

■ reviews, news & interviews

Rokia Traoré: Dream Mandé: Djata, Brighton Festival 2019 review – resonant griot wisdom

Home truths as Malian tales transfix the South Coast

by [Nick Hasted](#) | Thursday, 23 May 2019

[+ Share](#) |



Rokia Traoré's passage through this year's Brighton Festival has been central, binding it to her Malian identity in a series of gigs. This hands-on Guest Director's pulsing Afro-rock Opening Night was followed by the first Dream Mandé show's recasting of traditional sounds. A Malian Dance Night added FGM protest, Seventies s.f.-soundtracked myth and cheeky wit from young choreographers. But this show is surely Traoré's cornerstone, supporting all the rest, as she takes on the role of griot to recast Mali as democracy's secret rock.

The griot's role at the root of West African culture, orally transmitting culture over centuries from within a restricted caste, is a familiar backdrop to contemporary musicians' stories, as a tradition drawn, excluded or broken from. Traoré simply becomes a griot for the audience sitting somewhat uncertainly in the incongruous 19th century Theatre Royal. Wearing ripped jeans when she launched the Festival, tonight her dress billows beneath her like Lewis Carroll's wisdom-dispensing caterpillar's mushroom seat. Without preamble, she begins her version of the Epic of Sundiata, the foundation legend of the Mali Empire, which flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries, leaving mediaeval England in the shade.



An ngoni and a kora player provide a constant backdrop, subtly shifting rhythms and giving folkish lilts within melodic cycles, as Traoré sings with customary control. She speaks with a steady, hypnotic, husky voice, which drops and cracks as if scraped readily thin by endlessly telling such tales. Making the Theatre Royal's stage an unfamiliar ritual space, she is enacting the role of ancient griot (having learned from the real thing back home, somewhat more matter of factly, you'd suspect).

This performance requires patience and quiet, giving little quarter and only slowly releasing its narrative riches, as Traoré takes us to the court of Naré Maghann Konaté. Much intrigue and stories within stories follow. There are social details of hunters' mystical attuning to nature – the Traoré tribe being their elite - and courtly virtues, where women know “how to wear the right smile”. A quest to kill a rampaging buffalo echoes universal childhood tales, as the heroes enter a glade where “all help from outside our deepest nature will be in vain”, and an old crone proves to be the buffalo, advising on her own defeat. The animistic dream-states of modern, rural Thailand in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films come to mind.

Finally, Traoré steps out of her tale with its point, as the Mali Empire is built on the Kouroukan Fouga, an oral constitution including, in Traoré's reading: "No one will put the bite in his mouth of his fellow man"; and "power has never made a small mind greater". Wikipedia-level research hardly worthy of a griot suggests slavery persisted in the Empire, though with strictures allowing rest and barring mistreatment. "It is important to have our own version of our own history," Traoré anyway reasonably states. "Long before slavery, long before colonisation, Africa had a civilisation." She calls the Mali Empire the first democracy. "We are," she says, "proud." As the period's English kings hadn't a pot to piss in compared to Mali's lavishly generous Muslim emperors, Eurocentric history certainly needs revisiting.

Traoré finishes by singing with resonant strength, head up, staring straight at us. Like Sidney Poitier in America's Sixties, she sometimes seems to carry pride and dignity on Mali's behalf, refined and perhaps restricted by her role's weight. The lessons she is leaving in Brighton are worth it for us.

