his death. His last book, *La mort de la brousse (The death of the savannah, 1996)*, underscores the desertification crisis and the deterioration of the green environment that he once knew as a child. His labor was not limited to inscription on paper. Mariko owned several acres of land in areas of the Niger basin near Niamey. He stressed the importance of trees to the survival of the land and was involved in agricultural and health endeavors. Under his direction SOS Sahel-Niger was instrumental in the construction of medical clinics in isolated villages.

Mariko probably had the most extensive personal library in Niger. There were bookcases and shelves of books in every room of his home and a vast library at his museum on the left bank of the river. Scholars and students from Africa and Europe frequently used his facilities.<sup>2</sup>

My experiences with Mariko led to the production of a film about his life.<sup>3</sup> There was never a dull moment in his presence. He was endowed with "le don de la parole", the power of the spoken and written word. In fact, he had file cabinets full of manuscripts that he had yet to publish. I will always remember being with him in his office in April 1993 when he received the news of the accidental death of another Nigerien literary genius, Mamani Abdoulaye.<sup>4</sup> *Le Sahel*, the daily newspaper, contacted him for his immediate response. On the spot he offered a compelling tribute to the late author who was also his friend.

I feel honored to have known Dr. Mariko and to have been considered worthy of his time and attention. Although he is now physically absent, all is not lost. I have the books that he autographed and gave to me and especially the wisdom and knowledge that freely flowed from his lips. As one of *Le Sahel's* journalists, citing Hampâté Bâ, so well put it regarding Mariko "la mort n'existe pas chez les Africains, elle est perçue comme un simple déménagement" ("For Africans death does not exist; it is seen as a simple relocation").

This interview is essentially an extract from the documentary film *L'Homme de la boucle du fleuve Niger: un portrait de Kélétiogui A. Mariko* (*The man from the bend in the River Niger: a portrait of Kélétiogui A. Mariko*) with a short excerpt from an interview in *Rencontres* (*Encounters*), Niamey, Niger).<sup>5</sup>

Heritage! Gado!

Nothing is more valuable than heritage

Say it

Repeat it

Nothing is more valuable than heritage

Because culture is heritage.

Cultivating millet grain

Raising cows

Melting iron

Sculpting masks

Knowing how to fish or hunt

All that, I tell you, is heritage.

Getting married, becoming engaged

Naming the newborn

Or burying the dead

All that, you need to know, is heritage.

Heritage, you are so hard to preserve

Because beneath all heritage hides a secret

A secret bequeathed in confidence

Confidence that comes from knowledge, experience and understanding.

(From: K.A. Mariko, "Heritage" [Galgajiya –Tradition] in *Poèmes sahéliens en liberté*, 1987: 9).<sup>6</sup>

**Boyd:** *Tell me about your origins and your childhood?*

**Mariko:** I am near the 76<sup>th</sup> year of my life. I was born in Zinder on February 21, 1921. My father was a veteran of the Armed Forces; he fought with the French troops during colonial occupation. He retired from military service at Zinder and died there in 1925. It suffices to say his name and all who knew him or had heard of him would say that he was a great man, a hard worker, a good man. And I benefited from his reputation for my own success in life. And my hope is that in the same way that they speak highly of my father that I will be highly spoken of. I desire that my children follow my example like I patterned myself after my own father and other great men that I have known. My mother

was a Hausa from the town of Tessoua. I grew up in the privileged neighborhood in Zinder. It was a section inhabited by military veterans, government workers and foreigners who were brought in by the administration. So it was an active and lively community. There was a regional French school for the children of this evolved community that had eight classes or grades. I only stayed in some of the grades for three months before being promoted to the next grade.

At that time when we would come home from school in the evenings our mother would take us to Koranic school to learn. And I can say that going to Koranic school helped me a lot. All of my life everyone who knows me says that I have a memory like an elephant, a sharp memory. It's because I went to Koranic school. The children who didn't attend public school would go to Koranic school morning, noon and night. Those of us who went to the French school only went to Koranic school at night. What our comrades learned by going three times daily we had to learn all at once during the night session. So we had to stay at evening Koranic school longer than the children who did not attend the French school. Early in the morning, when the muezzin would call adults to prayer, we would wake up, light fires with wood or millet branches for the Koranic school hearth and we would start our lesson. Also, during that time in Hausa land, every evening blind men, *marabouts* and *griots*, those to whom I refer in my writings as "popular, unpaid educators," very learned blind men, *marabouts* and storytellers used to go to the large public squares in the city to tell stories, tales, fables, legends, myths. They would recite the history of the Prophet Mohamed, tell the story of Pharaoh and Moses, the history of the great religions, stories of what happened long ago.

And I thank God for having directed me to the veterinary profession. Thanks to my profession I can say that I know the traditions of at least sixty to eighty black African ethnic groups: Touareg, Arab, Toubou, Peulh and others. Why? Because during colonization the veterinarian had to make rounds and therefore he relocated frequently.

*How and when did you start writing? What inspired you to become a writer?*

Concerning writing I can say that in the 1940s while completing my veterinary studies and after, I was fortunate to meet men of culture, writers like Fily Dabo Sissoko in the French Sudan. He was the District Superintendent's teacher. There were other men like Amadou Hampâté Bâ; he was an expeditionary and interpreter before being assigned to

the French Institute of Black Africa. There was Ousmane Socé Diop, writer and veterinarian I must also mention Birago Diop, veterinarian and writer. In fact, there were many educators, civil servants, white and black, that everyone recognized as being highly educated men. And I admired them. I wanted to be like them. And that's what pushed me to start writing. I had to leave Niger and go elsewhere in order to be able to write. Léopold Senghor invited me to Senegal. I wrote *Souvenirs de la boucle du Niger*, while in Dakar between 1976 and 1978. *Les Touaregs Ouelleminden*, *Sur le rive du fleuve Niger*, *Contes sahéliens*, *Des Groupements paléonégritiques nigériens*, *Le Monde mystérieux des chasseurs traditionnels*, all of those books I wrote during the three years that I stayed in Dakar.

*You had a career as a musician.*

[Excerpt from the interview in *Rencontres*] I can tell you that before I became a poet or began writing poems I had been a musician and instrumentalist for a many years. While I was in the orchestras in the big cities like Bamako, Kita and Gao I produced songs; I composed pieces of music as an artist, as a composer but I am not a *griot*. I played several instruments: the mandolin, the banjo, the guitar, the cornet, the trumpet, three types of saxophone, the clarinet and the flute. I employed these musical instruments to express my daily thoughts, the joy and the disappointments of my life.

*What are your most recent publications?*

I managed to publish *La mort de la brousse* last year. I sent another manuscript, *Le Sahel, desert, sécheresse, famine* (*The Sahel, desert, drought, famine*), to explain, according to oral tradition on one hand and science on the other, the effect that the Sahara Desert has on the countries in the Sahel region.

*I have heard many accounts of your role in the struggle for human and civil rights in the Sahel. How and why did you become involved?*

Yes it's true that I was involved in the struggle for human rights in the Sahel. It was a very difficult period because the French and the British were the first two colonial powers who desired to change the status of the colonized. Great Britain created the Commonwealth and, as for us – French subjects – we were poured into the French Union with the title of citizen. Before that time, we were mere subjects. We had no rights; we did not have the right to express ourselves, no political rights, no rights at all. We were French subjects. From one day to the next, after

the end of World War II, a constitution was drawn up and we were declared citizens of the French Union.

This situation did not please everyone. There were white French men from the metropole who were not happy. They said “whitening a nigger’s head is a waste of detergent.” This meant that the Negro could not learn anything. There were Black French citizens like certain Senegalese from Dakar, Saint-Louis, Gorée and Rufisque, the four communes, who also were not happy to see former subjects become citizens of the French Union and have the same rights that they had.

Twenty-one years ago in 1975 in Nouakchott, Attar, Boukilit, and Shindit in Mauritania you used to see Blacks tied up at the neck, feet and hands and taken to the market to be sold like animals, like beef steer. The French administration had not managed to suppress the practice. And the independent Mauritania had not succeeded in stopping slave trade. Slavery was not officially abolished in Saudi Arabia until 1962. And there are countries like Sudan, Somalia and others where even today the practices of forced labor, captivity and slavery survive.<sup>7</sup>

I can tell you that while I was a veterinarian in Ansongo and was a civil servant of the French overseas department, I fought for Blacks like myself. I did it everywhere that I served because I cannot tolerate injustice. When the Germans invaded France in 1914 our fathers went to fight to liberate France. In 1945 we went, the people of my generation went to liberate France. Should we allow the French to come back to our country and continue to mistreat our brothers just because they have not been to school?

*What is SOS Sahel International?*

SOS Sahel International is an NGO – non-governmental organization – for development that we created in Dakar. Here in Niger I can tell you that our main preoccupation is the struggle against desertification.

*Please speak about Kélétigui Mariko, the husband.*

**Dicko Sidibé (Kélétigui Mariko’s wife):** He is a husband like all husbands. We were married in 1947; that makes 50 years of marriage. I believe that it was the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1947. And since that day we have been together with the joys and sorrows and that’s normal. But since I got married to him, if you see that I can speak a little French, it’s because of him because he has always spoken French to me. When I was young, to speak French or to go to school was a problem for girls, and even today it’s not easy. But thanks to him I have learned to speak French

even if it's not good French. I manage. So when he used to speak French to me, I would answer him in Bambara. I was somewhat ashamed to reply in French. Then one day he said to me: 'if you never speak French you are going to forget the little that you learned in school'. And so it started like that. Then he told me that I needed to read. I had thought about reading... But with the grandchildren here now I no longer have time. Otherwise, I like to read. I read a bit of everything. Some things I understand; others I don't understand. At times I will ask him the meaning of words, "what does that mean?" He answers me and tells me the meaning. And that's a part of the story. *Alhamdulillah!*

*You own several pieces of property "derrière le fleuve," on the other side of the river, near the road that leads to the Burkina Faso border. The vegetation here is green and rich; the villa is large and spacious. How often do you come to this home?*

**Mariko:** This villa has ten bedrooms. I built it for myself and for the children. On holidays and Sundays when we want to get a rest from the city, we come here. My library is in the villa, which also serves as a reading room, laboratory and meeting place.

*You have amassed quite a bit of land and provided an example of the importance of agriculture and horticulture.*

I believe that leaving these four pieces of land that have been well cared for 40 years will be the greatest good, the best inheritance that I will leave to my children. Throughout my experiences working in Black Africa, I have seen many civil servants, both active and retired, businessmen and laborers whose main concern was to be able to leave a valuable plot of land as an inheritance for their children. And before death, to leave a testament asking their children to bury them on their land, on their property, and stipulating that their children should never ever sell the property. Because 100 years later, even 200 years later, when people talk about the land or talk about that family, one can show the tomb of the ancestor who cultivated the land, where he himself was buried, so that his descendants can have a starting point to talk about the history of their family. That's my wish and what I will ask my children and my wife to do. The day when God calls me in I will ask them to bury me on one of my plantations. I have chosen this one; I want them to bury me here. And I pray that one of my children will never ever sell the parcel of land where I am buried... Because I can be for them a starting point for future history.

## Notes

1. I visited the following countries as a Fulbright Scholar in African Studies: Senegal 1983-1984; Niger Republic 1991-1993 and Mali 2000-2001.
2. Thanks to the financial and logistic support of the Franco-Nigérien Cultural Center, to the technical assistance of the National Archives, of The Institute for Research in Social Science, (IRSH) of the University Abdou Moumouni and the generosity of Mariko's family, this valuable documentary source has been transferred to the Nigérien National Archives in Niamey [eds.].
3. Apart from the late Kélétiogui Mariko I have also interviewed the following distinguished Nigérien writers and artists: Abdousalaam, Moustapha Alassane, Maman Barkah, Djingarey Maïga, André Salifou and Shaïda Zarumey and the late writers Mamani Abdoulaye, and Idé Oumarou.
4. See Jean-Dominique Péné's contribution on Abdoulaye Mamani, his life and work in this volume [eds.].
5. *L'Homme de la boucle du fleuve Niger: un portrait de Kélétiogui A. Mariko* (directed, produced and written by Debra S. Boyd). It was my first film in the "Genius of the Sahel" short documentary film series. The credits are editor: Paul Donnelly; Professional Video Services; Winston-Salem, NC; camera: Djingarey Maïga; DAM Films; Niamey, Niger; sound: Adamou Sadou; DAM Films; Niamey, Niger; format: BetaSP, 26mm; distribution: Culture Encounters, P.O. Box 16405, Winston-Salem, NC 27115-6405, USA.
6. "L'Héritage! Gado! Rien ne vaut l'héritage./ Dites-le, répétez-le./ Rien ne vaut l'héritage/ Car la culture est héritage./ Cultiver le mil ou élever la vache./ Fondre le minerai de fer/ Ou sculpter un masque./ Savoir pêcher ou chasser./ Tout cela, je vous le dis est héritage./ Se fiancer, se marier./ Baptiser son nouveau-né/ Ou inhumer un mort./ Tout cela, sachez-le, est héritage./ Héritage, tu es lourd à garder./ Secret légué dans la confiance./ Confiance née de la connaissance/ De l'expérience, et de la compréhension." (K.A. Mariko, "Heritage" [Galgajiya –Tradition], *Poèmes sahéliens en liberté*, 1987: 9).
7. Unfortunately, vestiges of this practice also exist in Niger. The non-governmental organization, Timidria dedicated to fighting against such illegal remnants of abuse of human rights, is currently in conflict with the government for sullyng Niger's image. At the finalization of this volume this organization's president is under arrest and a demonstration is taking place in support of his liberation (May 2005). Timidria recently received large financial support from Anti-Slavery International. The government claims the organization received the money under false pretence [eds.].