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978-0-521-10504-0 - Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers: Tradition and Invention in

Mende Story Performance

Donald Cosentino

Excerpt

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PROLOGUE

The Mende

Tradition and innovation in the storyteller's art are my themes. The storytellers are the Mende, a West African people numbering about a million who live in the low forests of southern Sierra Leone. They call the stories they create in lively performance *domeisia* (singular: *domei*). My critical themes were venerable even in the golden age of the Greeks. My methodology is only less hoary, for it looks back to the time of Chaucer in appreciation of the web which binds tale to teller, teller to audience, and the ensemble to its society.

Mende storytelling must be considered within the context of Mende society. One must know something about that society to appreciate its narrative arts, in much the same way that knowing something about London in the renaissance illuminates the themes of Shakespeare, or appreciating the sociology of Brooklyn Jewry helps to explain the preoccupations of Norman Mailer. So too, the complexities of social life in a farming compound give Mariatu Sandi her narrative themes, and the liberties of low social status in the village allow a rainbow of licentiousness in the performances of Mos'ay Dubua.

Since storytellers are highly selective in their use of materials, the reader must not expect to get a well-rounded view of Mende society from the images projected in their stories. These images act more like reflections from a telescope than a mirror, vastly enlarging some areas and leaving others dark. These enlarged areas – the exigencies of rice farming and the rivalries within the polygamous households, the machinations of the secret societies and the propitiation of ancestral spirits – are the subject of Chapter 2.

For those interested in the important areas of Mende society not covered in Chapter 2, or only obliquely reflected in the narrative images of the *domeisia*, there are several excellent articles and studies on the Mende which have appeared in the last generation. Many of these works are mentioned in the text, and cited in the Select Bibliography.

It has been particularly gratifying to study the narrative arts of the Mende at a period when the work of several scholars, in several disciplines, has converged in common appreciation of an aesthetic which I later describe as the Mende Dialectic. It is that peculiar dynamic which I propose

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as the mainspring for the startling innovation at the heart of this storytelling tradition.

Forms of 'old talk'

'Njɛpɛ wovɛi'

The *dɔmɛi* is one of several kinds of oral narrative that the Mende describe collectively as *njɛpɛ wovɛi* ('old talk'). *Njɛpɛ wovɛi* includes such diverse genres as history, the dilemma tale, myths of Kaso, the trickster, and Musa Wo, the hero, and the *dɔmɛi*. Despite this diversity of genre, all Mende narrative forms seem related in content. If analysis were limited to plot synopsis, categorical distinctions would be muted. The common plots which relate all these narrative forms are derived from a common bank of plot segments which are the building blocks of the entire oral tradition. These plot segments form a heterogeneous repertoire of images, rather like the store of colored fragments at the base of a kaleidoscope, which the performer is then able to twist into diverse narrative patterns.

History

History is divided by the Mende into two segments: ancient times when present patterns were established, and the past which is in the memory of the oldest people in the town. This division corresponds to the distinction between the *ndebla* (the nameless and timeless dead) and the *kɛkɛni* (the fathers who are remembered). Together they constitute the *ndɔɔbla*: the ancestors. The time of the *kɛkɛni* goes back to about the time of the Hut Tax War, the great Mende rebellion against colonial rule at the turn of this century. This history is widely known and discussed in the villages, but like all historical accounts of great events, it is subject to the prejudiced interpretation of informant and audience. The history of the *ndebla*, however, is called *njɛpɛ wovɛi* and so related by the Mende to storytelling, though it is held to be an accurate account of what happened, and no form of fiction at all. The oldest and most respected men, the *kpakoisia*, who refuse to perform or retell other narratives, are proud to narrate this form of *njɛpɛ wovɛi*, particularly the history of the founding of their town.

Such histories commonly involve the exploits of a hunter who kills a large animal, and then settles at the fortuitous site. In the town of Mattru, where we had settled to study Mende traditions, this hunter was named Njekor. He was said to have been born in Kono, to the east, of a one-breasted woman named Nini Yilei. After a quarrel with his family, this Njekor left Kono for the west with a band of friends. At the site of the present town the hunters had several etymologically determinate adventures, including the killing of a bush buffalo (*tewei*) which gave the town its

original name Matewei ('We and the Buffalo'). After successive battles with an autochthonous race of small people called Banta, Njekor settled some of his group in Mattru, and moved on again westward, towards Moyamba.¹

Variants of this same account connect Mattru's history to other histories throughout Mendeland.² But there is a further relationship between the story of Njekor and other kinds of Mende narrative which casts an ambiguous light on the historicity of *njεε wovεi*. Njekor's strange nativity and subsequent flight from a treacherous family into a life of picaresque adventure mirrors in essential detail the plot genesis of the Mende trickster–hero Musa Wo. In like manner, the killing of the *tewei* is mirrored in the image of the magical hunter in the forbidden forest which performers sometimes fix into *domei* plots. Thus the events which constitute the history of Mattru not only constitute most other Mende histories, but are analogous to images which other narrators use to fabricate the admitted

1. Pa Fatoma Nguhambeh, an ancient, blind *kpakoi* of the chiefly house of Mattru, narrated the following account of the town's origin one evening in August, 1973, before a large town assembly on the grounds of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission. He was supported by Bobadeen Goba, the town's most renowned performer of *domeisia*. Amendments to this account were made several months later by Chief Weaver of Mattru, and are included within parentheses in this history by Fatoma:

Mattru got her name from an animal called *tewei* in Mende. The first man to step on this soil was a hunter called Njekor. (Njekor was born in the royal house of Kono. His mother had only one breast, and so was known in Mende as Nini Yilei. After a quarrel with his family, Njekor and his friends left Kono and travelled west.) He and his followers went on a hunting expedition. On their trip they met the stream which now divides the town, leaving one section with about three-fourths of the land. They crossed this stream. On the other side of the stream are growing fruits like beads which children use as necklaces in our villages, they are called *fooli*. In this region of growing *fooli*, Njekor saw the blade of a hoe. The handle was not found. Turning to his friends, he suggested that the river should be named in memory of the hoe blade: Kalimeh. The group moved to the top of a hill, now in the heart of the town, and fortunately killed a *tewei* (bush buffalo). They built a small hut and stayed in it till the rest of the meat was smoked because their homes were far away. Finding that a lot of such animals lived in this region, they finally made the place their hunting base. His friends said that since they were living with these animals, it should be named Matewei ('We and the Buffaloes'). So the place got its name. (Njekor and his followers discovered they were not alone. The place was also inhabited by a race of small people called the Banta who were the original inhabitants. After successive battles, the Banta moved west to the area of Tiama on the border of the Temne.) After settling some his group in Mattru, Njekor also moved west, towards Moyamba.

2. Kenneth Little states that most Mende origin myths involve the killing of a large animal, followed by the settling of the hunters at the site of the kill. He specifically mentions Mattru as an example of this myth, perhaps because Chief Weaver served as one of his informants. See Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 26.

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fictions of myth and *dɔmei*. Despite the obvious parallels between the plots of history and admitted fiction, the Mende assert the truth of the former, and for historians able to look beneath the surface plots of *njɛpɛ wovɛi*, that assertion appears correct.

When the *kpakoisia* narrate the town's history, they set about finding the elements of their plot from the only available source, the images of *njɛpɛ wovɛi*. But they then make those crystallized images conform to patterns which are not fictive. In his discussion of the Mane invasions of 1545–1606, Walter Rodney says of the Mende:

They are clearly the product of an intermixture on a Bullom base, and with an upper structure showing distinct Mande traits . . . Mende tradition distinguishes between the earliest settlers and invaders who came from the north. The leaders of the invasions set themselves up as chief, but difficulties over boundaries brought them into constant conflict with each other, as well as with any of the original rulers who were able to with-stand them. All this sounds remarkably similar to the comments of the Portuguese on the Mane invasions.³

Thus the narrative structures of the Mattru *kpakoisia* account and Rodney's account are in essential agreement: the movement of a secondary wave of migration into Mendeland from the northeast, the subjugation of an autochthonous population, and, as Rodney later discusses, the continued westward movement of the Mende after they reached the Sewa River, are all explicit in the modern historian's account, and implicit in the arrangement of fictive images in the history narrated by Pa Fatoma, Bobadeen Goba and Chief Weaver of Mattru. In their narrations, the structural imperatives of the remembered events take precedence over the aesthetics of a well-wrought plot. There is no attempt by the *kpakoisia* to round off their stories with the semblance of coherence and unity which marks the fabrication of *dɔmeisia*. Domestic rivalries and quarrels, which motivate characters in myth and *dɔmei*, are used only to push Njekor west; the conflict which got him moving is left unresolved. At the end of the account Njekor just keeps moving westward, a dwindling of the protagonist which would be aesthetically unacceptable to the *dɔmei* performer, but which perfectly adumbrates the westward drift of the Mende migrations.

History and the *dɔmei*, then, are both constructed from the same bank of narrative images. They are crucially differentiated by mimetic intent: history assembles images from *njɛpɛ wovɛi* in order to reveal the structures

3. Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545 to 1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 58–9.

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of the past; the *domei* assembles those same images to create a social world whose structures are immanent in reality, but fully revealed only in beguiling fiction.

Dilemma

Dilemma narratives hold a position of prestige midway between the august historical tradition and the *domei* in the opinion of the *kpakoisia*. James Vandei, the section speaker of Mattru, and a man of great dignity and tact, wished to oblige our interest in *domeisia* but feared that his performance would embarrass the chief. He suggested that either we travel to his home village, where he would be able to perform *domeisia* without the fear of social censure, or we remain in Mattru where he could tell dilemma tales, which he referred to simply as *njɛpɛ wovɛi*. His compromise is significant for understanding the nature of the dilemma tale; it admits of an analogy between the dilemma and the *domei*, and of a crucial difference which would absolve the speaker of any charges of indiscretion which might have arisen over the performance of a *domei*. The analogy and the difference occur at the same levels as they occurred between history and *domei*: at the surface level dilemma and *domei* share the same body of images, but at the structural level they diverge and become two separate modes of narration.

In the dilemma the images borrowed from *njɛpɛ wovɛi* are subordinated to the framing of a conundrum. Possible resolutions to the conundrum are then presented to an audience which must choose among them, or recognize the dilemma as irresolvable. Openendedness is thus the distinguishing mark of this type of narrative; the narrator intends to create only a conflict of choice. Pa Vandei's 'Dilemma of the Pregnant Goat' offers the clearest and simplest example of the construction of this narrative type:

A bush creature liked to catch goats. He went walking one day in the bush next to the village. He met forty goats. He ate all but a pregnant goat who said, 'Stop, I'll give you three reasons not to kill me.'

He said, 'If there is a lie, I'll kill you. If there are two truths and a lie, I'll kill you.'

She said, 'First of all, your stomach is full. Secondly, I'll soon be giving birth to three kids. Then we'll be fornicating again, and I'll get more kids. Anytime you want another goat, you can just come and pick one up. Thirdly, when I go back to the village, they will kill me anyway – they will say I'm a professional liar.'

So he let the goat go. Then she went back to her village and they killed her.

Vandei's image is the most popular beginning to a dilemma and is also a common introduction to a *domei*: a protagonist indiscreetly ventures

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outside her/his proper sphere (the town) and so falls under the malign influence of a creature of the bush. In a *domei* this image would have to be followed by others which would examine the plight of the protagonist and resolve her initial indiscretion. This narrative, however, is irresolvable, so Pa Vandei leaves his audience with a dilemma and a conundrum. The dilemma belongs to the bush spirit: shall he devour the fortieth goat, or accept her sophistic arguments? The goat is left with the conundrum: either she lies to the bush spirit or she is devoured. If she lies, however, and lives to tell the tale in town, she will be condemned as a liar for this absurd tale.

The audience too is left with the goat's predicament, which like all conundrums is finally resolvable only in favour of the poser's wit. The point of the narrative is of course the cleverness of the argument. Pa Vandei uses his *njepe wovei* as a form of wit, a conceit to delight an audience.

Narrative images are as contingent upon the shape of the dilemma in this genre as they are upon the shape of the past in the construction of historical narrative. In both forms of narration creativity is limited by extra-narrative demands. Aptness and accuracy, rather than imagination and daring, are likely to be the criteria by which the narrative and the narrator are judged. The linking together of disparate images, the highest achievement of the *domei* performer, is absent from the construction of history and of the dilemma tale. They are without variants for their content is predetermined. One either knows the history or the dilemma, or one doesn't. They are not fabricated but recalled.

The dilemma tale also lacks the leader/chorus signing which characterizes the performance of the *domei*. This absence is crucial to the Mende who maintain that music is incompatible with 'truth' (*tɔnya*), and so categorize the *domei* separately from other forms of narrative on this basis alone. If *tɔnya* is translated as 'objectivity', then the sense of the Mende classification becomes apparent. The *domei* is a subjective form of art. The performer of the *domei* uses leader/chorus singing as an emotional net which traps his audience within the work of art he is creating. By joining in the song everyone shares in the performance, and by extension, everyone is implicated in the theme. The force of the performance is centripetal. The song draws the audience into the vortex of the performer's vision, and locks him for the length of the performance within the subjective world created by the *domei*.

History and dilemma are kinetic. They release their energies outward. Their meaning must be sought outside the circle of the tale where music would only be a diversion. The reluctance of the *kpakoisia* to perform *domeisia* thus becomes understandable. The dilemma and history are intellectual exercises. Their appeal is directly to the intellect, and their recitation is altogether a respectable affair. The *domei* however is too powerful emotionally to be safe. In order to generate the energy necessary

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to ensnare an audience within the images of a *dɔmei*, a performer must make a commitment of his body and his imagination to the performance. Such uninhibited behaviour would hardly be in keeping with the emotional austerity expected of a *kpakoi*. The *dɔmei* is best left to those willing to take more chances with their reputation.

Mythology

There is a final category of narratives created out of *njɛɛ wovɛi* which must be considered in relationship to the *dɔmei*. That is the continuum of narratives which stretches from Kaso, the spider–trickster, to Musa Wo, the trickster–hero. These narratives are particularly difficult to categorize, for the Mende do not differentiate them from *dɔmeisia*, but generally perform both within the same storytelling session. Yet in mode of performance, narrative structure, and thematic intent, these stories of the trickster and the hero are antithetical to *dɔmeisia*.

In structure, trickster–hero myths are simpler than the *dɔmei*, following an invariable violated injunction–punishment pattern. It is probably this simplicity of form which makes these tales so popular, for Kaso is undoubtedly the most recreated figure in the oral tradition, especially favored by children and less mature performers. These tales are also easier to perform, since for the most part they lack the songs and other elements of performance which characterize *dɔmeisia*. Music is not used to pull in an audience which can hardly be expected to empathize with characters and situations manifestly outside the bounds of their social life. Through the boundless repetition of tricks which on the subterranean level seeks to despoil rice pots, and on the cosmic to overturn kingdoms, this complex of trickster and hero myths defines what is beneath and above the order of society.

Trickster and hero narratives thus constitute the mythology of the Mende people. They express the ineffable in the form of a spider and a malicious boy. As mythological characters, trickster and hero sharpen the picture we have of the order which underlies the tradition of the *dɔmei*. These myths represent a counterpoint to that order, for the world of Kaso and Musa Wo is a chaos without boundary which evokes the laughter of Mende audiences because it belies the categories they use to describe their society and employ in the images of the *dɔmei*.⁴

4. For a more complete description of the role of the trickster and hero in Mende oral tradition, see Cosentino, 'Envoi: A Hero and Some Tricksters', together with twenty-one narrative myths appended to that chapter, in 'Patterns in *Dɔmeisia*: The Dialectics of Mende Narrative Performance' (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1976), pp. 385–540.

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Dɔmei

Through this comparative survey of the forms of narrative which the Mende fabricate from their oral tradition, it should be apparent that *dɔmeisia* fit into the universal category of folktale or *Märchen*. Though all Mende would agree that *dɔmeisia* are fiction (in fact they are commonly called ‘lies’), they are the only traditional stories which deal exclusively with basic human problems. In the mundaneness of their thematic concerns and the fabulous contrivances of their plotting, *dɔmeisia* seem related to the conventions of the modern ‘soap opera’, though in performance they seem more closely related to such ‘mixed forms’ of the lively arts as the music hall review or burlesque. *Dɔmeisia* are created out of an inherited body of narrative images which are brought to ephemeral life through the words, song, dance and dramatic mime of a performer in cooperation with an audience which itself frequently becomes a part of the dramatic action. Together, and out of a common tradition, performer and audience realize the most intensely personal form of all Mende artistic expression, and thus create in their joint repertoire the most brilliant expression of an uncommon culture.

The performers

At the very center of the *dɔmei* tradition stands a creating artist whom the Mende sometimes call the *dɔmeigbuamɔi* (*dɔmei*-‘pulling’ person).⁵ In order to create a *dɔmei*, he or she must select images from *njepe wovei*, arrange them according to a complex set of cultural traditions, and bring the completed narrative to dramatic life in performance.

Everyone in Mende society, from chief to child, can and does perform *dɔmeisia*. The images of *njepe wovei* are generally known, and the techniques of performance are learned casually, with no apprenticeship. Once a child has mastered the ability to link images in a conflict-to-resolution pattern, has learned to lead a chorus in song, and can handle the ritualized taunts from the audience (usually by the age of nine or ten) he or she begins to perform *dɔmeisia*. Although there are exceptions, most Mende are not regarded as competent *dɔmei* performers until they are adults.

Although the art form is popular, only a few Mende become proficient performers, and fewer still earn the name of *dɔmeigbuamɔi*. The only performers traditionally entitled to bear this name were men who traveled

5. The verb *gbua* (unmutated form of *kpua*) is defined by Innes as ‘take out, extract, remove’. It is used in a number of idiomatic phrases; e.g. *hale gbua*, to close an initiation ceremony of a secret society, *ta gbua*, to sack a town. In the case of the oral narrator, the verb describes the action of ‘pulling out’ images from *njepe wovei* in order to create *dɔmei* performances.

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across the two hundred miles of Mendeland, creating their dazzling *domei* performances before audiences consisting of entire towns gathered in chieftom meeting halls. These artists made their living from the gifts of food and cloth offered by the chief and grateful members of the audience. *Domeigbuableisia* (pl.) can no longer make their living in this way. What was sufficient reward for an artist in the traditional economy will not now sustain a man of expectations in Sierra Leone. Some of the most accomplished *domeigbuableisia*, men like Salia, have gone on to establish new reputations in more modern entertainment media, such as phonograph recording. Yet, as McLuhan has pointed out, the new medium takes as its content the substance of the old. Consider these lyrics from Salia's popular disc, 'Making Love at Kono':

When we went, when we went to Kiama,
 For one week I was shouting but the chief
 Didn't give me a penny.
 But I continued working at it; I continued passing
 among the houses.
 My companions listened to me, grandmothers welcomed me,
 For the sake of God I continued pursuing them.
 The women welcomed me,
 They welcomed me with two hundred pounds.
 Then I became rich
 In that country there are no coins, just currency notes
 They were just giving currency notes to me . . .⁶

No doubt Salia's lyrics exaggerate the lucrative aspects of his former profession, even in the diamond-rich town of Kono. But they do recall the past excitement, the almost movie-star popularity of the *domeigbuamɔi*, even while the recollection must be cast in a new medium, and the old *domeigbuamɔi* must become the new recording star. Not all the professionals made the transition. Lele Gbomba, widely acknowledged to be the greatest *domeigbuamɔi* in western (Kpa) Mendeland, now supplements his income by working as a nightwatchman at a mining camp near his hometown of Mokbanji. In an interview granted us after his three-night performance in the town of Matru, Gbomba lamented the demands which have forced him to retire partially into 'English work':

Now I'm really tired of the dancing business. Mine is too much.
 Because I'm known as the top man, I must dance, dance, dance.
 Everybody – I surpassed them all. God really blessed my mouth.
 I've surpassed them all. Up, down, everywhere. When you're

6. Lyrics transcribed by Mr Jonathan Pabai from a Phillips recording sung in Mende by Salia.

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young, everything is easy. When you're old, everything is hard. I won't go out any longer. Imagine doing this business for thirty-nine years. Imagine all this shouting for so long. That's why I went out and got this Englishman's work.

Like entertainers everywhere, however, Gbomba's ballyhooed retirement kept being put off for just one last curtain-call. His Mattru 'swan song' was performed at our request, and as the guest of Bobadeen Goba, our neighbor and the town's acknowledged *domeigbuamɔi*. Goba was not a professional in the traditional definition. He did not travel about performing *domeisia* like Salia or Gbomba, nor did he expect to earn a living from his art. For him narrative performance was an avocation, not a profession. But at Christmas time, and occasionally during festivals, the whole town would gather around Goba's verandah to see him perform the ancient images they also knew and performed, but not in his style, and not with his flair.

Many large towns have an unofficial *domeigbuamɔi* of Goba's type, someone generally acknowledged to command the greatest repertoire of images, together with a performing style like the 'stars'. Most often, these amateur *domeigbuableisia* have picked up their skills in the manner described by Gbomba:

...Like anything one has to learn, Bobadeen [Goba] saw me doing this business and he started trying it. So then, when you see someone doing something, you watch them closely and then you too jump into the business. So it was with Bobadeen. All we are doing is imitating.

Bobadeen Goba, however, was not Gbomba's only imitator in Mattru. The wood-carver Mos'ay Dubua, originally from Gbomba's home chiefdom of Serabu, also fancied himself a *domeigbuamɔi*. He was a true bohemian, a member of the international freemasonry of would-be artists. A marginal citizen, originally of non-Mende (Gbandi) slave stock, engaged in a peripheral occupation, and living at the edge of town, Dubua had developed a repertoire of *domeisia* with an 'off-Broadway' reputation. His risque performances earned him a small but intense following and the enmity of the respectable and the powerful *kpakoisia* in Mattru.

Gbomba's audience was the whole of Mendeland, Goba's the town of Mattru, and Dubua's a coterie of fans. Although only Gbomba has official claim to the name, all these men were *domeigbuableisia* since each consciously manipulated and elaborated the inherited images of the narrative tradition in order to create new works of art. Performing artistry, however, did not stop at the level of Mos'ay Dubua. Each quarter of the town, and indeed many of the compounds within the quarters, boasted performers who might never create *domeisia* before audiences larger than