

Beyond the Mali Empire—A New Paradigm for the Sunjata Epic*

By Jan Jansen

Universiteit Leiden (jansenj@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

Abstract: This article presents a new approach to the Sunjata epic. It analyses the epic in relation to Africans' understanding of their relations with other-than-human beings and by linking the epic to ritual life and masquerade performances. This new approach places the epic as a representation of important matters in the political economy of the West African savannah, with a time-depth of three millennia, rather than merely an account inspired by the foundation of the medieval Mali Empire. This article will provide ample evidence that the origins of major themes in the epic – such as the relationship between the warrior Sunjata and the blacksmith Sumaoro and descriptions of heroes began much earlier than the thirteenth century to which modern historians since Maurice Delafosse have assigned Sunjata. It will as well demonstrate that genealogical data in the epic must be read as lessons for smart rule (through matrimonial and military strategies) rather than data about historical persons.

Keywords: Sunjata epic, Mali Empire, oral tradition, blacksmith, warrior, griot

Introduction

This article reveals a wholly new way of thinking about Sunjata, the alleged founder of the medieval Mali empire and the hero of Africa's most popular oral epic. This new paradigm proposes a new level of analysis for the Sunjata epic that, in contrast to the current paradigm, is grounded in an African understanding of the world, and that includes a rich variety of historical, ethnographic, and ecological data that have hitherto been excluded or overlooked in the study of the Sunjata epic. For the narratives about Sunjata follows Joseph Miller's conception that typical features of oral traditions for the early history of Africa are that they are characterized by "no developmental chain of related events set on a time-based continuum," that "the traditions (...) never deal with individuals," and "refer selectively to only certain parts of the past."¹ The new paradigm for understanding Sunjata differs from the current paradigm 1) which seeks the origin of the narrative in actual political history, namely the establishment of rule (by Sunjata's family) in medieval Mali; 2) which studies the oral narrative in terms of a literary genre, the epic, surrounded by myth and legend, and 3) which accepts a time-based continuum for the events reported in the epic. The new paradigm will replace the current emphasis on literary dimensions of the narrative by an emphasis on the epic's historical meaning, arguing that all major episodes

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¹ Joseph C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen – Early Mbundu States in Angola* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 14.

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of the epic actually are based on fine cultural understandings of several founding periods of West Africa's history. It will thus describe what is generally called "the epic of Sunjata" as a hybrid historical source representing core issues in the political economy of the West African savannah; the epic gives answers to universal political questions about the origin and preservation of power.

This article reveals in particular three major issues in West Africa's political history and that are reported through the Sunjata epic, but that have been concealed by the current paradigm's emphasis on medieval Mali, the belief in Sunjata as a historical person, and the literary appreciation for oral epics. The first issue which I link to the epic is the relationship between power and fertility in an agriculture-based society. I argue, by revealing new sources and by putting forward new hypotheses on the blacksmiths' position in agricultural societies, that Sunjata's adversary has to be a blacksmith; it is not a story theme, it is political-historical necessity.. Secondly, I give evidence that the protagonists and antagonists of the epic resemble masks and Africans' knowledge about human relations with animals, the earth, and the landscape in such a detail that it is unacceptable to suggest that Sunjata and his helpers/adversaries were historical persons or based on historical deeds by humans. Thirdly, I will demonstrate that the epic is a template for smart rule: the narrative explains what marriage strategies rulers should adopt in order to preserve power and how rulers can organize military operations.

Before discussing these three issues (the role of blacksmiths, the knowledge about human relations with other-than-human beings, and smart rule and warfare), I will shortly introduce the content of the epic and describe how the current paradigm was developed and became widely accepted in the large twentieth century.

The Current Paradigm: Mali Empire, History for Africa, and Epic

Nowadays the Sunjata epic is everywhere in academic courses on African history, culture, literature, and politics.² It is a text that reaches large audiences since the story line is easy to follow, the text is nicely divided in episodes that can be read as separate stories, and some episodes have esoteric, exotic events or actors, while other episodes feature universal themes like the love of a mother for her child and the rivalry between half-brothers.

The most catching episodes, well-known to millions of people in West Africa, are:³ 1) the two hunters from the kingdom of Mande (Mali) kill the rampant buffalo of Do; 2) the two hunters choose as their reward for the kill the hunchbacked princess Sogolon the Ugly; 3) the two hunters, on their way back to Mande, attempt in vain to have sexual intercourse with the princess; 4) the

² The most often used versions are Djibril T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965 [French original 1960]); John W. Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara—A West African Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); David C. Conrad, *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004). For overviews of Sunjata texts published before 2000, see Stephen P.D. Bulman, "A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 71–94 and Stephen P. Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 94–95.

³ Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara*, 39, for a first list of episodes. See also Stephen P.D. Bulman, "A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 71–94, and Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa*, 94–95.

hunters decide to give the princess to their king; 5) the king of Mande marries Sogolon the Ugly as his second spouse; 6) Sogolon bears a child at exactly the same moment as the first spouse, but her child (Sunjata) is announced as second; 7) Sunjata's half-brother Mansa Dankaran Tuman is announced first-born and becomes inheritor of the throne; 8) Sunjata is paralyzed during childhood and starts to walk, to help his mother, only after his mother is deeply insulted by the co-spouse; 9) the king dies and Mansa Dankaran Tuman succeeds to him to the throne of Mande; 10) Sunjata fears his brother's newly acquired power and goes in exile, in the company of his mother; 11) Sumaro Kanté, the blacksmith-sorcerer king, occupies Mande and Mansa Dankaran Tuman flees the country; 12) a delegation from Mande visits Sunjata in exile and begs him to return to Mande; 13) Sunjata swears that he will return to Mande, but only if his mother dies that very same night; 14) Sunjata's mother dies that night, and Sunjata returns to Mande; 15) Sunjata acquires the secret on how to defeat the apparently invincible Sumaoro; 16) Sunjata defeats Sumaoro.

The Sunjata narrative acquired its current prestige as an epic through literary analyses and debates published between 1960 and 2000. Niane published his version in 1960 under the subtitle *l'épopée mandingue (An Epic of Old Mali)*. That was an innovative literary classification, because until then Sunjata had been considered as a legend or a tale. Niane's claim was extraordinary at the time and came in sharp contrast to Ruth Finnegan's findings in 1968 that there is no African epic.⁴ Finnegan's bold statement produced a wave of studies and text editions to prove the contrary. In 1997 the publication of two anthologies of African epics—one in English and one in French—demonstrated that there had been a *volte face* within three decades.⁵ Finnegan herself now agrees that the tables have turned on her and has herself described the shift in detail.⁶

In the academic quest for an African epic, the Sunjata epic appeared to be the ideal candidate. Sunjata narratives met the literary criteria for the epic genre in an exemplary way and over the years numerous critical text editions of the Sunjata epic have been published.⁷ The discussion of African epics has certainly profited from the intellectual mood among the historians

⁴ Discussion in Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond—Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007), chapter 9.

⁵ John W. Johnson, Thomas A. Hale and Stephen Belcher, *Oral Epics from Africa—Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Lylia Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng, *Les Épopées d'Afrique Noire* (Paris: Karthala/Éditions UNESCO, 1997).

⁶ Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, chapter 9.

⁷ In this process, griots acquired a high status as experts in oral tradition. Griots appeared to be the perfect partners for researchers—from the late 1960s they were equipped with tape recorders—providing the researchers with recordings and acting as encyclopedic informants. In some works the number of lines of the text edition is even suggested as a criterion that determines the value of the performance. Some critical studies are: Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist as Critic and Intellectual Producer: An Example from Contemporary Mali," in Toyin Falola, ed., *African Historiography—Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), 14–38; Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, "Modern Transformations of Written Materials in 'Traditional' Oral Wisdom (Mali, West Africa)," in Gaetano Ciarcia and Éric Jolly, eds., *Métamorphoses de l'Oralité entre Écrit et Image* (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 95–110; Donald R. Wright, "Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants," *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 205–17.

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of the 1960s, which was in favor of emancipating the writing of African history from its colonialist paradigm by exploring African sources for African history that would be the equal of written documents. As a result, in the academic study of oral traditions much emphasis was placed on the mnemotechnical skills of informants and the recovery of factual messages hidden in orally transmitted data⁸—this was the era of Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s adage “En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle.”

The 1960s therefore marked a beginning in the recognition of the oral tradition as historical evidence, and methods closely resembled philological text analysis -- structural analysis became never en vogue among historians of Africa.⁹ However, although there was a breakthrough in the appreciation in the appreciation of the storytellers and their oral traditions, in the study of Africa’s precolonial history the historical models and units of analysis remained inspired by European political history, with much attention for states, kingdoms, , empires, and other centralizing polities.¹⁰ Without any doubt, their attitude was linked to the widely felt desire to provide a national history to the young African nation states that had just gained independence.¹¹

One cannot underestimate the pivotal position of the Sunjata epic as a potential source for the history of the Upper Niger (present-day south-west Mali and north-east Guinea), and even the entire West African savannah. For this area there are no first-hand written sources available that can be dated to before the French occupation at the end of the nineteenth century, except the report that Ibn Battuta wrote about his visit to the ruler of Mali, in the middle of the fourteenth century, when he heard a griot [West African bard aka *jeli* or *jali*] reciting about Sunjata. Moreover, in this part of Africa archaeological data are very scarce because of the weakness of mud architecture and the devastating forces of nineteenth-century warfare and termites.

When the Sunjata epic acquired in the 1960s its current academic prestige as a source for the medieval history of the African states that had gained independence and as a literary masterpiece, numerous premises about its content were reproduced uncritically, such as the idea that the victory of Sunjata over his adversary, blacksmith-sorcerer Sumaoro Kante, refers to a historical battle between leaders of polities, and the idea that Sunjata and Sumaoro were to some extent at least inspired by historical figures.

⁸ Jan Vansina describes his pioneering work in this field in his *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

⁹ This may be due to the impact of Jan Vansina on the study of Africa’s history. See for Vansina’s impact and his methodic preferences, for instance, the special section “Jan Vansina Remembered” in *History in Africa* 2018, in particular David L. Schoenbrun, “Crafting Early African Histories with Jan Vansina,” *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 99–112 and Peter Robertshaw, “Rivals No More: Jan Vansina, Precolonial African Historiography, and Archaeology,” *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 145-160.

¹⁰ As examples I would mention Nehemia Levtzion’s *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London: Methuen, 1973), and the UNESCO and Cambridge projects of writing the history of Africa.

¹¹ After the Gold Coast had opted in 1957 to call itself Ghana and thereby appropriating one of the two famous medieval empires of West Africa, in 1958 the French colonies of Sénégal and Soudan chose “Fédération du Mali,” which was split up in 1960 when the present-day Republic of Mali was established.

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The origin of the idea of a battle between Sunjata and Sumaoro had become an established fact since Maurice Delafosse's monumental *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*.¹² This three-volume work marked a watershed in the historiography of the Western Sudan by putting forth a conceptual framework of the Mali Empire and by integrating it into a linear history of successive empires in Western Sudan. In retrospect, Delafosse's work has been seen as an effort to write a nation-style history for the new colonies,¹³ its purpose being to establish French rule in that part of the world and to make the society of Western Sudan historically "legible" to colonial administrators; it made the colonies in West Africa comparable to France, which had been as well a kingdom in the Middle Ages.¹⁴ Delafosse provided a linear chronological reading of the relationships between Sunjata and those Mali kings mentioned in the works of Arab writers whose work Delafosse highly esteemed.¹⁵ Adaptations by successive generations of historians of the resulting linear chronology prove the substantial impact of Delafosse's work;¹⁶ he introduced major characteristics of the current paradigm (Sunjata as a historical person, the Mali Empire reported by well-informed Arab authors).¹⁷

¹² Maurice Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger. Le pays, les peuples, les langues, l'histoire, les civilisations* (Paris: Larose, 1912). The first generation of colonial administrators in the Western Sudan believed that the stories about Sunjata had taken place in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. See Yves Person, "Nyaani Mansa Mamudu et la fin de l'empire du Mali," in *Le sol, la parole et l'écrit. Mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny* (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'Outremer, 1981), II: 613–53, 613. Some of the very exact data reconstructed by Delafosse, such as for Sunjata's reign and the battle of Krina "in 1225," have always been judged to be somewhat conjectural—although those dates still appear in school history textbooks.

¹³ See the essays in Jean-Loup Amselle and Emmanuelle Sibeud, eds., *Maurice Delafosse. Entre Orientalisme et Ethnographie: Itinéraire d'un Africaniste (1870–1926)* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1998).

¹⁴ This idea of legibility was introduced by James Scott in his book *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ In his fascinating PhD dissertation Hadrien Collet recently reconstructed in detail how the image of Sunjata came into existence as an expression of orientalism. Hadrien Collet, "Le sultanat du Mali (XIVe -XVe siècle) Historiographies d'un État soudanien, de l'islam médiéval à aujourd'hui (Paris, 2017), in particular pp. 42ss.

¹⁶ Austen and Jansen have challenged Delafosse's (and others) trust in Ibn Khaldun and come with an alternative, implicitly following Miller's conception (*supra*) that oral traditions don't represent a "set of events based on a time-based continuum," by arguing that Ibn Khaldun fused an oral tradition with eyewitness reports about contemporary rulers of Mali and framed them in contemporary Arab models typical of oral memorization and the literary expression of political power. Ralph A. Austen and Jan Jansen, "History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers," *History in Africa* 23 (1996), 17–28.

¹⁷ Earlier administrators had never collected such material, well-illustrated by sources preserved for Nyagassola, which is in present-day Guinea but not far from the Malian border. After Nyagassola was occupied by the French, the French commander Captain Péroz wrote—very sympathetically to its inhabitants—a twenty-page historical study of the town. Captain Péroz's report is full of historical details and includes numerous claims by Nyagassola's political elite, but all referred to an occupation of the area a few centuries earlier. Péroz himself estimated that the invasion of the area had occurred in 1705. There was no reference to Sunjata; the *mansarenw* (the royal family) was described as being ethnically of Fulbe descent and said to have invaded the area from the East—and not as descendants of the rulers of the Mali Empire. Capitaine Étienne Péroz, *Au Soudan français—Souvenirs de guerre et de mission* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1896), 242–60.

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It wasn't though through Delafosse and other scholars and administrators that the current paradigm became hegemonic in the long twentieth century. The first generation of indigenous West African school teachers, trained in St. Louis, the administrative capital for the West African colonies, were taught to use the character of Sunjata as a teaching aid for classroom drama lessons. Those early African school teachers accepted and copied that image of Sunjata as the hero of West Africa's medieval history. In doing so they played an important role in popularizing that French-inspired image of Sunjata in West Africa, as some of the best pupils from St. Louis became the leaders of political parties destined to govern Mali and Guinea after independence, and thus they helped to establish the current paradigm.¹⁸

Throughout the twentieth century, increasingly more scholarly text editions about Sunjata have become available. As a result the content and function of each episode of the Sunjata epic has been subjected to detailed analysis, but, maybe surprisingly, historians never linked the epic's episodic structure to Miller's conception that different episodes will refer "selectively to parts of the past." Apparently, the epic is viewed as being internally consistent based on the premise of the relationship of a *person* called Sunjata to the medieval rulers of Mali. That view led researchers to accept the idea that oral traditions about Sunjata originate from one main period, namely the era before the heyday of medieval Mali, which is the central pillar of the current paradigm.

Towards a New Paradigm: Why Sunjata's Adversary Is a Blacksmith

Although detailed chronologies for Africa's political and social history are often impossible to reconstruct, in particular for the pre-1800 era, societies on the African savannah have gone through dramatic transformations in the past millennia. First a shift from hunting-gathering was made, then iron production was introduced, and then kingdoms were established. During all these transformations knowledge of the human relation with the other-than-human lifeworld (animals, plants, and other substances) must have been acquired, produced, and integrated in daily and institutional life.¹⁹ Although the conditions of the African savannah were relatively ideal for hunter-gatherers, it was here that people made the transition to agriculture in Africa

¹⁸ Stephen P.D. Bulman, "A School for Epic? The École William Ponty and the Evolution of the Sunjata Epic, 1913–c. 1960," in Jan Jansen and Henk J.M. Maier, eds., *Epic Adventures—Heroic Narrative in the Oral Traditions of Four Continents* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 34–45. An example of such a school teacher in action is Mamby Sidibé, who in 1937 wrote a version of the epic that was inspired by the plays of Shakespeare (published in 1959 in *Notes Africaines*), and who in 1961 witnessed how the famous septennial Kamabolon ceremony took a nationalistic turn that celebrated Mali's independence, featuring the Sunjata epic. See Mamby Sidibé, "Soundjata Keita. Héros Historique et Légendaire, Empereur du Manding," *Notes Africaines* 89 (1959), 41–51; Nicholas S. Hopkins, "Rapport de Mamby Sidibé sur les Cérémonies Septennales du Kamabolon de 1961," *Mande Studies* 15 (2013), 51–78; Jan Jansen and Nienke Muurling "Mamby Sidibé's Report of the 1961 Kamabolon Ceremony: An Historiographical Analysis," *Mande Studies* 15 (2013), 63–79. See also Collet, "Le sultanat du Mali," 64 ss.

¹⁹ For a methodological exploration on the study of the other-than-human lifeworld with regard to history see the articles on multispecies history in *History in Africa* 45 (2018), in particular David L. Schoenbrun and Jennifer L. Johnson, "Introduction: Ethnic Formation with Other-Than-Human Beings," *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 307–345.

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approximately seven millennia ago.²⁰ At the beginning of the first millennium CE iron technology was used intensively on the West African savannah.²¹ It is also known that horses were used in West African warfare during the first centuries of the second millennium CE,²² Horses arrived centuries after iron technology had been integrated into society. But while iron technology was successful everywhere, the success with horses was limited. Horses could survive only in parts of Africa where there were no tsetse flies, and were of practical use only in certain types of terrain.²³ Nevertheless, horses did have a major impact on military and political organization on the African savannah, which is a flat landscape and one where there are no tsetse flies.

It is important to note that the Sunjata epic is a narrative from a flat terrain (the West African savannah) where horses can be maintained, although often with difficulty. And this may exactly be the reason why the Sunjata epic has been transmitted through the centuries in this ecological zone!

Working with Miller's conception, that an oral tradition refers to parts of the past, it is a challenge to find out which part of which past is referred to and why this is so important. I will start chronologically by exploring and propose to see a strong relationship between agriculture and blacksmithing in the early days of agriculture. This relationship is far from coincidental: it seems universal and the reason for this is that both demand knowledge of fertility and reproduction. It is, for instance, well known from the culture of the Ancient Classical World that the Greek god Hephaistos (the Roman Vulcan, god of blacksmiths) was married to Aphrodite (Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sexuality). Archaeologists have suggested an ancient relationship between fertility and blacksmiths as masters of fire: "[A] s fire predates metallurgy and the earliest associations with fertility are to fire, heat, and ripening.²⁴

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa blacksmiths are not only the experts in iron technology but have also been indispensable for fertility and therefore for the reproduction of human life. The parallel between the production of iron from ore and human reproduction has been described numerous times, with the furnace said to resemble a woman's breasts and womb²⁵ and the bellows standing for the male genitalia,²⁶ and blacksmiths being forbidden from sexual intercourse on days when ore is melted in the furnace. Iron production and human reproduction

²⁰ David W. Phillipson, *African Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). I thank James Fairhead for this reference.

²¹ An overview of evidence for the introduction of iron technology in the African continent is provided by Stanley B. Alpern, "Did They or Didn't They Invent It? Iron in Sub-Saharan Africa," *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 41–94.

²² Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History—The Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²³ This is explained in John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500–1800* (London: UCL Press, 1999).

²⁴ Kathryn de Luna, personal communication, December 8, 2016. De Luna added: "I think this gets transferred later to metallurgy, at least in early Bantu societies."

²⁵ See the "explicit imagery" in Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power—Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

²⁶ *Ibid.*; blowing air into the furnace is symbolically equal to ejaculation.

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can even be integrated into the landscape, for example among the Haya blacksmiths who live near Lake Victoria and view a terrain of iron production as the body of a willing woman.²⁷ The imagined link between the blacksmith and fertility in examples from Africa show the deep logic of it and suggest a far more complex and prominent role for blacksmiths there than was attributed to them in Ancient Europe. I will argue that the position of the blacksmith can be better understood if the blacksmiths relationship with agriculture is explored – shifting the attention from iron to earth – and human relationships with animals are taken into account. This brings me to the animals that historians and archivists usually considered as their arch-enemies: termites!

The numerous authors (art historians, archaeologists, ethnographers) who have described the production of iron have stressed the artisanal craftsmanship and the importance of iron tools for increasing agricultural production as well as its impact on warfare. These authors however overlooked the cosmological significance of the material that blacksmiths add to the clay they use to make furnaces. That material is clay taken from termite mounds, for it has been generally believed that furnaces cannot resist the heat of the melting process if they were not partially made of clay from termite mounds.²⁸ Clay from termite mounds does indeed increase the integrity of the oven material, but the practice of adding it must not be understood only in terms of increased cohesion and resistance to high temperature. In fact, there is more to it than meets the eye.

Clay from termite mounds is used to make furnaces, and furnaces represent the process of fertility and birth. But why are termites and the clay from termite mounds so crucial? To answer that question, we must look at the function of termite mounds in agriculture. James Fairhead and Melissa Leach have published a number of studies in which they have demonstrated how farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa use termite mounds to determine which land is suitable for clearing and cultivation. Farmers can determine from the mounds the quality of the soil since the mounds present a perfect sample of “what lies beneath.” For under the mounds the termites create complex systems of tunnels that ventilate and irrigate, enhancing the potential fertility of the field.²⁹ Fairhead also explains that “termites also bring to the surface combinations of minerals that have important dietary value, for instance to pregnant women.”³⁰

²⁷ Peter O’Neill, Frank Muhly, Jr., and Peter Schmidt, *The Tree of Iron* (film, University of Florida, 1988). See also Walter E.A. van Beek, *Forge and the Funeral: The Smith in Kapsiki/Higi Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

²⁸ For instance Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power*, 9; O’Neill et al., *The Tree of Iron*.

²⁹ For instance James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, “Termites, Society, and Ecology: Perspectives from West Africa,” in Élisabeth Motte-Florac and Jacqueline M.C. Thomas, eds., *“Insects” in Oral Literature and Traditions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 197–220. “Termites can be beneficial to agriculture, for example by boosting crop yields and enriching the soil. Termites and ants can re-colonize untilled land that contains crop stubble, which colonies use for nourishment when they build their nests. The presence of nests in fields enables larger amounts of rainwater to soak into the ground and increases the amount of nitrogen in the soil, which is essential for the growth of crops,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Termite> (accessed 11 April 2016). See also (with thanks to James Fairhead for the reference) Dorkas Kaiser, Michel Lepage, Souleymane Konaté and Karl Eduard Linsenmair, “Ecosystem Services of Termites (Blattoidea: Termitoidea) in the Traditional Soil Restoration and Cropping System Zaï in Northern Burkina Faso (West Africa),” *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment* 236, 2 (2017), 198–211.

Therefore both blacksmiths and termites have the power to extract substances from the earth that benefit agriculture, so that cosmologically speaking the activities of termites and blacksmiths correspond as they both are fertility experts.³¹ I suggest that blacksmiths' practice of using clay from termite mounds is very ancient and might be linked to knowledge of termite mounds (and admiration for termites) that enabled transition on the African savannahs from hunting and gathering to agriculture.³²

This deep link between blacksmiths and earth through termites is strengthened when female blacksmiths are taken into account. Female blacksmiths in Sub-Saharan Africa are presented as potters in English publications, but this translation conceals the fact that African languages have generic terms for "blacksmithing person" to which an adjective male or female is added. Socially blacksmiths are marked as well in most African societies, as they are endogamous or entitled to marry artisans only, as is the case in most societies of the West African savannah.³³ Potters have a *cosmological* relationship with the earth similar to the relationship their male counterparts have with earth. Henrike Florusbosch,³⁴ who studied Mande potters in Mali, relates a myth about a time before clay when potters had to use termite mounds to make their pots. The first clay was then obtained by making a sacrifice to a bush spirit (*jinnu*) who transformed a termite mound into clay, thus providing the potters with their raw material. Since then, in return

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFg21x2sj-M> for the magnitude of the tunnel system created by termites, which is beautifully illustrated in an experiment in which an abandoned ant hill (which is in structure very similar to a termite mound) was filled with cement, a process that took three days and ten tons of cement. When this cement structure was excavated, it revealed an astonishing metropolis of eight meters deep, with highways, fungus gardens, etc..

³⁰ The clay of the interior of some termite mounds is therefore eaten. On geophagy (which is a global phenomenon) in West Africa, see James R. Fairhead, "Termites, Mud Daubers and Their Earths: A Multispecies Approach to West African Religious Thought," *Conservation & Society* 14, 4 (2016), 359–67. I suggest it is cosmologically significant that in West Africa it is always reported that *women* eat soil, since they are most involved in the process of producing new life. Termites, which have an enormous total biomass and which are available any time of the year, have served African societies as major source of nutrition – see for a bio-engineer's report Arnold van Huis, "Cultural Significance of Termites in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 13, 8 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13002-017-0137-z>.

³¹ Shrines and other places of sacrifice often consist of termite mounds. As an illustration I mention the Hauka sect in the colonial Gold Coast in Jean Rouch's famous film *Les Maîtres Fous/The Mad Masters* (1956 [copies available all over the internet]).

³² The relationship between fire and fertility indeed explains why blacksmiths are related to fertility in Ancient Europe, where there are no termite mounds. See also note 25.

³³ For some ethnographically rich case studies on this phenomenon, see David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, eds., *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

³⁴ Henrike Florusbosch, "The Way of the Clay: Cosmological Aspects of Mande Pottery" (paper for the Fifth International Conference on Mande Studies, Leiden, National Museum of Ethnology,, June 2002).

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for the clay, potters must offer an annual sacrifice to the bush spirits.³⁵ Clearly, female blacksmiths too have a strong relationship with the earth through termite mounds.

Therefore, the position of blacksmiths in Sub-Saharan Africa does not depend on a differentiation between their artisanal skills along lines of gender—men working on the anvil, women making pots—it depends on their shared powerful relationship with the earth. They shouldn't be called "blacksmiths and potters" but "earth experts." Their position isn't therefore the result of any process of labor differentiation within their society, but the consequence of their *cosmological* position at the genesis of society. And that is why blacksmiths are responsible for circumcision/excision, which transforms children into pure and complete members of society; they finish the reproduction/birth process and they prepare new life for reproduction.³⁶ Just as biologists use DNA as an analytical unit to explain life and discuss its impact on life, and monotheistic religions lean on a model of a Supreme Being to explain the origin of life and the meaning of life, societies in Sub-Saharan Africa refer to blacksmiths' activities and knowledge to explain life and each member of society knows the impact of the blacksmiths on his/her personal life.

It is then no coincidence, given termites' crucial role in transmitting to man knowledge about the earth and fertility, that termite mounds feature in African creation myths all over Sub-Saharan Africa as a locus of creation and as a source of knowledge about sexuality.³⁷ A beautiful example of such a myth was told to me by an old, blind hunter from a village south of Bamako who made a cosmological division between those beings who can hear and those who cannot, and who at the same time presents this knowledge as sexual education, thus suggesting a self-evident link between knowledge about termites and sexuality³⁸:

Man, all creatures of flesh and blood, wild animals in the bush, domestic animals, the Devil, snakes, human beings, and birds all issue forth from two termite mounds. Human beings, domestic animals, wild animals of the bush, and all creatures that have ears issued from the same termite mound, and [later] dispersed over all the earth. Birds, those which resemble snakes and those which turn their heads to the sky, lizards, the simple-minded animals—and take good note of this—have no ears and issue from the same termite mound.³⁹ Note this well! That all beings with ears give birth to living young. The snake,

³⁵ The necessity of using clay from termite mounds in the production of furnaces (by blacksmiths) and pottery (by potters) is a significant fact that has been overlooked in the discussion on the introduction of iron technology in Sub-Saharan Africa as documented in Alpern, "Did They or Didn't They Invent It?"

³⁶ O'Neill et al., *The Tree of Iron*, presents blacksmiths who explain that circumcision is like cleaning the pieces of iron obtained from the furnace.

³⁷ Jacky Boujus told me that the Dogon (Mali) compare a termite mound to a clitoris, which also emphasizes a link to fertility (personal communication, Aix-en-Provence, 24 mars 2016).

³⁸ Based on a French translation by Ouana Faran Camara in Jan Jansen, *Les Secrets du Manding—Les Récits du Sanctuaire Kamabolon de Kangaba (Mali)* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 2002), 29–30. The Mande (Manding) peoples highly esteem the spoken word as source of truth which is key to understanding the important cultural dichotomy beings-with-ears versus beings-without-ears.

³⁹ My new translation; the original text provides several options.

the water iguana, the lizard, the crocodile, the birds that fly, have no ears, and lay eggs. Creatures which give birth to living young have ears, those which lay eggs do not have ears. These differences exist between us and them. When you haven't reached a certain age when you have obtained wisdom in certain things, you'd better leave them alone. It is not good to reveal everything you know, for that evokes an evil force. We adults, we restrain ourselves sexually in certain cases.

The important position of blacksmiths as earth experts in an agricultural society demands to rethink the relationship between Sunjata and his adversary Sumaoro Kante – note that Sunjata's adversary *always* is a blacksmith; apparently this is a mandatory element in the narrative.

I argue that the theme of Sunjata's defeat of Sumaoro has been the conceptual framework for discussing the changing nature of the regional political economy of the West African savannah, in both form and scale, in the last centuries of the first millennium and the first centuries of the second millennium. In that era introduction of horses changed the ways political power could be expressed and maintained. Warfare became complex as polities became more complex, that is larger in scale and bigger in size. The use of iron for warfare technology developed as well, although iron production/blacksmithing remained culturally/cosmologically an activity linked to (control over) fertility and agriculture. The triad iron-fertility-warfare and their mutual relationships needed to be redefined and re-imagined. This seems to be an issue of general interest in the history of mankind. In many parts of Africa a scenario developed in which the warriors gained political power and military leadership, but issues of fertility remained with the blacksmiths, who became a (casted) group without access to political power. This is, for instance, the scenario described by the Sunjata epic. Elsewhere in Africa, the political elites developed scenarios that integrated knowledge of iron (and fertility) in royal power.⁴⁰ And in the European Classical World, fertility was transferred from the blacksmith god to the god of warfare – Hephaistos loses his spouse to Ares (Mars), the god of war – thus turning the blacksmith god into a marginal creature.⁴¹ Sunjata and his adversary Sumaoro thus represent competing forces in society.⁴² Sunjata's adversary always is a blacksmith, because the narrative needs to be

⁴⁰ I thank Kathryn de Luna for helping me define this process. The alternative, that knowledge of iron was integrated into royal power, had happened with the kings of Congo, for instance. See, among many other studies, the important study by Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion—Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁴¹ This marginality is his destiny in the Classical mythology: he was so ugly that his mother Hera threw him from a cliff, which made him cripple. In the Germanic world war god Donar/Thor is pictured with an iron hammer, clearly a product of blacksmithing, but stories about him don't refer to fertility. It seems that in African thought the link between iron and fertility has been maintained conceptually, while it has been abandoned in European thought. Such reflections, however, go far beyond the scope of this article.

⁴² To my knowledge, the only exception to the commonly adopted premise that Sunjata and Sumaoro refer to to historical persons, is a suggestion by George Brooks who proposes to see the epic is an account of a societal transformation, in his *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 100. This paper provides the evidence for Brooks's hypothesis. Strikingly enough this idea never developed among French colonial administrators who must have learned about Classical mythology at school; the story about Hephaistos must surely have been familiar to the echelons of French colonial administrators and researchers who produced the first written histories of Sunjata. However, their mission to establish a French colony, with its own great medieval

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understood as a story about the blacksmith, not about a person called Sumaoro – “traditions never deal with individuals” (Miller, *supra*). The idea to see blacksmiths as earth experts, whose knowledge and skills about fertility developed at the same time when societies learned to exploit land for agriculture, is key to a cultural understanding of the political history as it is told through the Sunjata epic.⁴³ One may wonder now, if traditions can’t deal with individuals, what historical understanding can be attributed to the key actors in the narrative. My answer will, again, be inspired on people’s understanding of the their relation with the other-than-human lifeworld.

Understanding Sunjata through Masks, Cults, and Animals rather than an Account of Rulers of Mali

I have offered here an alternative historical interpretation of the battle between Sunjata and Sumaoro by linking its narrative to a major political change of warriors seizing power at the expense of blacksmiths as earth experts. . By rejecting the idea that it was a battle, I indirectly suggested that Sunjata and Sumaoro were no persons. I will elaborate this idea by taking a closer look at the actual protagonists of the epic.

In this section I will identify the strong links between the main heroes of the epic and West Africans’ cultural understandings and knowledge about animals, plants, and landscape as well as through the performance of some cults and the appearance of some masks. The immediate connection of blacksmiths to these cultural understandings and this knowledge lies in the fact that blacksmiths are West Africa’s main mask sculptors and they perform initiation rituals as well as lead secret societies. I aim to demonstrate that the epic’s protagonists are cultural constructs; they refer not to human beings and their deeds but rather they are representations of culturally highly significant meanings and practices. As African oral traditions are characterized by “no developmental chain of related events set on a time-based continuum,” that “the traditions (...) never deal with individuals,” and “refer selectively to only certain parts of the past,” I argue that the epic provides, through the descriptions and actions of its heroes, a cultural understanding of human relations with animals and with cults and mask performances. I will illustrate this by giving an analysis of the characters of Sunjata, Fakoli (a general of Sunjata), Tiramagan (another general of Sunjata), and Sumaoro. But first I will pay attention to Sogolon the Ugly, Sunjata’s mother who features in the narrative in more episodes than Sunjata himself!

Sogolon is very ugly and this seems to be taken for granted, although it is for any audience in the world strange to think that a powerful king will marry an ugly, cripple, hunchbacked girl. In the epic it is explained by having a soothsayer announcing to the king that he has to marry this ugly girl, but still it feels illogical. And to make it even worse, she has as well the power to transform herself into a porcupine, something the hunters from Mande find out in the

history, and their respect for the medieval Arab authors who mentioned Sunjata as the ancestor of the rulers of medieval Mali, must have blinded these colonial researchers to see a thematic similarity between Classical mythology and the story about Sunjata.

⁴³ When writing these lines I had in mind a recent study by Jennifer Johnson on a group of people from Uganda that lived from fishery and whose practices of raising socially recognized children were inspired by the reproductive practices of the mouthbrooding fish species that used to be their most important source of living. Jennifer L. Johnson, “Fish, Family, and the Gendered Politics of Descent Along Uganda’s Southern Littorals,” *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 445–471.

episode when they try to have sexual intercourse with her.⁴⁴ Key to understanding Sogolon is knowledge of life of bush animals. In West Africa the story theme of the princess living in the bush like a wild animal is common and by no means unique to the Sunjata epic.⁴⁵ In founding myths a kingdom is successfully established by a hero born to a “wild” princess found in the bush. This princess often lives like an aardvark or a porcupine – an animal that lives in the holes dug by aardvarks and that lives the life of a solitary hunter. In the perspective of the clash between blacksmiths and warriors, the aardvark makes a strong symbolic contribution in favor of the warriors. This animal has a diet based on termites, for which it destroys systematically termite mounds, thus ruining and disrespecting the cradle of fertility/reproduction, and the source of blacksmiths’ knowledge. Sogolon’s powers to transform herself into a porcupine and her physical appearance – with a hunchback she resembles an aardvark – announce her destiny to give birth to a hero who will overpower blacksmiths (= earth experts who have established a positive relationship with termites)..⁴⁶

A number of characteristics of Sogolon the Ugly is visible is the material world as attributes of the Komo mask – the Komo being a male secret society of the West African Mande peoples in which matters of sexuality and virility are transmitted; it should be noted that a Komo society is directed by a blacksmith.⁴⁷ Sarah Brett-Smith demonstrated that the porcupine metaphor for Sogolon is related to a description of a Komo mask and argues convincingly that the Komo mask represents a vagina.⁴⁸ Consequently, Sogolon the Ugly is more than just a rather unattractive girl. As a character in the Sunjata epic she represents both the mother of the future

⁴⁴ Some variants of the epic describe the hunters’ attempts to have sexual intercourse with Sogolon very explicitly and with a great sense of humor. See also the list in Stephen P. Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 94–95. This list shows that this theme is present in nearly all published versions of the epic.

⁴⁵ See Cornelia Giesing and Valentin Vydrine, *Ta:rikk Mandinka de Bijini (Guinée-Bissau), La mémoire des Mandinka et des Sooninke du Kaabu* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007). This study describes the theme of princesses who live in the bush like aardvarks. The aardvark is very shy and seldom seen but, once captured is easily domesticated. See for instance “Meet the Aardvarks!” (Zoological Society of London), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFjut7I6M28>. It is common knowledge among the peoples of the African savannahs that the aardvark is practically invincible, because it has no natural enemy (see, for instance, the folktale on the aardvark and the hyena in Gérard Dumestre, *La pierre barbue et autres contes du Mali: édition bilingue bambara français* [Angers: Bibliothèque Municipale, c. 1989], 36–43) (Note that the aardvark should not be confused with the ant eater, an animal that lives in South America and biologically of a totally different species).

⁴⁶ The Kela version of the Sunjata epic, in Jansen et al., *L’épopée de Sunjara*, mentions a king Soma Jobi who is praised with the lines “Sera the destroyer of the dark termite mound, Sera the destroyer of the light termite mound.” At the time I thought that translation bizarre, but accepted it on the authority of my co-author Boubacar Tamboura, a native speaker. It is only now that I see it makes sense as an expression of power at the cost of blacksmiths.

⁴⁷ On the Komo, see for instance McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmith*; Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Artfulness of M’Fa Jigi—An Interview with Nyamaton Diara* (Madison, WI: African Studies Program of the University of Wisconsin, 1996).

⁴⁸ Sarah Brett-Smith, “The Mouth of the Komo,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (1997), 87. Komo masks are sculpted from termite-infected wood, which adds the powers of creation to the mask. See Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). My gratitude to James Fairhead for this reference.

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leader of a new political order and existential/cosmological matters related to sexuality and human reproduction.⁴⁹

Sunjata's name suggests a cultural construct rather than a person, since part of his name is an animal. Sunjata derives from Sun-Jata, *Sun* referring to Sogolon, the mother of Sunjata.⁵⁰ Jata or Jara means "lion," so that Sunjata is sometimes called "the Lion King."⁵¹ A lion is, of course, an animal with royal appeal, but Jata ("Lion") is a man's name too. However, considering these observations, we should also take into account that the lion was a widespread cult object on the savannah of the Western Sudan. Although nowadays the lion is nearly extinct in West Africa, it was once widespread.⁵² Leo Frobenius studied the sites of lion cults, which he mentioned in a number of his books,⁵³ and in the classic novel *L'Enfant Noir/The Black Child*, the Guinean writer Camara Laye talks about his initiation, when he grew up in northern Guinea, by a lion mask called Konden Diarra. This proves that lion cults continued to be practiced until at least the second quarter of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ It is therefore plausible that the name for a founder of a royal dynasty, Sunjata, is inspired by cultural understanding of the hierarchy among the bush animals.

In Mande oral traditions Fakoli, Sumaoro's nephew who defected from Sumaoro's army and joined Sunjata's army, is described as a Komo mask, as Patrick McNaughton noted.⁵⁵ The lines of praise for the Bila clans, who are descendants of Fakoli, are an idealized description of a Komo mask. The lines begin, "*Fakòli kunba, Fakòli daba*" ("Fakoli with the big head, Fakoli with the big mouth"). They refer as well to "three hundred and thirteen arrows" on Fakoli's head, which is a reference to the porcupine needles that are attached to a Komo mask. For anyone informed about the Komo secret society mentioning Fakoli, who is often introduced in a narrative by praise lines for him, is therefore also an appearance of the Komo.⁵⁶ One notes that the mask may at the same time be understood, by other initiates, as a vagina (see *supra*). The current paradigm thinks

⁴⁹ The proposed new paradigm for the Sunjata epic invites to rethink gender and gender relations in West Africa. This aspect falls outside the scope of the current analysis and demands a separate study.

⁵⁰ It is a common practice in Mande to add the mother's name to a person's name.

⁵¹ The relationship between Sunjata and a lion was also performed by two old women who danced like a lion, with a piece of raw meat in their mouth, to the words of the praise song for Sunjata; see Jan Jansen, "Masking Sunjata—A Hermeneutic Critique," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 137.

⁵² See, for instance, Mungo Park's unexpected meeting with a lion. Mungo Park, *Travels Into the Interior Districts of Africa* (1954; reprint, London: Eland, 1983), 159. Park mentions the Middle Niger River as an area with many lions (page 145, page 149), which explains why "gates are shut a little after sunset, and nobody [is] allowed to go out" (page 149).

⁵³ I used Leo Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (Zürich: Phaidon Verlag, 1933), 81–83.

⁵⁴ Jansen, "Masking Sunjata," 135 (Diarra [= Jata/Jara] = lion).

⁵⁵ Patrick McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 136–37; also in Jansen, "Masking Sunjata," 133.

⁵⁶ This argument is supported by detailed evidence in Stephen P.D. Bulman, "Introduction," in Stephen P.D. Bulman and Valentin Vydrine, eds., *The Epic of Sumanguru Kante, Narrated by Abdulaye Sako* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017).

of all the heroes in the epic as being inspired by human actors. How doubtful this can be is as well illustrated by Tiramagan. Tiramagan is the ancestor of the Traore, one of Mande's largest clans. In the oral traditions of Sunjata, Tiramagan is celebrated as Sunjata's most important general, who killed the king of Djolof (present-day Senegal), and thereby provided Sunjata with horses. Tiramagan is also remembered as the founder of the Kaabu Empire, in a narrative that almost fully ignores Tiramagan's relationship with Sunjata. In Kaabu (present-day Guinea-Bissau) he is called either Tiramagan or Siramagan, a name which might refer to an ancient cult practice. *Magan* is an archaic word for king or ruler, while *Sira* is the lance that the Kaabu people used in an ordeal to point to someone in the audience whose innocence or guilt had to be tested. Tiramagan/Siramagan therefore means the Chief of Ordeals.⁵⁷ This suggests that over the centuries a cult object, the lance of ordeal, transformed into a person with a particular human characteristics.

Last but not least in my list of examples of "other-than-human heroes" is Sumaoro, the legendary blacksmith-king. In many versions of the Sunjata epic Koulikoro is remembered in Mande as the place where Sunjata defeated Sumaoro, who then transformed himself into a rock. The rock formation at Koulikoro is often considered the border of Mande.⁵⁸ Recent research by Stephen Bulman has uncovered the rich history of this rock at Koulikoro as a cult site or place of amnesty for fleeing slaves, and a place to which the Keita (Sunjata's descendants) are denied access.⁵⁹ Therefore Sumaoro has for centuries been physically present in the Mande landscape, his position was marked both geo-politically and ritually.

To summarize my argument as to why the epic's heroes don't refer to historical persons, I would point out the strong link between the descriptions of the epic's characters on the one hand, and ritual practices, masks and knowledge about animals on the other. Inspired by Ibn Battuta's description of a griot's performance with masks at the court of the Mali king, I suggest that the epic as we know it today—a recital by a griot accompanied by string music—is an altered version of a long-gone mask performance that expressed the warrior's struggle with the

⁵⁷ This was suggested to me by Cornelia Giesing, personal communication, Haldern (Germany), 1 September 2015. On Kaabu, see, for instance, Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikkh Mandinka de Bijini (Guinée-Bissau)*.

⁵⁸ Dieterlen mentions Koulikoro as the border of the fishing zone where Somono fishermen, who are related to the rulers of Kangaba, may fish. Germaine Dieterlen, "The Mande Creation Myth," *Africa* 27 (1957), 135. This supports the hypothesis that the rulers of Kangaba, the heirs to the throne of the Mali Empire, once ruled in the area upstream of the Niger up to Koulikoro, before they withdrew the border of their polity to the north of the Mali gold fields. That process, which took place in the seventeenth century, has been described in Jan Jansen, "In Defense of Mali's Gold: The Political and Military Organization of the Northern Upper Niger, c. 1650–c. 1850," *Journal of West African History* 1, 1 (2015), 1–36. The account of the Kela griots—affiliated to the rulers of Kangaba—affirms the importance of Koulikoro as a geographical marker of Sunjata's realm: "Il s'est transformé en rocher. (...) Magan Sunjara [= Sunjata] dit: 'Tu l'as fait ainsi, si tu ne l'avais pas fait ainsi, je ne t'aurais pas laissé ici au Manden.' Même aujourd'hui les gens de Kulikoro font des sacrifices au lieu dit Kulikoro Nyanan. Sumaworo n'est pas mort; ce n'est pas un mensonge." Jan Jansen, Esger Duintjer and Boubacar Tamboura, *L'épopée de Sunjara, d'après Lansine Diabate de Kela* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1995), 160–61.

⁵⁹ Bulman, "Introduction."

blacksmith for political leadership.⁶⁰ Over the centuries and under the influence of Islam—the official religion of Mali’s rulers—masks have disappeared and the performance has been reduced to an oral recitation, without doubt – but this needs further study – influenced by the Tarikh format as it was developed in the Sahel in the seventeenth century.⁶¹

Lessons in Smart Rule – Marriage and Warfare

In contrast to what is generally said or believe about oral traditions, the oral tradition about Sunjata is remarkable stable over a large area and a longer period. While local people attribute this stability to the training and mnemo-technical skills of griots, I seek it in the importance of the message that is transmitted through the Sunjata epic. To this I now add the idea that the epic contains several smart lessons about rule. These are expressed in relationships between key actors in the epic.

As it is believed that an African oral tradition about the early past is not about individuals (see Miller, *supra*) research about such oral traditions should focus on the relations that are expressed by the actors, definitely in an oral epic like the Sunjata epic in which these relations are stable over a large time and era. This means that a structural analysis is required (– not to be confused by a structuralist analysis, which is one inspired by the work of Lévi-Strauss). I aim to demonstrate that the epic’s stability is apparently due to the importance expressed by particular relationships. I will illustrate this by studying two relationships that are crucial for any ruler: marriage and army leadership.

- *Marriage*

Though the plot concerns Sunjata’s victory over Sumaoro, the epic’s narrative mainly describes the quest for Sogolon the Ugly, Sunjata’s mother and the second spouse of the king of Mande, and her life at her husband’s court. The story more or less ends with Sunjata’s succession of his

⁶⁰ Jansen, “Masking Sunjata,” 133 and Bulman, “Introduction,” referring to Ibn Battuta’s account in Nehemia Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 293. For an alternative evolution of the Sunjata epic, see Ralph A. Austen, “The Historical Transformation of Genres: Sunjata as Panegyric, Folktale, Epic, and Novel,” in Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 69–87. Note that it is not unusual that people give account of major shifts of big issues in their society in highly standardized texts, which is the reason why myths exist. The interpretation of such mythical texts may, however, vary as some people may experience a myth as factually true. To give an example: in the 1970s I learned from my teacher of religious knowledge that the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Paradise actually is an account of a people’s transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture, while at the same time our neighbors in the village where I lived suffered a family conflict on the issue whether or not the snake had literally spoken to Adam and Eve in Paradise.

⁶¹ See for possible analytical relationships Mauro Nobili and Mohamed S. Mathee, “Towards a New Study of the So-Called Tārīkh al-Fattāsh,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 37–73 and Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, “Intellectual Innovation and Reinvention of the Sahel: the Seventeenth Century Timbuktu Chronicles,” in Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane B. Diagne, eds., *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2008), 95–107.

father.⁶² No version of the epic tells of Sunjata as being married or of his having a family life—although that would be an obvious theme if the Sunjata epic had been a chronicle about kings.⁶³ Sunjata's marginal role in his own epic affirms, in fact, strengthens the idea that Sunjata is not just a historical person but a sort of conceptual framework representing urgent issues for a new political elite made up of warriors.

In terms of relationships, it is crucial to understand why a future mother of a founder-hero is a "wild princess" (see above). Such a wild princess lives in the bush, which means without relatives and therefore her future husband won't be indebted to her family. The character of Sogolon is an advice or warning to a ruler to avoid in marriage obligations towards the bride-giving lineage or clan. Sunjata achieved political autonomy and could have full attention for his paternal heritage by having no obligations to maternal relatives. His father was not indebted to his spouse's family, since he received his spouse as a gift, a reward in fact. For similar reasons, it is logical that Sunjata himself doesn't enter into marriage, for the reason that to do so would mean that he would lose equal appeal to all clans, as the future ruler of a society for everyone.⁶⁴ The same logic applies to that ruler's mother who could dedicate herself completely to her child's career, thus representing the ideal of a mother's role in the kinship system.

Sunjata's narrative is embedded in prominent political dimension that is structurally inherent in the Mande kinship system, and that is the question of co-spouses and half-siblings. In their classical study of the Mande hero, Charles Bird and Martha Kendall elucidated the political struggles resulting from polygamy, expressed in terms of *fadenw* (*fa* = father, *den[w]* = child[ren]), who are half-siblings as children from the same father but a different mother and who represent rivalry or *faden-ya* (*-ya* = *-ty*) versus *badenw* (*ba* = mother, *den[w]* = child[ren]), who are full-blood siblings as children of the same father and same mother and therefore represent harmony or *baden-ya*. In Mande societies a father is seen as a rival, a kind of obstacle for individual success, while a mother is highly valued as the person who will always support you and a well-known proverb is *Bèè b'i ba bolo*, which can be translated as "Everything is in the hands of your mother" or as "Your mother is all you've got."

Thus the composition of Sunjata's family is characterized by an implicit rivalry between the children of the two spouses of Sunjata's father.⁶⁵ The political message in Sunjata's mother's narrative is therefore embedded in the ever-present fraternal rivalry, a delicate kinship question

⁶² Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara*, 47–48, explains that after reaching its climax, a performance of the Sunjata epic is open-ended (instead of ending with a final apotheosis, as written texts often do).

⁶³ The narrative of Sunjata's struggle usually ends with Sunjata's giving each family a particular task in society. This is the famous meeting at Kurukanfugan, where, as people in Mali and Guinea learn at school, "Sunjata divided the world among the families of Mande [society] and gave every family its task."

⁶⁴ Jan Jansen, "When Marrying a Muslim—The Social Code of the Political Elites in the Western Sudan, c. 1600–c. 1850," *Journal of African History* 57, 1 (2016), 25–45.

⁶⁵ Charles S. Bird and Martha B. Kendall, "The Mande Hero: Text and Context," in Ivar Karp and Charles S. Bird (eds.), *Explorations in African Systems of Thought* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987 [1980]), 13. Jansen explains that versions of the Sunjata epic in which Sunjata's father has three spouses therefore sketch a rather different political landscape from that of the versions with two spouses. Jan Jansen, "The Younger Brother and the Stranger: In Search of a Status Discourse for Mande," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 144 (1996), 659–88. See also Jansen, "In Defense of Mali's Gold."

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that Mande people have always experienced in their daily lives, since they live, generation after generation, on large patrilocal compounds.⁶⁶

There is, however, next to the fact that his parents' marriage left him indebted to his maternal relatives, a remarkable structural dimension to the failure of Mansa Dankaran Tuman, Sunjata's half-brother: his mother's Muslim identity, for in all versions of the epic her patronymic is Berete, which is a patronymic that in the Mande world imposes the bearer the public role of being (descendant of) an Islamic scholar.⁶⁷ By contrast, Sunjata's mother has a warrior identity, with the patronymic Kone [Condé] in all versions.⁶⁸ Although by definition no older than fourteen centuries, the theme of failure of issue from marriage to a Muslim spouse is widespread in narratives of the West African savannah.⁶⁹ Just like in the case of Sunjata's mother representing the West African story theme of the "wild princess", Mansa Dankaran Tuman's mother represents the story theme of "failure by marrying a Muslim." The Sunjata epic thus presents a strict rule that in the matter of his marriage, a warrior's political concerns must prevail over religious or commercial concerns.⁷⁰

In addition to the advice to avoid indebtedness to the bride-givers and to avoid involvement with Islam and trade, the narrative advises rulers, reminiscent of the words of the hunter in the creation myth above, to act upon the value of knowing how to "restrain themselves sexually.". In contrast to Sunjata Sumaoro lacks such control, something made very explicit in the famous theme of Sumaoro, who took the spouse of his nephew Fakoli in addition to his other

⁶⁶ On Mande settlement principles, see for instance Jansen, "Younger Brother."

⁶⁷ On the importance and flexibility of the Mande system of patronymics, see Gregory Mann, "What's in an Alias? Family Names, Individual Histories, and Historical Method in the Western Sudan," *History in Africa* 29 (2002), 209–220 and Jan Jansen and Clemens Zobel, "The Guest is a Hot Meal - Questioning Researchers' Identities in Mande Studies," in Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Africanizing Knowledge – African Studies Across the Disciplines* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 375-386.

⁶⁸ In the Mande world, as is explained by Brahim Camara, "to pay homage to anyone involves, among other things, recalling the praise-name of the mythical ancestor." This is done by griots in public performances. While the standardized praise lines griots recite for a Berete refer to Islamic scholarship, those they recite for a Kone refer to warfare (immediately after harvest, at the beginning of the dry season): "Kone, from the land of Sankaran! / Kone, who can make great waters run dry! / Kone, who roils the water in a pond and who dries it out! / A battle without a child of the Kone clan / A battle without a child born of a Kone woman / Is only a simple hunting party / Kone, twin of the lion, [wo]man from the land of Sankaran!" Brahim Camara, "Homage to Daouda Conde," in Stephen Belcher, Jan Jansen and Mohamed N'Daou, eds., *Mande Mansa: Essays in Honor of David C. Conrad* (Zürich/Münster: Lit Verlag, 2008), 59-60.

⁶⁹ For examples of failure predestined by birth to a Muslim mother, and for an historical analysis of the relationships between rulers and Muslims and how they changed when Muslims became rulers, see Jansen, "When Marrying a Muslim." Another good illustration of this theme is a narrative which presents Sumaoro as the child of two mothers, each of whom has a Muslim patronymic—Ture and Berete—which implicitly predicts that Sumaoro will fail as a warrior-ruler. Bulman and Vydrine, *The Epic of Sumanguru Kante*.

⁷⁰ Trade was organized through Islamic networks, hence I include commercial concerns. This rule refers to the political situation of a particular historical era, a "part of the past," possibly the pre-1800 era. For analysis, see Jansen, "When Marrying a Muslim."

ninety-nine spouses.⁷¹ That betrayal by Sumaoro caused Fakoli to join Sunjata's army and in certain versions of the epic the event is pictured as the crucial political shift of balance in favor of Sunjata. However, most versions explain Sumaoro's defeat to Sunjata as being essentially another form of falling victim to sexual desire. Sumaoro is seduced by Sunjata's sister and reveals to her that he can be killed by an arrow fitted with a cock's spur. The predictable and certain failure of Sumaoro to restrain himself sexually may thus be read in the epic as the warriors' presentation of a superior self. The epic thus attests that rulers can be victorious when they restrain themselves sexually, which is part of skillfully managing the indebtedness to the families of their spouses.⁷²

Army Leadership and Military Collaboration

In this section it will be explained that, when read in terms of the relationships and the tasks they express, genealogical material in the oral epic reveals a smart template for organizing military collaboration. The Sunjata epic has acquired most of its fame based on the idea that it is the story about a predecessor of the rulers of the legendary medieval Mali Empire as it was described by Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun. After Delafosse, a number of historians – among them Nehemia Levtzion, Djibril T. Niane, and Yves Person – attempted to reconstruct the genealogy from Sunjata to the fourteenth-century rulers of the Mali Empire whose names we know from Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun. All those historians critically examined the written and oral sources and fused data from both types. They worked in the current paradigm in which oral traditions were believed to have preserved data for the reconstruction of an internally consistent and linear chronology for the rulers of the Mali Empire. Strikingly, this appreciation of the genealogical sources was not affected by the growing awareness among historians of Africa, from the 1970s onwards, that one cannot expect an African oral tradition to preserve knowledge characteristic of literature, such as

⁷¹ In Mande oral traditions Fakoli is a very complex character. It is interesting to note that Fakoli, Sumaoro's nephew, is imagined in Mande oral tradition as both a successful warrior and someone related to unacceptable sexual behavior. It is general knowledge that Fakoli founded the secret male Komo society, which in the Mande world is the platform for things to do with masculinity and virility. According to widespread oral traditions, Fakoli brought the first Komo power objects to Mande, although many other traditions consider Fakoli and Makanta Jigin (= "Jigin who went to Mecca") to be the same figure. Those sources say, "Jigin who went to Mecca" was the personage who brought Komo power objects from Mecca to Mande. This character called Makanta Jigin is often represented as having made the pilgrimage to Mecca as penitence for incest, after engaging in sexual intercourse with his mother. Although Fakoli may not have been a blacksmith by birth, and might not be one and the same as Makanta Jigin, there are strong links between him and the status of a blacksmith through his mother—no father is ever mentioned—and through his founding role in Komo society, in which blacksmiths play a leading role and in which sexuality is a major theme.

⁷² Allen Howard suggested (personal communication, January 27, 2016): "[I]s it possible that the Epic is a cultural construct that refers to clashing masculinities? In southwestern Guinea and adjoining parts of Sierra Leone during the late 18th century and the early to mid-19th century, I have found much evidence for conflict among various figures who represented different kinds (models?) of masculinity in terms of how they acquired resources, conducted themselves in public, and were spoken about. Could the same have been true in early Mali?" This idea needs further study; it made me realize that my view on warriors tends to be rather puritan, and that both Sunjata and Sumaoro are examples of "wealth through marriage," although with contrary interpretations on how this wealth should be accomplished

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a list of kings representing a time-based continuum, nor can it be expected to document lists of names in chronological order of when those people lived.⁷³

But if the genealogies can't preserve chronological data about individual rulers, what is then their logics? The genealogies about Sunjata must represent something meaningful, since they are omnipresent in oral tradition and they are stable over many generations.⁷⁴ As in the case of marriage relations, the answer can again be found in the structural relationships that are expressed through the genealogies.

The genealogies of descendants of Sunjata consist of names of *men*, and this simple fact implies a very important political message. The men in these genealogies relate to each other as brothers, fathers, grandfathers, etc. Women's names are absent in these genealogies. This is in great contrast with the description of the family relations Sunjata's father's household, discussed above in the analysis of marriage: in Sunjata's household co-spouses feature as mothers of in a story about rivalry to the throne of Mande. Women (mothers, sisters) are however absent from the genealogies of the descendants of Sunjata. The complete absence of women from genealogies of descendants of Sunjata results in a picture without half-siblings. This implies a strong political idea, since half-siblingness (*fadenya*) is a disruptive force.⁷⁵ All genealogies about descendants of Sunjata, regardless of their place of origin, thus represent harmony (*badenya*) and the absence of the sort of fraternal rivalry mentioned earlier.

Thus, according to the message that genealogies implicitly express through structural relationships, as children of the same mother the descendants of Sunjata all lived in harmony. Interestingly, in these genealogies the position of the youngest brother mattered most, since that position was claimed by the most powerful rulers. Of course, in the West African savannah as elsewhere in the world, inheritance of royal titles is based on principles of seniority, placing greater value on the position of the oldest brother and the oldest son. However, the genealogies of Sunjata's descendants don't deal with inheritance of royal titles but are templates for temporary military collaboration in communal defense or communal attack.⁷⁶ Each male name in the genealogies represents the ruling family of a specific region, the regions working together as full siblings (= in harmony) for the purpose of communal military operations. The position of leader of the army (*kèlètigi*) was left to the ruling family that was considered to descend from the youngest brother in the genealogy; the other families were considered to be descendants of older brothers in the genealogy.

⁷³ David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). See also Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy—The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; reprint, New York: Routledge, 2002) for the thesis that linear (historic or evolutionary) thought is a consequence of literacy. Joseph Miller's conception, that I use as the guiding principle in this article, follows a similar line of thought.

⁷⁴ Genealogies are stable, although they vary from place of recording within the large area ruled by families that claim descent to Sunjata. This area consists of the triangle Kita (Mali) – Kangaba (Mali) – Kankan (Guinea). See maps in Jansen, "Younger Brother."

⁷⁵ See analysis above, based on Bird and Kendall, "The Mande Hero." See also Jansen, "Younger Brother."

⁷⁶ Jan Jansen, "The Younger Brother and the Stranger: In Search of a Status Discourse for Mande," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 144 (1996), 659–88.

Giving army leadership to a “youngest brother” is based on the cultural principle that a junior has the obligation to give to a senior. Thus, when the booty had to be divided among the military partners at the end of a military campaign, the youngest one would share the booty with his seniors, as younger brothers always do. If the military campaign had been led by a senior brother, the logics of sharing would have been absent.

The genealogies of Sunjata’s descendants thus perfectly meet another sharp observation by Miller, that genealogies “consist of sets of personal names linked to one another by (...) conventional relationships of descent and affinity.”⁷⁷ The structural relationship of implicit *badenya* among all men in the genealogies typically is, in Miller’s terminology, “a conventional relationship of descent;” it shouldn’t be read as factual historical material about persons.

The genealogies of Sunjata’s descendants often report of three (full) brothers. The conventional relationship described by the format of three brothers refers to a division of military tasks for which consensus must be continually negotiated—a majority among three participants is always uncertain, and absolute leadership is almost impossible to establish.⁷⁸ It has been observed that in pre-colonial times defense of the area to the north of the gold fields of the medieval Mali Empire manifested itself in settlements/fortifications that were ruled by groups descending from Sunjata and that related to each other as if they were three brothers.⁷⁹ Using that system of collaboration through structural fraternal relations, political elites managed to control the area for a number of centuries: it was successful.⁸⁰ When the French occupied West Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century they were convinced that the entire area had known no form of centralized political organization for centuries. They failed to understand that the genealogies of Sunjata’s descendants, in which the branch of the youngest brother appeared to have usurped royal power, were actually genealogies consisting of conventional relationships of descent and had a clear politico-military function.⁸¹ The French failed also to assess the political

⁷⁷ Miller, *Kings and Kingsmen*, 16.

⁷⁸ It might be no coincidence that an early report on Mali mentions nine (3x3) towns, while Ibn Khaldun reports of 24 (subjected) kingdoms, which is 3x3x3 minus the 3 leading “brothers.” For the social logics of the number three, see Jansen, “In Defense of Mali’s Gold.”

⁷⁹ Economically this area, the Upper Niger, was integrated by a common interest in the defense of these gold fields. Jansen, “In Defense of Mali’s Gold.” For a detailed case study of a political elite that organized rule through a network of loosely connected households, see Mahir Şaul and Patrick Royer, *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War* (Athens/Oxford: Ohio University Press/James Currey, 2001).

⁸⁰ Jansen, “In Defense of Mali’s Gold.”

⁸¹ The absence of the famous fourteenth-century ruler Mansa Musa—or his presumed alias Nfa Jigin/Makanta Jigin—in the oral versions of the Sunjata epic may strengthen my argument that the Sunjata epic has always been a model discussing issues of political economy. It has been argued that Mansa Musa is remembered in the Nfa Jigin/Makanta Jigin oral traditions, but that might be wishful thinking. A sharp methodological critique of the alleged relationship between Nfa Jigin and Mansa Musa is provided in Jan Jansen, “Narratives on Pilgrimages to Mecca: Beauty versus History in Mande Oral Tradition,” in Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2003), 249–67. Authors who explore the historical relationship between Nfa Jigin and Mansa Musa are David C. Conrad and, rather reluctantly, Sarah Brett-Smith. David C. Conrad, “Pilgrim Fajigi and *Basiw* from Mecca: Islam and Traditional Religion in the Former French Sudan,” in Jean-Paul Colley, ed., *Bamana: The Art of Existence in Mali* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2001),

importance of the genealogies, because they perceived them as factual data about historical rulers of a long-gone kingdom. They developed the current paradigm with a glorious medieval history for West Africa followed by centuries of war and chaos.⁸²

Conclusion: Has this New Paradigm a Chance?

The current paradigm is the result of the combined efforts of French colonial researchers, the new West African educational elite trained by them, and scholars of African literature. The new paradigm is inspired by academic explorations of the other-than-human lifeworld, with a special attention for relations between humans and termites and aardvarks, and by ethnographic studies of artisanal practices, cults, and masks; it was embedded in general principles of the nature of oral tradition as they were defined by Joseph Miller. In both paradigms the Sunjata epic is a rich and important source for the culture and history of Africa and of mankind.

The current paradigm supposes a starting date of the Sunjata epic after a historical Sunjata, and attributes special status to the fact that the narrative is transmitted as a story cycle with related episodes, i.e. an epic, performed by experts, the griots. The new paradigm ignores the epic as a literary masterpiece emphasizes its value as a historical source; it analyzes the narrative as a hybrid that has integrated and fused selectively various major “parts” of the history of West Africa’s political economy during the past three millennia.

The great strength of the current paradigm is that it is well established in daily life. Schools teach Sunjata in their history classes as a magnificent thirteenth-century king, radio broadcasts modern, Cuban-style interpretations of praise songs about Sunjata,⁸³ politicians actively use references to Sunjata’s era in the public debates on identity,⁸⁴ television pays attention to ceremonies that re-enact the foundation of society by Sunjata,⁸⁵ and griot families

25–33; Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Artfulness of M’Fa Jigi—An Interview with Nyamaton Diara* (Madison, WI: African Studies Program of the University of Wisconsin, 1996).

⁸² Remarkably, Malian researchers have never challenged this negative French judgment of their history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, probably because in doing so they would have undermined their belief that oral traditions about Sunjata have been transmitted for generations since the thirteenth century. See for instance Seydou Camara, “La tradition orale en question,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 144 (1996), 763–90. For a analysis of this attitude, see Jan Jansen, “The Intimacy of Belonging: Literacy and the Experience of Sunjata in Mali,” *History in Africa* 38 (2011), 103–22.

⁸³ For instance “l’Exil” by the Rail Band featuring Mory Kanté, and several recordings by Salif Keita (solo or as singer of the Rail Band). For background information and many more examples from Guinea and Mali, see Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁸⁴ Molly Roth, *Ma Parole s’Achète – Money, Identity and Meaning in Malian Jeliya* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2008) and Dorothea Schulz, *Perpetuating the Politics of Praise: Jeli Praise Singers, Radios and Political Mediation in Mali* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2001).

⁸⁵ For the “Charter of Mande”, see Francis Simonis, “Le griot, l’historien, le chasseur et l’UNESCO,” *Ultramarines* 28 (2015), 12–31, Jansen, “The Intimacy of Belonging,” and Jan Jansen, “À la Recherche d’Autochtonie—Pourquoi les Maliens Acceptent la Charte du Manding et la Charte de Kouroukanfougan,”

have become stakeholders in projects of intangible heritage in which feature Sunjata and Sumaoro.⁸⁶ Moreover a major strength of the current paradigm is its flexibility and dynamic; it can seamlessly integrate new perspectives and new story themes to a present-day audience of literate citizens who have a linear conception of time.⁸⁷ The new paradigm is based on an idea that the Sunjata epic can't be interpreted as a linear, chronological history, and it will be a long way to go before this new paradigm will have a similar social and cultural life as the current one.

In the new paradigm the Sunjata epic offers a powerful window looking onto the cultural and political history of Sub-Saharan Africa, a story of things that have really mattered to the peoples who inhabited that part of the continent. The Sunjata epic is a most wonderful and rich source for studying an African perspective on African history, an African understanding of matters of life and rule, and an acknowledgment of the wisdom that mankind owes to its relationship with the other-than-human lifeworld. The epic will however show this richness only to those who are prepared to rethink the Sunjata epic beyond the Mali Empire.

Mande Studies 18 (2016), 59–69. For television reports of the septennial Kamabolon ceremony, see Jansen and Muurling “Mamby Sidibé’s Report.”

⁸⁶ For the link between UNESCO and the production of intangible heritage in Nyagassola (Guinea), see Simonis, “Le griot, l’historien, le chasseur et l’UNESCO.” The griots of Nyagassola had family members who graduated from university, such as Namankoumba Kouyaté, who, for instance, was familiar with the work of Niane in the 1960s and integrated this knowledge into his efforts to gain UNESCO status. Francis Simonis wrote (e-mail, 13 February 2016): “(...), je ne trouve aucune référence au Soso Bala avant le mémoire de Namankoumba Kouyaté [an undergraduate thesis from 1970—JJ]. Il me semble très important de noter que Niane [1960] ne situe pas le Soso Bala à Niagassola dans son livre. Je suis personnellement convaincu que le Soso Bala en tant qu’objet encore existant est une invention récente des Kouyaté [from Nyagassola, Namankoumba Kouyaté’s village of origin] et que le balafon présenté n’a aucune profondeur historique.” See also Jansen, “The Intimacy of Belonging.” and Jansen, “À la Recherche d’Autochtonie.”

⁸⁷ It is remarkable that versions of the epic based on recordings by researchers from the mid-1990s all give prominent status to Sumaoro, as if Sunjata should be silenced and, with the fall of the dictatorial regimes in Mali and Guinea, the political economy needed to be reconfigured. See for instance how Sumaoro is pictured in David C. Conrad, *Sunjata—A West African Epic of the Mande People* (recording from Fadama, Northern Guinea), in Bulman and Vydrine, *The Epic of Sumanguru Kante* (recording from Koulikoro, Mali), and in Mamadou Kouyaté, *L’épopée de Sunjata* (Saint-Denis: Publibook, 2016) (recording from Nyagassola, Northern Guinea). Again, that follows Miller’s conception discussed above, that oral traditions in Africa “refer (...) to [those] parts of the past, (...) which have evident analogues in the present.” Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen*, 12. See also Jan Jansen, “The Next Generation – Young Griots’ Quest for Authority,” in Toby Green and Benedetta Rossi, eds., *Politics, History and the West African Past. Essays in Honour of P.F. de Moraes Farias* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 296-311.