CHAPTER THREE

SENEGALESE DIOLA IN CONTEXT

Who Were the Diola?

Much of what is known about the Diola people and the region they inhabit has come about through the works of a handful of European and American ethnographers and sociologists/anthropologists. The erudite Senegalese scientist and anthropologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, traces the origin of all black Africans back to the region of the Upper Nile valley extending to the Great Lakes—a milieu he calls “the primitive cradle of all Black peoples today living dispersed at the various points of the continent.”

His works seek to recover linguistic ties that bind most ethnic groups populating Senegal and other African countries. Although the origin of


Diola people is difficult to determine, clearly neither is it true that Diola people “did not exist as an ethnic group before the colonial period.”

There are three myths about Diola origin. The first links the Diola ethnic to a trader:

Un père de famille de la race des Diola actuels, vint s’installer dans le Buluf en qualité de trafiquent… En tout cas, la prospérité de ce nouveau pays l’enchanta; il s’y installa définitivement et garda pour ses enfants le nom de Diola, déformation de Dioula. Ses descendants fondèrent par la suite, les sous-groupes Diamat, Floup, Djougout et Bayot. an ancestor of the actual Diola ethnicity, lived in the area of Buluf as trader… In any case, enchanted by the prosperity of this new country, he finally settled there and kept the name Diola for his children, a distortion of Dioula. His descendants henceforth founded the subgroups of Diamat, Floup, Djougout, and Bayot.

The second myth stresses a Diola kinship with the Serer by way of twin sisters said to have left the kingdom of Kabu by canoe traveling towards the estuary of the Gambian River. During the trip, their

suggesting that African unity can be achieved if Africans were to speak one language. This, of course, is the case in Senegal where most tribes speak Falaf/Wolof.

Peter Mark, *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest: Form, Meaning and Change in Senegambian Initiation Masks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 22. It is also insulting to assert that the Diola is whoever claims to be one. To reduce Diola identity to a mere personal preference would likewise be untrue (Mark, *Wild Bull*, 16–17). I am not denying the fact that identity is a process but it is one that does not dissolve the person into something else.

I call them myths instead of theories because, as a Diola by maternal lineage, I consider Diola mythology to be crucial. The Diola reconstruct their history through mythological accounts.

Thomas, *Les Diola*, 2.489–90. This theory cannot be rejected based on the Diola disdain for trading jobs as Thomas maintains. Were Thomas’ arguments based on linguistic grounds, they would have been more convincing. Lucie Gallistel Colvin, *Historical Dictionary of Senegal* (AHD 23; Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 216–7. The Mandinka (Mallinke is a subgroup of traders) migrated from the empire of Mali to the Senegambian region between 1240 and 1260 A.D. There, they founded the empire of Kabu.

Thomas, *Les Diola*, 2.490–1. Apparently, there are two versions to this story. The first, with a slight variation, has the twin sisters (“Agen” and “CyAmBon”) sent away by the king to find mates. Whereas Agen traveled southward and became the mother of the Diola, her twin sister, DyAmBon, went north where she birthed the Serere people. Thomas dismisses these myths insisting that “les légendes que nous venons de citer n’existent que chez les Diola, et le Sérère ne parle jamais d’une tell parenté de facto ou de jure,” “the legends we just cited exist only among the Diola, and the Serer never talk about such kinship in reality” (491n1). Against his refutation is his admittance of key shared beliefs between the Diola and Serer such as the belief in a transcendent God, communication with the deity, belief in the future, burial practices, fishing,