

# Parallel Lives and Intertwined Narrations. Identity Paths Between Life History and Historical Processes

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## Abstract

In this article the author reflects on how to textualize the life history of a Senegalese artist of a griot family (Badara Seck) who actually resides in Rome, without forcing the data into a different conception of being a person. First, there is an exploration of the nexus between the self's conception, genealogy and history, which emerge from Badara's words and which are widespread among some Wolof speakers. Second, the author approaches the life history and the genealogical narrative and constructs an organization of particular materials to reflect on the ways in which some historical processes- the changes in griot way of life from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial period and the migration from Senegal- and joined rhetoric- the public presentation of the self, widespread among some Wolof- are diffracted through a life's story. Finally, an epistemological reflection is presented on the life history as a metaphor for the cognitive process in anthropology (and not only), considered as a spiral movement between literary imagination and scientific rigor.

**Key words:** *anthropology, life history, narration, migration, genealogy, griot.*

## The Story of a Life or the Story of a Family?

«So this is, for me, this book's general idea: it's my story and *une généalogie* of *tutte une famille*, it's not only Badara because my past, the familiar point of view behind me, was a big griots' arena which made a lot of different things, which crossed religious, political and social movements in Africa, which changed the griot point of view».

(Interview with Badara Seck, Rome, January 12<sup>th</sup> 2008).

«*Personally traveling little worlds and different stories I understood that cultural anthropology, at least the type that I like, doesn't study the cultures' general laws but the ways in which, within individual lives, a culture is learned, played, interpreted, transformed. For me culture is nothing without the individuals who live it and for whom it's a kit without which they couldn't exist, but a kit they act in different ways according to places and times, and in ways which [...] we could call "individual freedom". It is this "freedom" which produces in us who read the "marvelous spectacle" and often unexpected, of a life narrated from inside a culture, of a culture narrated from inside a life*» (Clemente, 1999, p. 23).

It was three years ago when I met Badara Seck, Senegalese singer of *g'ewël'* family, who now lives in Rome. In some respects, the circumstances of our meeting reflect the «dis-orientation» of the situation nowadays- I more and more understand that which, according to James Clifford, characterizes the contemporary historical situation: «*Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth*» (Clifford, 1988, p. 15).

In fact, it's «in the adjoining neighborhood» where I met Badara: in my mother's house.

In those days, my agenda was to construct a «perspicuous representation» of the migrant phenomena in Rome through the connection of different “families” of life histories. In particular, I was interested in the ways some migrants try to recreate a horizon of meaning and operability in the landing context. In the beginning, the work was articulated in some general questions: How is the identity's process structured when- to quote Clifford again (Clifford, 1997) - the roots are in transit? How are the traditions transformed, replayed and translated in a new socio-cultural context?

To explore such territory, life histories could be «an extraordinary methodological tool» (Clemente, 1999). Nevertheless, my project was too large; should I focus my attention on a specific migrant group's life histories or on an individual story? I came close to a first answer when I begin seriously asking: what are the methodological and epistemological challenges, ethical implications, emotional involvements, and political stakes involved in oral accounts' textualization? It is not a simple question, and trying to answer will involve a long journey around the epistemology of the social sciences' (and not). Here I limit myself to taking into consideration some ethical, methodological and epistemological implications about what textualizing Badara's life history.

From the first conversations I guessed that I had to place more closed limits on the research project. It was the first time I had tried to textualize another person's life story and I had not yet thought enough about the intricate fabric of events, persons, stories and places that makes everyone «a crossroad» (Clemente, 1984). As Valentina Zingari efficaciously write:

«*A single interview, a single story constructed in association with other stories, creating complex networks of references of a stratification of times and facts brought to the limits of the one's experience. [...] The narrative territories trace paths which from the intimacy of one's biographical experience bring one to overlook large landscapes*» (Giuffrè, Lapicciarella Zingari, 2010, p. 127).

I found out quickly. In fact, when I asked Badara to narrate his story, he said to understand his path it was necessary to talk about his ancestors- both the matrilineage and the patrilineage-, the West African griots and to read the whole background of some religious, political and social processes. Only in this way- and in that my interlocutor demonstrated a very refined anthropological sensibility- we would be able to bring out the larger story- that theatre of characters and historical processes which brought him to be who he is- a background without his narration couldn't have meaning.

Reflecting on this first talk I understood that «tell me your story» didn't mean the same thing to both of us: whereas my question was anchored to an individualistic conception of the subject, his answer was directed to point out the relations, bounds and processes which formed and proceeded to inform his identity. And not only that, also very far apart was our understanding of ways the textualization of his life history would take on meaning: for me it was the chance to examine how some social processes and joint rhetoric are diffracted in particular ways and acquire thickness in individuals tales; for him an occasion, maybe through a book's publication, to augment his visibility and to promote his status.

A set of interrelated questions came out: how to organize and read the data of our meeting without forcing them into a different conception of being a person? And first of all: from Badara's point of view, what is the relation between identity and genealogical narrations? What is at stake in textualizing the life of a public persona? Until what point it is possible to account for the relationship which ties the anthropologist and his subject of study?

The narration and textualization of a life story are complex processes that, at least in theory, can last for the duration of a relationship (and so far, at least for the second). A life history is an inter-subject product taking form in the relationship between who solicits the tale and who tells it. As the relationship evolves, so does the story. From this perspective it's necessary to speak about the relationship between the anthropologist and his interlocutor (Crapanzano, 1984; Watson, Watson Frank, 1995; Giuffrè, 2007).

In these three years, according to the roles he ascribed me in different contexts, Badara presented me as: a friend, his biographer, a griots' scholar, a sort of brother-in-law, a confidant, an assistant for the Italian translation of the stories which he alternates with songs in almost all his concerts. I read in my diary from March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008:

«The relationship with Badara is a boat in a tempestuous sea. Our meetings are more frequent and the roles are replayed through practices tiled in different contexts. When I come to his house in Labaro I'm a guest, but also a scholar who is interested in griot tradition, a friend who won't refuse a lift to Ciampino airport for his "sister", a Westerner, an Italian. When we explain the research project to L., he presents me as a kind of biographer who comes to him morning and night: "because sometimes I don't have the right inspiration to speak, so he has to come back another time". When we go to a farmer to buy a sheep he presents me as an African and so the breeder says to me: "Does it rain like that in your country?"»

After my stay in Dakar from February to April 2009, guest of his family, the range of roles widened; I become almost a brother-in-law, with a Senegalese name: Ablaye Seck. Nevertheless, the variation continues and Badara in Tivaouane- a small town 90 km north-east of Dakar- speaks about our project in different ways with different interlocutors: with his cousin, coordinator of the traditional communicators, he tells of a book on different kinds of griots; with his "aunt" Penda of a tale of the family's story; with his brothers and sisters of a dissertation on his life and genealogy. At first his sentences could appear as a contradiction. But, once the nexus between

genealogical narration and public self-presentation is examined, these appear as different declinations of a single project.

The genealogy: «You are what your ancestors made you. Your ancestors are what you make of them»

As I anticipated, Badara also said that before we could speak about his life it was necessary to know his family and genealogy. Or better, from his point of view, there wasn't a clear cut line between the two terms. In fact, among the Wolof the answer to the question: «Who am I (and so Who are you)?» can be entrusted to specialists, the *gëwël* experts in memorizing the genealogical links which contribute to structuring one person's identity, roles and status. We find out a person's self conception is grounded in a bundle of relations both synchronic and diachronic. Badara's answer reflects a rhetoric mechanism wide spread in the griot way of life, according to whom- the story and identity of a person is strictly tied to what remains of his ancestor's life. Is in this vein I speak of parallel lives and intertwined narrations: to underline Badara's reference to his ancestors, some of them never known, as allegoric figures to reconstruct the story of his life.

According to Judith T. Irvine (1978), the Wolof precision in reconstructing genealogy is extraordinary, if compared with other Africans peoples like the Nuer, Tiv and Lwo- classic ethnographic examples of genealogy as a reflection of present political relations in the past. The American scholar confirms this precision through correspondence between colonial administrators' maps and the place and person names present in griots' speech events.

But, such correspondence risks obscuring the difference between the *gëwël's* conception of history and our own. Wolof genealogy tends to be, at the same time, flexible and historically well- structured. On one hand, the more and more you go back and date the ramification of the genealogical tree, the characters whom you speak about, often gifted with magical powers, could hardly have the same position in a history written according to Western historiographical standards; on the other, the speech is only a single expression (a kind of *parole*) of a wider map (a kind of *langue*), from which the performer, according to present requirements, chooses to follow a definite path and to tell determinate stories.

For many Wolof genealogy is still the fundamental device used to establish a person's status and identity. His declamation during a speech or song of praise serves to raise his profile, and in turn he will give a sum of money. Through this, the griot performs the status, the corresponding behavior's patterns and the related interlocutors' identity; the performer not only connects the listener to important past persons (his ancestors and patron or client) and, brings moral examples through the stories he tells, but also sees that the reaction of the listener corresponds to his identity (Ebron, 2002).

Genealogy can assume different forms according to different situations: recited in metrics during a song of praise; simplified when taught to young griots; explained in informal speeches; written by a familial group who, desiring to "save" its own past from oblivion, starts the task of researching different sources; reduced and disseminated in mass media and popular music; reconstructed on radio and television

from the memory of a director, who responds to the request for the “past” from listener.

To know his own birth story is fundamental because, in the so called “traditional” point of view, lands and titles are mainly inherited from the paternal side, whereas the moral and genetic nature comes mainly from the maternal side (Diop, 1985). Furthermore, the individual’s place and roles in the network of rights and duties which characterizes the extended family is determined by his birth order. For instance, the sons of different sex siblings are considered as “slaves” and “masters” according to their family name; the sons of the paternal side aunt carry out services for the sons of the paternal side uncle. In *gëwël*’s families is said that the first are griots of the seconds, who have in turn subjected cousins of the father’s sisters sons. Moreover, but especially in towns it is a waning practice, the preferred marriage is between crossed cousins: the mother’s brother’s daughter for a man and the father’s sister’s son for a woman (*Ibidem*).

Briefly, in the traditional point of view «you are what your ancestors made you», in a double sense: on one hand, the person’s moral and physical nature is the result of his genealogical legacy, on the other his place in society- his rights and duties compared to other families and to the members of his own- are derived from one’s genealogical position. From this emerges a recursive conception of history, in which descendants are pushed by a double current- the inheritance which flows in their veins and the griot’s breath which resonates with the family’s stories in their chests- to repeat, even if in different times and places, their own ancestors’ actions.

Despite the historical precision cited at the beginning of this paragraph, genealogy presents a high degree of flexibility which is derived from the path the memory’s master decides to follow; since the recitation follows both sides, the griot or the griotte chooses some genealogical tree’s branches to narrate the most appropriate stories according to the specific situation. In conclusion, from a griot’s point of view, we can affirm that you are what your ancestors made you, but also your ancestors are what you make them. It is from this double link that I’ll try to shed light on the nexus between Badara’s genealogy and life history. At this point, we can ask again: Who is Badara of the Mbaye-Seck from Tivaouane?

### **The maternal side: at the generals khalifa’s Tijani court**

The representation of Badara’s maternal genealogy, which I present, was written by him as a text for a theatrical drama. Following is my translation from French to English:

«In the past there was a village called *Male*. It was a banal countryside, to say ordinary. But one day a less common event happened. From a lake, located in the territory, two individuals went out. People understood that they were strangers. A circle of curious people formed. Nevertheless, the two strangers remained quiet, in spite of all the questions posed to them. A wise man said to the audience that these

young men weren't people of little account. He proposed to organize a party in their honor, thinking in front of such a demonstration the two men would decide to speak. An ox was sacrificed, quartered and shared. The quarters were offered to the guests. The first, in serving himself, took a flank, showing his social status: he was a noble. The latter took the animal's head and all understood he was the griot of his travel companion. Locals adopted them and so the two men, only just gone out from youth, settled there. They lived in Male until maturity and they got married. The noble was called *Barlète Thioub*, the other's name was *Mayeréle Thiané Couly*. Both became popular in their classes. *Barlète* revealed himself to be a good hunter, a warrior and an honorable man. For his part *Mayeréle* excelled as a praise singer and drummer. Showing his talent in battle, *Barlète* persuaded everyone of his bravery and sagacity. When it was necessary to choose a community chief, the council of wise men selected *Barlète Thioub*. He took at his side his companion as ever, who had married *Yacine Malick*, *Marame Yacine Malick's* mother.

He, on his father's death, was taken under *Barlete's* wing. He was doing his task as a confidant, advisor, spokesman, emissary and musician. During battles he was always at the front line galvanizing the king through his praises and mystic tam-tams'. They had emerged victorious from all the wars which they had conducted. One day, returning from a battle against hostile troops, *Marame* fell off his horse. In fact, he was drunk (we have to underline that they were animists, they were Ceddos). To *Marame's* surprise, once he recovered his senses, *Barlète* wasn't there. *Marame* felt betrayed and expressed his sorrow in these terms: «On the head of my dead father, *Mayeréle Thiané Couly* I swear I will never more be in the service of any king in this vile world. From now on I'll be in the service of the unique and real king: God». At dusk *Barlète* ascertained that *Marame* hadn't yet returned from their military expedition. He inquired about him and he learned, with great surprise, that his griot had converted to Islam. The king tried to cure him without success. He ordered his emissaries to go back to *Marame* and to bring him back; if necessary at the price of flattery. In fact *Barlète* knew if he was separated from his griot he couldn't be invincible. For that reason it was ordered that the messengers were to use force if the first method failed. *Marame* also informed them that they could kill him, but never would he come back in the king's palace. Informed about *Marame's* resoluteness, the king abdicated. He was aware that any effort could be in vain; in fact the griot was a man of principle. With this divorce nothing was like before. Really, in these times of polytheism, converting to Islam was disapproved of, especially for a griot. *Marame* knew his entire lineage's fate. He was thrown out of *Male*. He took the path of exile, leaving behind friends and relatives, huts and memories: insignificant things compared to his faith in Allah. He left with his horse, and with his drum on his shoulder he struck up a chant to the Prophet. He had cut the bridges to his past. After ten days of walking, he came to *Khéli*. Natives couldn't believe their ears: «A Muslim griot!» they exclaimed. Everyone came out from their houses and they saw the visitor. Through a rare confluence of circumstances in this remote canton there was a woman named *Anta Diama*. She was born in a griots' family, but she didn't behave like one of them. She never drank wine nor any alcohol. She refused to sing

and dance. She said, to those who wanted to hear, that one day she would be converted to Islam. When the villagers saw *Maramé*, they asked where he had made himself like this. «In *Ndiagnou*» he replied. *Anta Diama* was brought, and the young girl's mother begged him to take her with him and to marry her. Her enthusiasm was shown in forced way. Really *Ndiagnou* was a locality inhabited by Muslims- at that time an exceptional fact. *Maramé* accepted the offer and carried away his new fiancée on his mount. The union was celebrated while they stayed in the above mentioned village. Immediately they had two children: *Mour Anta* and *Ahmadou Anta*.

Once they grew to become tall, strong youths the two left in the direction of *Ndar*, in order to increase their knowledge of the Koran. There they were received by the marabout *Mabèye Anta Lô*, who had grown fond of them. He introduced them to the French West Africa (A. O. F.) governor- We must specify that *Ndar* is the Senegalese name for the city the colonies named Saint-Louis. In so far as the quality of the city, the A.O.F.'s capital no doubt fascinated more than one. Nevertheless, some years later, *Mour Anta*, worried about his old and lonely mother, proposed to his brother to return. The younger *Ahmadou Anta* didn't agree at all. The older, showing more wisdom, resigned to leave without his brother. He came back to his mother in *Ndiagnou*. Afterward he married *Gnokhor Djiguène*. From this union was born *Coumba Diodio*, *Alé* and *Matar Diaw*. *Ahmadou Anta*, who settled in *Ndar*, went to his uncle in *Mourane* for marriage. On his wise mother's advice he married his cousin *Diarra Mbaye*, with whom he'll have *Astou Niang* and *Khady Niang*. Her offspring constitute our family's Saint-Louisian branch. Meanwhile *Coumba Diodio* found a husband and gave birth to *Mariéma Siang*, her only daughter. *Alé* was very erudite, but until the age of sixty-five years old he didn't have child. Not wanting to take with him non transmitted knowledge, he made it the benefit of his niece's husband *Macoura*. The latter had two twins daughters with *Mariéma Siang*: *Fatou Mbaye* and *Aminta Mbaye*.

Then, in search of knowledge, *Macoura* went to *Gandiol* with his noble and friend *El Hadji Rawane*. As luck would have it, their path crossed *El Hadji Malick Sy*, an Islamic scholar. They followed him to *Njekhite*. *Macoura* became the muezzin of this learned man of Islam. The master in question had among his followers one named *Saer*, *Gnokhor Djiguène Seck*'s cousin, who had married *Jacine Dèguène*. At the birth of their son *Ahmadou Mbaye*, the illustrious marabout took charge the baby's education. Becoming a man, he'll marry *Fatou Mbaye*, one of the twin sisters. At the latter's death, his sister becomes the same man's bride. Like that my [*Badara*'s] mother *Aida Mbaye* was born.

It's necessary to let it be known that my mother's father was *El Hadji Malick Sy*'s right-hand man *Tidiana*'s (the main brotherhood at that time) general *Khalif*. That provoked a deep jealousy in the maraboutic family. This mission was resumed by his son *Sérigne Ababacar Sy* who took the place of his dead father. He did the same for the succeeding spiritual guides. This explains our family's settling in *Tivaouane*, a holy city, and brotherhood feud in question. Between the other sons my grandfather had *El Hadji Mansour Mbaye*, the closest succeeding marabout advisor. My uncle

was one of the most known and esteemed griots among us. He was the second Republic President's advisor, as he is now. In history the griots' families are counted among the most remarkable of the country. It could be utopian and vain numbering the members. [...] We are spread in all countries but we have kept alive the multiple ties with *Mayeréle Thiané Couly's* chain».

The underlining of ancestors name's, their patrons and places where they lived serves to facilitate their identification, as Bonnie Wright writes:

*«Whenever a bard [a griot] meets someone and seeks to "place" or "identify" that person, he always asks about the personal name and the place of origin. He may then ask the mother's and father's names, but often the first two are sufficient for identification»* (Wright, 1989, p. 45).

It's as if the genealogy assumes two forms: a synthetic one, made by the underscored terms, which works as a sort of identifying document, and an extended one in which each name is bound with some stories, which we can at the same time consider emblematic and didactic. Each tale refers to a vaster story which involves other places and people and the behavioral rules which have to be followed. It's the case of Marame Yacine Malick's story, which, through the conversion episode, exemplifies at the same time the passage from animism to Islam and the behavioral rules befitting a king. Similarly the story of the two brothers, Mour and Ahmadou Anta, marks the shift from the maternal village to the new colonial town Saint-Louis, the bond with marabouts' families and the exemplar ethics of the elder brother, who decides to return home to attend to the old mother. All these episodes are at the same time a family story's stages and pieces of a mosaic of a vaster history, which quoted episodes allow to be seen in the «unsaid» openness.

A key topic of the narrative is the conversion from animism to Islam, from Ceddos to Muslims. Not only was Marame Yacine Malick depicted as one of the first griots to convert, but also his wife Anta Diama was destined to take a different path with respect to that of her ancestors. According to estimations, the conversion story is placed in the first half of the XIXth century, a period in which the diffusion of Islam in Senegal was popular; previously, was rather scarce before undergoing a rapid surge. Lucy Behrman (1970, p. 24-33) interprets such a dynamic as a reaction to the crisis of the society's values system due to the colonial conquest. In such a situation, in which the former behavior patterns and meaning networks couldn't effectively respond to existential difficulties and dilemmas, many people looked to sufi Islam and marabouts for new sources of values and role models.

### **The paternal side: between Kajoor's damels and modernization**

Reconstructing Badara's paternal genealogy was very hard. He knows only the start and the end, between which there are missing intermediate links. Such a gap depends both on a stronger involvement with the maternal side and the father's choice to not practice the griot way of life. Badara says that maternal family tends to "pull him" toward her side, "eating" the paternal side.

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We started to reconstruct some genealogical ties in part thanks to a performance made by Penda Mbaye (Badara's father's cousin), nevertheless also in this case the griotte jumped many generations. Like Badara, Penda starts from the Faramarins; however, unlike Badara, she makes start the descendace from Late Déguène Mbaye, who lived in the XVIth century, in the time of Amary Ngoone Sobel, Kajoor's independence artificer. In Penda's story is Late Déguène Mbaye who comes to the Kajoor's damel and not his son Mar Yacine Meisse Bigué, as in Badara's account. According to the story, the griot found the king ready to go off to the war and he went with him, together with his four sons (Mar Yacine Meisse Bigué, Meisse Migué Mar, Adiop Nar and Djarga). The battle was won, but Late Déguène lost two of his four sons (Adiop Nar and Djarga) in the fight. The king, to thank him for his efforts, give him a property (between Kajoor and Baol) which from that moment would be for his descendant: the Faramarins. The tale then jumps almost three centuries arriving at Dembowar Sal, Lat Dior's army general in the XIXth century, of whom Guda Lam-Badara's great grandfather- was the griot. The Secks remained tied to Sall's and Diop's families until the Ousemane Seck's generation, who, with his brothers, decided to leave the griot way of life. Badara explains his father's and uncles' decision of starting what was considered a "modern" career, with their frequentation of a French school first in Saint-Louis and then in Paris.

A recurring topic is the journey: there is the story of Mar Yacine, who, breaking the rules of political power, becomes a king thanks to a displacement; there is the story of Ousemane Seck (Badara's father) and his brothers who, after experiencing school in France, decide to be nobody's griot. In such a narrative context migration is read as a source of change which rends possible new opportunities.

### **Reading the life history in the (con)text of the genealogical narration**

On many occasions Badara interprets his life against the background of his family story. A recurrent topic is the need to find equilibrium between the grandparents' way of life, performing griots until their deaths, and those of his parents, who emancipated themselves from the caste job system. This topic is articulated by Badara speaking of a marriage between "modernity and tradition", and is a recurrent one in Senegalese artistic production: we can find it, although underlined in different ways and also with opposite results, in novels such as *L'Appel des arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall (1982) and *L'Aventure ambiguë* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1961); in Senghor's poems (1971); in the ways in which Youssou N'Dour speaks about his musical production<sup>2</sup>.

A very similar rhetoric is present in the scholarly literature on Senegalese migration (Ceschi, 1998 and 2001; Castagnone et al., 2005; Riccio, 2007), another social process of which Badara's story is a part, read by some as an opportunity to feed their roots with what is good in "toubabs' (whites) pack". Despite such a reading of the journey as an occasion for personal growth, my interlocutor connects his reasons for departure to his ancestor Mayeréle Thiane's choices, and so to his family's story.

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The topic of migration comes back many times in the genealogy narrative. On the maternal side, of particular interest is the story of the two brothers, Mour and Ahmadou Anta, who represent two opposite options: departure with return, and definitive immigration. Discussing Ahmadou's decision to stay in Ndar (Saint-Louis), Badara recounts some very similar occurrences to the paternal side. An uncle on his father's side, after an argument with his father, emigrated to Fouta and they haven't had any news of him. This same story, two generations after, came up again in the case of one Badara's brothers who, because of a conflict, emigrated to the United States and for 40 years neither came back nor got in touch with his relatives in Senegal or who had emigrated to other nations. In all these cases definitive emigration is considered an extreme choice, to be avoided in favor of return. When I asked Badara if in the future he would return to Senegal, he responded:

«Yes, I want to live there and when I have work return here, yes, yes. Also for the inspiration I need here, I made many years of hegira and you can create some structure that works well and then you sing. Because I can be a model to people who live here to return [...]». (Rome, October 10<sup>th</sup> 2007).

Badara's answer finds a place in the family's migration story with a significant difference: whereas for his ancestors there was a clear opposition between return and definitive emigration, in his case the difference is more a matter of degree than of substance. In fact, nowadays, thanks to the development of communication technology and mobility, the boundaries between places of origin and places of diaspora tend to become blurred; even more, migrants- by means of economic, politics, socials and religious ties maintained with countrymen emigrated or remaining at home- inhabit social fields which maintain through connection, tension and mutual exchange the different contexts which span their coming and going (Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc, 1994; Ceschi, 2001; Levitt, Glick Schiller, 2004; Riccio, 2007). In such a situation historically it is easier to come back and maintain the relationships established in the places of migration. At the same time, if we read Badara's travels against the background of Senegalese transnational migration literature, we can observe the phenomena's internal variety, underlined by scholars using life histories (Ceschi, 1998; Castagnone et al., 2005; Riccio, 2007). The studies underscore that the great majority of Senegalese people in Italy rely upon co-national networks to organize the first departure and to sustain social and psychological costs. In Badara's case we can find both differences and analogies: on one hand, he maintains close ties with relatives who have both emigrated and remained at home; on the other, he gained the resources necessary to buy the ticket and the visa as well as the social capital necessary for his initial insertion thanks to relationship with successful Italian musicians. Only later he built strong ties with co-nationals on Italian ground. In fact, Badara's migration path presents some peculiarities which allow for additional profundity on Senegalese contemporary migration representations: unlike the majority of his co-nationals, Badara, thanks to ties with Italian musicians, didn't have great difficulty in achieving a permit to stay, finding decent accommodation and securing a job appropriate to his vocational

training. At the same time, in his case the “caste” element (his griot birth)- often overlooked or badly represented in scholarly literature (Fall, Perrone, 2001)- played a significant role in structuring his migratory experience. Secondly, as we noticed, the travel is represented in the family’s story: it was to follow the example of Mayeréle Thiane and his grandmother, compared to which differences are considerable. On various occasions Badara says he was the first practicing griot of his family to come to the West and to visit the majority of countries of the ex-Mali empire (considered the birthplace of griotism). His ancestors traveled, but their displacement covered a smaller spatial area. All of this permits us to shine a light on the freedom left to the individual in the family story, which gives direction to the track of certain components, but also leaves room for innovation.

This ambiguous connection between the way of the individual and that of the family is also evident in Badara’s explanation of his life as a singer. In fact, he decided to follow his grandparents’ way of life (to be a griot), while his brothers and sisters decided to emancipate themselves from the “caste” system and follow the new way opened by their parents. After independence (1960), many people started to move away from the division of labor based on the “caste” system. Isabelle Leymarie-Ortiz, speaking about the changes in the *gèwël*’s way of life, depicts the period immediately after independence as a very turbulent one. It’s in this interval which- due to democratization, westernization and urbanization- many “wordsmiths” decided to cut ties to their family inheritance. Partly because the government egalitarian agenda which had weakened the hierarchical system; partly because the spread of the French school system, which, tended to substitute for the previous educational system; partly because of the effect of urbanization on the family structure; it seemed that griots were destined to extinguish or completely readjust their previous way of life (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). It is within this historical process that we have to read Ousemane Seck’s and his brothers’ choices. At the same time, if we compare Ousemane Seck’s and El Hadji Mansour’s choices, we can see the various facets of such a process. Mansour’s story illustrates another possibility: to readjust his role to the demands of the historical-political context. Thanks to ties with Tidjani Khalifa, and his work as spokesman of the Sys of Tivaouane and as advisor to of second Senegalese President, Abdou Diouf, he gained the nickname of “*le griot de la présidence*” (Panzacchi, 1994). Moreover, Mansour was so skilled at readjusting his talents to the radio-television medium, insomuch as he directed different programs and his fame stretched across the nation.

To read Badara’s choice we have to start here, on the necessity to reinterpret the griot’s way of life. According to Cornelia Panzacchi, this was a choice common to many griots of his generation:

«While the generation who are now (in the 90s) between 40 and 60 years old can be very self-conscious about their social origins, their children tend to rediscover their grandparents’ profession. Whereas parents consider it a social blemish to be a griot and in consequence have turned to another occupation and another way of life, their children tend instead to romanticize the profession of griot, associating it, on one

hand, with an unalienated, “authentic” pre-colonial Africa and, on the other, with relatively easy access to a promising career as a musician» (Panzacchi, 1994, p. 200). In this case, with what the author writes, we have to take into account also the growing interest in griots in the West. During the twenty year period from the beginning of the 1970’s to the end of the 1980’s, the artistic and academic interest in griots becomes strong. Some “masters of the word” are invited to speak at international scientific conferences. Singers and musicians of griot families are well represented in the “world music” medley, and they are invited to perform for Afro-Americans as representative of their past (Charry, 2000, Ebron 2002, Hale, 2007). In short, paradoxically, for many the possibility to maintain ties with their family inheritance passes through the migration or to the United States and Europe, where the musical companies and the concert organizers take the role of the patron guaranteeing the griots’ livelihood.

### **The life history between documentary rigor and literary imagination**

This essay questions how to read and write the resulting biographic material taken from meetings between Badara Seck and myself. According to point of view of “ingenuous realism”, the life history’s textualization is a simple task: all you have to do is to listen, record and listen again, to transcribe the words, put the data in order and let the facts speak for themselves, at most adding some comments in footnotes. Contrarily, following the thesis that Alberto Sobrero sustains in both *Antropologia dopo l’antropologia* (1999) and *Il Cristallo e la fiamma* (2009), at the heart of the problem we find a double paradox:

*«There is something paradoxical in the autobiography, in wanting to tell one’s own life, but not for this we have to think it’s less paradoxical to narrate the life of others, especially when the others tell their own story: that which we obtain is only an evident double paradox. In the first words of Jorge Luis Borges’ Evaristo Carriego: “That one person should wish to arouse in another memories relating only to a third person is an obvious paradox. To pursue this paradox freely is the harmless intention of all biography”»* (Sobrero, 2009, p. 12).

If I read well, the author- making himself interpreter of what we can call «narrative turn» and which, in different disciplines refers to Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz, Jerome Bruner, Gregory Bateson, Gerald Maurice Edelman and Antonio Damasio- considers knowledge a fruit of a spiral process between scientific rigor and literary imagination, digital and analogical languages, explanation and comprehension, documentation and interpretation, elements considered as complementary which in combination create the different and interwoven genres of narration. It is not a fad, but we have to consider the elementary paradox of knowledge: our being part of the world and the impossibility of seeing the world and ourselves observing it from the outside. In other words we have to recognize the partiality- in the meaning of being part of the context which we try to understand- and so the “falsifiability” and finiteness of any knowledge.

In this perspective imagination- understood as the faculty «*to anticipate different modes of seeing the world, other worlds, and then to recognize them as meaningful, as parts of our world*» (Sobrero, 1999, p. 81) - became the tool to force the limits of our culture and language, «*to think of the real without losing sight of the possible*» (Sobrero, 2009, p. 33). The imaginative function, as Martina Giuffrè and Valentina Lapicciarella Zingari remind us in a recent article, has to be practiced until the start of ethnographic research: being open to the art of listening, to change our perspective and to reformulate our questions in the dialogic encounter with the other (Giuffrè, Lapicciarella Zingari, 2010). At the same time if we want to continue to make science we have to use the tools of analytic reason.

According to Pineau and Le Grand (1993) the life history, being at the edge between literary imagination and scientific rigor, brings us to the heart of the problem. The textualization of one life history requires both the documentary rigor, necessary to produce the material and construct the contexts in which to add sense to them, and the literary imagination, necessary to create new connections and to make real experience: to not mistake what we believe to have understood for the life of one person.

Being unable to reach the lack of point of view, which hyper-rationalists yearn for, we are forced to constantly reconstruct our story in the dialogic encounter with the other, sustaining ourselves in space holding on by a shoestring, so to speak, foundation on an absent groundwork, which philosophers of science call “bootstrapping” (D’Agostini, 1999).

Against this background, the manner in which the materials have been organized – the connections made between biographic tale, genealogy and socio-historical processes- is only one of the possible ways to textualize Badara’s life story. Properly speaking, it is a contingent and partial way, which reflects the actual tone of our relationship, and enacts only partially the mutual roles embedded in the fieldwork (those we can define as collaboration between personality and biographer) and only a part of exchanged sentences (those well suited to a self’s public presentation appropriate both in Senegal and Italy).

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<sup>1</sup> *Géwël* is the wolof term for griot.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with a British journalist he says: «We have remained quite traditional until the very last minute before opening out to the world». J. Cathcart, *Hey You! A portrait of Youssou N’Dour*, Fine Line Books, Witney OX, 1989, p. 1.

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