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DJELIYA



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*Go Back
and Get It*

What stories like *Djeliya*
can help us see about
our lost connections
with our own heritage.

Words by LUCIUS ILLUMINUX

The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and where we come from are powerful. They don't just give us our history, but they pave the road to where we believe we can go. West African societies recognize this and have a distinct role for their storytellers, with the djeli. Djeli are poets, musicians, historians, and storytellers. Their job is to inform and educate. "Djeli ya", is the djeli's act¹ and the title of Juni Ba's West African fantasy epic. Juni Ba is based in France by way of Senegal, and writes from that perspective, with *Djeliya* being West African in every way. The imagery, language, mythology and even the Mali story it draws inspiration from are distinctly West African.

I have never been to Africa, even though my lineage has origins in the region. Yet reading *Djeliya* from my own perspective spoke directly to my experience as a Black American. Through Awa I see the things I never forgot and learn the things I never knew. *Djeliya* is a wonderful meditation on an ancestry that I have been trying to form a connection to my entire life, offering me opportunity to feel a closer connection with my own roots.

1. At least as Amiri Baraka defines it in "Griot/Djali: Poetry, Music, History, Message," the first essay in *Digging*.

*Your crown is falling king.
You hang your head because even before your life began, your
environment told you that your people,
that Black people were less.
It left your great grandfather on display beneath a tree branch,
told your grandma she could not swim in the same waters as
those considered people,
and locked away your father to make you forget.
It desired to wash away and diminish anything you achieved
despite the constraints
so that your beauty is not a part of the story.
It makes every effort to wipe your memory because
"if the memory dies the history dies and so do the people"
and if you are not a person,
you become exactly what they told you they were.*

*But hold your head high because your crown is showing king.
The fact that I can see it falling means that it's there.
When they colonized our ancestral homeland
they destroyed entire histories and systems of knowledge
When they enslaved our forefathers
they cut us off from that land entirely
and told the children of scholars and storytellers
that they came from nothing.*

...

*However we know the truth.
We did not come from nothing and our people were great.
We know that
We were kings and queens.*

“We were kings and queens.” It reverberated through our culture and made its way into our language. In choosing those words we chose to let **Black be synonymous with glory.**² So my community reserves titles for friends, family, lovers, and idols. In seeing regality in Blackness, we reclaim our narrative. When I was younger, the ideas felt empowering to me as a Black man.

2. As the Queen Bey said in *Black is King*.



In Awa's wonder I saw in myself in the days when I claimed my own divinity. Awa was alive to bear witness to the destruction of her lands. She saw her family die and her kingdom set ablaze, but she never wavered. The attack severed her legs from her body, but could not sever her connection to her people, because Awa Kouyaté is a djeli of the Keita Clan, and as such she knows the power stories hold. Her father taught her stories of powerful kings that ruled the most powerful dynasty in history. It is knowing that she came from greatness that gave her the strength to carry on.

Awa knew she was not of royal blood herself, since she was a child. Her family has directly served the leaders of the Keita Clan for generations. But if the Clan is great, then being a part of that made her great too. So she made it her goal to restore that glory, even if it meant serving a prince who wanted none of it. She has quite literally become regality's companion as she works to restore Mansour's clan to its former glory.

In that way I might have envied Awa. She has direct knowledge of her greatness while we were left with a credo and some vague imagery. As a child, I knew that every Black American cannot be descended from royalty, but having been constantly shown the uglier panels from my history, I clung to the beauty of that idea of choosing my own panels to cherish. My history was something larger than the history of America had taught us. Like Awa, I found strength in a history that made me great. Unlike Awa, however, the greatness of myself and people across the **diafspora**⁴ was too far away and too long ago to try and restore.

3. Adinkrahene means "King of the Adinkra symbols."
It is a symbol for authority, and leadership.

4. Africa + diaspora = Diafspora a term I use
specifically to describe people of African heritage
whose migration was forced through slave trade

*When colonizers abducted the Cusabo's land and called it
Charles Town,
Full fledged famine began to wipe them out
But the people they abducted from across the sea were fine.
Africans who may have known
they'd never see home again brought grain
Sowed seed, grew rice, and irrigated the rain.
Hunted and herded cattle over the land they tilled
Traffickers marked field boys and cow boys as top billed
Charleston was habitable to the people who abducted it
Thanks to the people they abducted.*

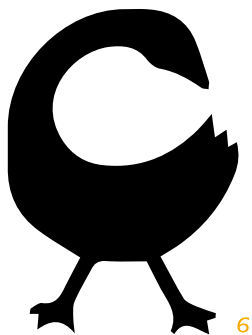
*The children of those Africans continued to create
From the sounds of their lost home, they created the banjo
Taught Jack how to distill whiskey right
And created the filaments that let there be light.*

...

*By the time I was born all the cowboys were white
The banjo was for ivory men to play music they named for
country
And the names Nearest Green and Louis Lattimer
had been lost in favor of their ivory counterparts*

My people's contributions to society were not locked away in an ivory tower, but the stories taught us that all of its significant contributions came from ivory people. It was not until I was a young man - surrounded by scholars that looked like me - that I learned otherwise. I did not need to look to ancestral kingdoms to find the greatness in my people, instead I just had to retrieve the stories the land tried to make us forget. *Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi.*⁵

5. "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten."
A common Twi proverb.



The people in the world of *Djeliya* live with no sense of the past. It was robbed from them when the wizard Somaoro destroyed every kingdom known to man. Now he sits at the top of a literal ivory tower that is said to contain all of the knowledge of the world. People inhabit the tower, but in Samomaoro's domain - where he is all-powerful - the best anyone can do is collect as much power and wealth as they can to influence all the levels of the tower below them.

Awa's knowledge of the past causes her to see the lives that live in the tower as empty. The stories, as she heard them from her father, blamed all the evils of the world on the ivory tower.

Now those same stories fall on deaf ears as the accumulation of wealth dictates life. But she has a purpose bigger than herself, and she looks down on the lives of people aimlessly trying to accumulate possessions.

This makes it all the more shocking when the knowledge locked away in the tower shatters the version of history she had been told, having been taught her whole life that her people were righteous. In the decade since the apocalypse, she had worked tirelessly to restore her people to glory. Yet the tower reveals that her people had destroyed entire kingdoms just as the tower had destroyed hers. Awa ends up having to come to terms with the idea that her people are as capable of the oppression she detests.

Coming to terms with the idea that I am likely not a descendant of royalty was a matter of capability. The history I chose told me I could be as great as those kings. Awa's reconciliation was one of culpability. If the Kouyate clan won stature and power for propagandizing over the atrocities of the Keita clan, were they - and is Awa - complicit? While the way our histories unraveled is different, its effects are the same. We draw strength from our histories. They tell us who we were and who we could become. When they become undone, we have to find a new way to draw strength.

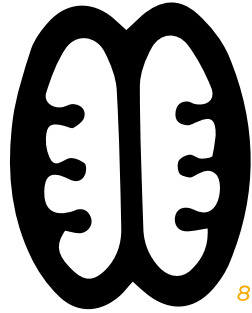
Through reading Awa's journey, I felt connected to the African heritage in my blood. *Djeliya* is a story rooted in West African mythology, based on a West African legend. West Africans have a lore as deep as rich as Greek or Norse mythology, full of wisdom and philosophy shared in the form of proverbs. There are Africanisms in this tale that are not so different from cultural wisdom that I hold in America.

From the ashes of our unstable kingdom, we are able to build a new path forward based on two truths that we had to retrieve. We are all people, and people fear what they do not understand. That has caused mistakes. Armed with that truth, we know our path is not backward, restoring the glory of a time now lost. Instead it is incumbent upon us to find a new way forward.

*Who do we look to, if we don't come from regality?
What is the line between history/reality?
When did this land make us into a race?
Where do we go if we don't stay in our place?
Are you really still a Djali, if you cannot inform?
How'd we move forward if the shackles we're the norm?*

*Who do you know really did it all alone?
What's the beauty in the story once we made this place our home?
When did we come up with our food, music and church steeples?
Do you recognize that we've all climbed a steep hill?
How can they stop us if we made ourselves a people?'*

I don't need regality to find the beauty in my history, I simply needed to be presented with a different reality than I'd been taught, and be given the opportunity to ask different questions. My ancestors came from different lands that spoke different languages and had different cultures, and they arrived in America.



Free from all the stories in conflict with her truth, Awa has created room for more stories. With that space she makes a brave decision to start listening and forging a truth based on her own experiences, and that of those around her. Without dismissing the past, Awa forges ahead to build on her lineage and history.

Awa finds her greatest truth when given access to all the knowledge and power the tower holds. The answer is not in any of its books or technology, but the people within it. The truth of her past has taught her that hoarding knowledge and resources for a select few is not the best way to shape our future. Her final song poses a question, but since she has decided to share the knowledge, the answer is obvious. *Alone a youth runs fast, with an elder slow, but together they go far.*⁹

Though both my journey and Awa's started in different places, we've seemed to arrive at the same truth.

*Only in partnership can we thrive, grow, change.
Only in partnership can we live.*¹⁰

Djeli Ya is the djeli's act. It can be performed any number of ways: music, proverbs, and oral stories. But Awa tells her greatest story just by living, going through a journey of discovery that mirrors those of us who look to uncover our own hidden past. ■

8. Ese Ne Tekrema, Adinkra symbol meaning the teeth and the tongue play interdependent roles in the mouth. They may come into conflict, but they need to work together.

9. A Luo proverb.

10. Earthseed's *The Book of the Living*. Check out Octavia Butler's *Parable* series y'all.