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A CRITICAL NOTE ON "THE EPIC OF SAMORI TOURE"

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I

Samori Toure (d. 1900) is celebrated, both in written history and oral tradition, in Mali and Guinea because of the empire he founded and his fierce resistance against the French, as they sought to occupy their future colony of the French Sudan. Recently published anthologies of African epic (Johnson/Hale/Belcher 1997, Kesteloot/Dieng 1997, Belcher 1999) attest that an orally transmitted Samori epic exists in these countries. In this paper the texts hitherto presented as the Samori epic will be compared to some oral sketches about Samori which I recorded during two years of fieldwork conducted in south-western Mali and northeastern Guinea.¹ I will hypothesize that a Samori epic may be in the making, but does not yet exist. The texts hitherto presented as the epic of Samori are largely oral narratives produced more or less in concord with expectations about what an

¹Research during the period 1999–2002 has been financed by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW. In the period 1988–2000 I have conducted more than two years' of fieldwork on several topics related to oral tradition in the region south of Mali's capital Bamako (Kela, Kangaba, Narena, Siby, and the Monts Manding). This area is known as "the Mande heartland." Mande or the Manding originally was the region around Kangaba, a presumed capital of the famous medieval Mali empire (which was founded by Sunjata). Nowadays, the term has become in use for a much broader area, well defined by Belcher (1999: 89). "The Manden (or: Mande) is a space, in some way perhaps a time, and for many, an idea. The space is roughly defined by the headwaters of the Niger and its affluents and lies in western Mali and eastern Guinea, it is occupied by the Malinke, for whom it is a symbolic heartland from which the more widespread branches of their people have departed (or claim to have departed—eds.) at various times to take on different names (Mandinka, Dyula, Konyaka, and others). As a time, the Manden looks back to its period of unification and glory under the emperor Sunjata. To speak of the Manden is, of necessity, to evoke the time and space of Sunjata's rule: thus, the Manden is also an idea spread across Africa."

epic should look like. The focus is on Samori as a hero on the battlefield, and this is not representative for the present-day oral narrative on Samori. Therefore, an epic of Samori, if it ever does come into being and takes the form of a standardized oral narrative, might deal with different issues than one might expect from reading the texts presented in the anthologies.

II

The French occupation of sub-Saharan West Africa in the 1880s was not carried out systematically. Yves Person, who wrote a standard work on Samori (Person 1968), compared the future French Sudan to the American Wild West (Person 1977). It was a frontier area where ambitious French army officers sought to fulfil their dreams, often out of sight of formal control by their superiors. The occupation of present-day southwestern Mali was impeded by the fact that the area was part of a huge polity ruled by Samori, whose superior tactics would have made him victorious, Person argued, if he had had the same armature as the French.

Samori suffered a setback in the mid-1880s, when his empire crumbled because of the rise to power of Kenedougou, whose walled capital Sikasso (in present-day southern Mali) he unsuccessfully besieged. In the meantime he signed treaties with the French and the British, which gave him the opportunity to buy European armaments. Yet, when in the late 1880s the French had decided to penetrate and occupy the entire 'Sudan,' Samori moved southward to present-day Ivory Coast, where he subjugated the population and organized a second empire, this time as a 'foreign' ruler. In the mid-1890s Samori had become France's principal enemy in western Africa, and his persecution was something of national interest, reported in newspapers and magazines. In 1898 Samori was captured and sent into exile to the Island of Missanga in Gabon, where he died in 1900.

Samori's regime was rude; collaboration with local rulers was not on a basis of free will. For instance, the collaborationist ruler of Kangaba, a politically and strategically important town south of Bamako, had to give some of his sons in hostage. These sons were killed when Kangaba had to surrender to the French in 1887 after Samori himself had decided to withdraw his troops from the region. Moreover, Samori had built a strong fortress at Degela, a few kilometers north of Kangaba, in order to watch over his "partner" (Bâh 1985:172). Documents from the Malian National Archives (Koulouba, Bamako) and the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (Aix-

en-Provence, France) testify that many villages in the Kangaba area were burned at least once, and that the area's population had become refugees in the period 1885-88, although people resettled quickly after the French occupation

III

In spite of his cruel regime, Samori is often highly esteemed in oral tradition. Anthologies on African epic even assess that there is an epic of Samori. Analyzing the epics of "Afrique Noire," Kesteloot and Dieng (1997 192-200) mentioned the epic of Samori among the five "épopées mandingues." The other four are the Sunjata epic, the Gabou epic, the Segu epic, and hunters' epics. As an example of the epic of Samori, they quoted a few pages from an unpublished text from Conakry *sine dato*, which deals with Samori's siege of Sikasso. Kesteloot and Dieng also mentioned playwrights on Samori to illustrate his fame and announced the publication of a text by David Conrad.

Johnson, Hale, and Belcher's anthology (1997) of oral epics from Africa presents twenty five epics, nine of which have been labeled as Mande epics. Compared to Kesteloot and Dieng, they include more *reported* epics (such as "Fa Jigin" or "Sarah") on the basis of unpublished texts or on relatively short texts. The desire that there are important, although not yet (fully) recorded, story cycles about a particular hero, seems to be used here as evidence, a discussion on the criteria for classifying an oral text as an "epic" is missing. Much attention, twelve pages' worth, is paid to Samori's epic, and the text chosen has been taken from Conrad's unpublished manuscript mentioned by Kesteloot and Dieng—other versions are not referred to.²

Belcher (1999) is more critical concerning oral narratives such as the "epic of Samori." Together with El Haji Umai Tall, Samori is, according to Belcher (1999 113), one of the two "terrifying great men from the 19th century." He adds to this (1999 114) "In addition to the epics of these heroes, a wealth of localized historical narrative lends itself easily to epic singing in the hands of *jalilu* [bards, *a/k/a griots*] As recording, rather than textual publication, becomes more widespread, a great deal more material from this fertile homeland will become available." Thus, although Belcher accepts the existence of an epic of Samori, he acknowledges that these "epics" are constructed by those who manage the means of communication.³

²This text is presented as a Bamana epic, although it was recorded in Kissidougou (northern Guinea), a region dominated by Maninka (Malinke). This may be a typo.

³Most students and teachers outside Mali have experienced Mande epics only in printed form. The vast majority of Malians experience these epics aurally, not

Here, Belcher touches on one reason to watch critically texts presented as African epics. I would like to add to this the role of the researchers in “upgrading” (African) oral narratives to “epics”—researchers are also managers of the means of communication. A fascination for a particular oral tradition in combination with either a lack of training or a modest appreciation for criteria used in the literary sciences—which many historians *have*—might easily inspire them to publish something they call an “epic.”⁴ In the 1960s Ruth Finnegan incorrectly argued that there was no epic in Africa, a point of view refuted a decade later by, among others, Isidore Okpewho and John Johnson, who undermined the Homeric hegemony in epic standards as well as being able to refer to texts that had been collected in the meantime, and which met the revised literary standards for epic.⁵ Nowadays, almost too many epics have acquired the status of “epic.”

The published oral narratives about Samorí certainly have been moulded by Mande literary models to represent gender relationships, warfare, hunting, and labor differentiation, and the texts fit well with what people expect an African epic to be. However, an “epic” should at least be standardized to a certain extent.⁶ The two texts of the epic

as live performances, but as audio cassettes, played on local and national radio stations or on their own cassette players” (Newton 1999: 313).

⁴The following anecdote might illustrate this process. When I requested Stephen Belcher to write an introduction for a book I co-edited with the Malian historian Seydou Camara, and which had the provisional title “L’Épopée de Nankoman,” Belcher convinced us that the versions of the Nankoman narrative we had prepared for publication were variations of a ‘local’ family history, and not an epic. The book was published as *La geste de Nankoman. Textes sur la fondation de Narena* (Leiden, 1999). Trained as historians, Camara and I clearly had not been very critical in elaborating criteria for an epic before Nankoman was “announced” to be an epic. I suggest that this is often the case with historians who work with oral tradition.

⁵Texts presented as West African epics sometimes give insight in the groups who have an interest in the existence of epics. These are not only non-African academics and non-African publishing houses, but also audio cassette sellers in need for a commercially attractive product, as well as local scholars. A good illustration of this complexity is the Musadu ‘epic’ (in Johnson et al. 1997: 80ff.), which the authors exemplify by a narrative told by a professor of history at the University of Kankan in northern Guinea. Another text of this epic (Geysbeek and Kamara 1991) was narrated by a retired schoolteacher. All the storytellers of the Musadu epic being literate men, this is not convincing evidence for the existence of a narrative tradition on Musadu comparable to those used in the 1970s to prove the existence of epics in Africa (Sunjata, Segu, Mwindo).

⁶An important power player in the distribution of the knowledge about African epics is Indiana University Press, which has published almost all the English literature on African epics (works by Johnson, Hale, Belcher) as well as several texts of African epics.

of Samori presented in the two anthologies narrate completely different storylines, even though they both deal with alleged events during Samori's siege of Sikasso. To these two texts, I will add some narratives collected during fieldwork that I will use to illustrate that the narrative tradition on Samori—interesting though it is—must not (yet) be labeled as an epic.

IV

Much local lore about Samori represents what Samori did to the local population, and how he personally communicated with them. When I once passed the village of Nafadji (northeast of Siby), a man whom I greeted said that his village was famous because Samori once had passed the night there. This 'fact' may have been inspired by another Nafadji, in the Mande hills, where Samori defeated a French army in 1886.

Often the events referring to Samori are more "narrative," and not told as a simple historical 'fact.' For instance, Seydou Diabate from Kela, a village famous for its griots, told me *ca.* 1996 that Samori appeared one evening at the *tata* (mud fortress wall) of Kela, but was so impressed by the brilliant replies to his threats that he decided to save Kela from destruction.⁷ This story, told by a young griot and which highly values the spoken word—verbal art is most appreciated by Mande peoples—all must be apocryphal, since contemporary French written documents tell that until the 1880s Kela was an agricultural hamlet without a *tata*, and without griots among its population of about a hundred people.

The following story, narrated by Daouda Nambala Keita from Narena, on 3 October 1996, sheds a different light on griots:

Samori had invited the Keita [the ruling group in Narena] to share with him the drinking of *dègè* [a porridge]. A refusal was a declaration of war. The Narena delegation had been commissioned to drink the *dègè*, but when it was their turn, a female griot among the delegation suddenly started to sing that they had never been subjugated by anyone. The delegate then said that he had forgotten his commission. Samori asked: "Where are you from?" "From Narena," the delegate replied. "Isn't that over there, at the hills," Samori wanted to know. "Yes," the delegate replied. "So close to here," Samori said, "and then already forgotten your commission! Go back to Narena and ask it." The delegate returned to Narena and Samori ordered that the female griot be killed.

⁷Unfortunately I failed to record this anecdote in my diary, thus the lack of details. I doubt whether the story was about Samori or any of his officers.

This is a story of an agreement between two ‘gentlemen,’ who consider the intervention by the griot as an impediment, although of old griots had exercised diplomatic functions in Mande. Again, the story does not refer to a ‘historical’ event. Narena was—just like the other villages in the region—demolished by Samori’s armies somewhere between 1885 and 1887, when he withdrew his armies from the left bank of the Niger and applied the scorched earth strategy. When I told Daouda [himself a member of the local ruling Keita clan] this, he was astonished: “That is not what we tell about Samori.”

When I once proposed to M. Keita, a lawyer from Bamako who was at the time a visiting scholar in Leiden, that research on Samori-in-oral-tradition would be interesting, he objected that one would collect only stories of babies taken from their mothers and pounded in mortars, as well as stories about Samori constructing defense walls by using living humans as building material. These indeed were stories that I have heard quite often. Again, the historicity of such ‘facts’ must be doubted, since people who tell such story invariably locate it in their own region or village, and the French, who documented cruel acts by Samori *in extenso*, do not report such actions.

V

These two stories, about pounded babies and human walls, I recorded also Bala Kante (born *ca.* 1926) from Farabako, where I conducted half a year of fieldwork in 1999. Bala was a well-informed blacksmith who often invited me to talk about blacksmithing technologies and other topics he imagined in the past.⁸ His report about Samori illustrates, to me at least, some methodological problems related to the “Epic of Samori.”⁹

In the meantime the French arrived there. They made a nice city of Dakar. You saw cars passing your compound, and paved roads.

⁸I feel privileged to have worked with him. When I read to the people from Farabako from my transcription of the Sunjata epic (Jan Jansen, Esger Duintjer and Boubacar Tamboura *L'épopée de Sunjata, d'après Lansine Diabate de Kela (Mali)* [Leiden, 1995]), Bala was happy to have found a young man who still was interested in their tradition, he often complained about the lack of attention to the past by the local young people.

⁹I am much indebted to Muntaga Jarra (DNAFLA, Bamako) for a preliminary transcription and translation of the Bala Kante interviews. We are working on the publication of a selection of these interviews. Unfortunately I have not been able to consult Mr. Jarra about the minor changes I made in both the Maninka text and the translation. The Maninka transcription has been added to this paper as an appendix.

connected the compounds and vehicles drove around everywhere. They constructed a very decent Dakar, along the sea.

After having left Dakar, Jola [the ancestor of the Wolof, the dominant ethnic group in present-day Senegal] met Samori, to whom he told that he had a huge troop. Samori replied him that he too had a huge troop and that, since he was an army leader (*keletigi*), they weren't the same, if he were a benefactor (*jigomogo*), he would permit him to pass. Thus Jola and his men passed.

In certain villages he passed, Samori made walls from the inhabitants whom he forced to put their feet in holes dug by themselves. He also ordered to imprisoned women to put their children in mortars and to pound them. Samori did all that.

He went to Ceba of Sikasso. He [who?] told him that something bigger than him was about to come after him. He said that this must not come.¹⁰ May this not happen! Samori met him and then Samori departed, saying this the thing that will happen will be his problem. Biton also arrived at Ceba's place and informed him about his intention to attack Samori. He replied "There will come something that won't save Samori." But that will be in the faraway future! One year passed, and the next year the French arrived.

Samori went to the French and made them sneaky proposals. He told them that he proposed an alliance to Ceba, who refused it by saying that no living creature could beat him. "Really?" "Yes." Someone went to Ceba to tell this. Ceba confirmed that he had an army. The French also had an army. He wrote them something. He wrote them "You may lead an army, well, I am an army leader, too. But catch first the scum who told you those lies." Thus they went to Sikasso and failed to take the fortress (*jiri*) of Sikasso.

They took the road and encountered Samori. "It is you who put us in conflict with Ceba—God's will is your will!"¹¹—you put us in conflict with Ceba of Sikasso." They had a long discussion. Samori destroyed all the villages he passed. In the end, his army suffered from starvation. Again they went to Sikasso, and he knew that, acting this way, he took the risk to be caught by the French.

They argued that he was partially responsible for his own arrest, because he had gone *politiki*.¹² *Politiki* is a bad thing. They consulted each other. Samori's army was in trouble, his troops were ruined by a famine.

There was a huge manioc field, at sunrise Samori went there, he sought refuge there. The ancestor of the Wolofs informed the French that Samori had fled to the manioc field. He went there to tell it. They said it was okay. Then they send two guardians to search for him, to search for him. He said "Aa, hunger ruined me."¹³ "Really?" "Yes." "That's it, when you think hunger kills you, this is only the beginning!"

¹⁰This should be regarded as a tentative translation.

¹¹An frequently used expression which has no particular significance to the story.

¹²Translated by M. Jarra as "escroquerie."

¹³Jarra gives a translation I do not understand (but probably inspired by the rest of the narrative): "Aa, Egoistes, la faim m'a ruiné."

They recorded his voice. He was put in chains, and on the moment of his arrest he said "Ha-an-an-an-an, selfish people!" His voice was recorded and taken with them. That was the way he was arrested. The people of Mande made a song of it: "Samori was caught in a manioc field / This year's things happen in the absence of certain people / A manioc field." That is the way the song goes. They took him to somewhere on "an island in the French sea" (*Faransi kogoji kan*).¹⁴ I don't know whether it still exists. They made a train, and put on it the thing on which they had recorded his voice. Every Sunday the French came together in huge masses to hear his voice. When everyone had arrived, they put "it" (*a*) in the machine. The train howled "Ha-an-an-an-an, selfish people!" The words of his arrest. His words will be in France, over the sea, if they haven't destroyed that train.¹⁵ It is there.

This is neither an epic, nor a well-narrated story, but it is a fascinating text with some interesting historical layers. Samori's adversary Cèba of Sikasso was contemporary to him, and Samori indeed besieged Sikasso in the 1880s. However, Samori was captured more southward, and in the same year Sikasso fell to the French. Biton certainly is Biton Kulibali, the famous eighteenth-century king of Ségou (250 kilometers east of Bamako), at the time the most powerful polity in the area covered by present-day Mali. The joint performance, in an oral tradition, by Biton, Cèba, and Samori—three heroes of different ethnic origins from a present-day perspective—might be evidence for an ongoing process of nation-formation in present-day Mali.

Themes that seem bizarre at first sight appear to be references to major issues in Mande cultures. I already mentioned the "griots" and the high status of the spoken word in Mande. Thus it is logical in a certain sense that the French are described as wanting to conserve their enemy's voice.¹⁶ The fact that they are able to preserve his voice is a major technological achievement and therefore described as coinciding with a train, a vehicle that appeals to the peoples' imagination.¹⁷ The fact that the French listen to Samori on Sundays is a reference to the seven-day week system introduced by the French; in this region a five-day week was usual, although a seven-day week was

¹⁴My tentative translation. lit. "on the French sea."

¹⁵My tentative translation.

¹⁶Adversaries are often highly esteemed in Mande oral tradition, people descending from Sunjata's adversary Sumaworo, that is, the Kante blacksmiths, are respected members of society. Hitler too is often appreciated as the man who almost defeated De Gaulle, although this appreciation certainly has an anticolonial load.

¹⁷The narrator of this text, Bala Kante, a blacksmith, often expressed to me his fascination for the railroad, because of the toughness of the railroad's iron.

known from Islam, a religion that has been present in the region long since. On Sunday the French go to church and listen to a priest, and I wonder—but this is mere speculation—whether this is the reason why Samori's message is so "christian" in accusing the people of being selfish ('egoistes').

The manioc field refers to a situation of warfare. The Maninka, a group of agriculturalists, grow millet and maize, with manioc being an additional product. Manioc, though, can be cultivated on plots in the middle of the bush. It will be the first food that refugees plant, since it has a relatively short growing cycle. To me, therefore, it is not a coincidence that Samori's capture is imagined to have taken place on a manioc field; it correlates to the situation of depletion the people suffered.

Bala Kante's report does not resemble the texts presented as "the epic of Samori" in the anthologies, both of which texts feature events on the battlefield, thus meeting the homeric standard for epical texts, as well as those set for Mande epics such as Sunjata and Segu. Bala Kante's text, though, is about the impact of the French on daily life; it is about modernity and its inevitability. Therefore, I propose, the ancestor of the Wolof has been made responsible for Samori's treason; living along the Atlantic coast, the Wolof certainly were impregnated by the French way of life more deeply and longer than the Maninka.

VI

Oral traditions on Samori are not limited to one particular genre, e.g., the epic, the format hitherto used to present Samori's oral heritage to the academic audience. Although sketchy, and not the result of systematic investigations (a prerequisite, we all were taught, for sound scientific research), the material I collected on Samori gives me reason to think that more data collection on this topic will certainly contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and variety of Mande oral tradition, no matter in whatever literary category it will eventually be categorized.

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APPENDIX

Jolo, ka bò yen ka na, a nɪ Samuru waara nyògòn ye: ko ale min ye min dɪ, ale ka jama ka ca. Samuru ko k'ale ka jama ka ca. Ko balɪ ale ye kèlètɪgɪ ye, a ko ne nɪ ile tɛ kelen dɪ Nɪn ya jigitomògò tò dɪ ko ale ka tanbe. O n'a ya mògòlu tagara. A mana se yòrò dòlu, a bè hadamaden dugu sen ka waa, ka hadamaden dò nyògòn nò k'u sen jòsò k'o kè kòlòkò ye. Olu bè bò yen, a bè taga hadamaden ma. A mana hadamaden mina, o tuma a bè muso, muso bila o k'a den susu kòlòn kònò, a b'o kè. Samuru tun b'o kè.

Sikaso Cèba, a tagara o diyà. O ko, ko fèn ye kòfè ka na, k'o ka bon ile fana ta ye. A k'o kana na dè. A dèsera o la. Samuru ka jèn ka taga. Ko balɪ fèn dò natò ye, ko ɪ la fèn y'o ye dè. Cèba fana, Sikaso Bitòn nara ka w'a yira Cèba la k'ole b'a fè ko ka Samuru kèlè Ayiwa, ko fèn ye kò, ko Samuru kèlèbaga le nato ye. K'o ka jan dè! K'o san dama bila, o san filanan, tubabuw k'ɪ kunbò.

A waala mafaniyafòlɪ kè, ka waa a yira tubabulu la k'ale waalen ko Sikaso Cèba bannen. Ko nɪmafèn sɪ tɛ s'a la Ko ahan? Ko uhun. Mògò ye waa o fò Cèba ye. Cèba ko ale ye kèlètɪgɪ ye. Tubabulu ye kèlètɪgɪ ye. A b'a sèbèn. A y'a sèbèn k'a ban· ko nɪ e ye faama ye, n fana ye faama ye. Ko balɪ nafɪgɪ min waala fò la, a k'ɪ bè o mɪna. A tagara o le tò o tuma, ka waa dèsera Sikaso jɪn ma.

A ye ɪ muru ka na, ka na se Samuru ma. Ko Samuru ko ile ye ne nɪ Cèba bila nyògòn na. Ala sago ɪ sago. Ko Sikaso Cèba an nò bila

nyògòn na. Alu ye o kuma fò, k'o yira nyògòn na. Samuru a mana se dugu min tò, a b'o ti, a mana se dugu min tò, a b'o ti. Bòn, kòngò nara ka n'a ka kèlè minè. Kèlè minèna, ko Sikaso, alu selen yen, ko balì fèn min nanen nin di, ko tubabuw b'ale minè nin sen in.

O ko n'u bè ile minta, ɿ fana nò y'a di, pasèkè ɿ waalen politiki k'alu ni nyògòn cè. Politiki dun man nyi. Ali waara ka waa nyògòn ye Ko Samuru a ya kèlè bara tinyè, a bara kònònafili Kòngò kèlen ɿ k'a k'a fan haliki.

Banankuforo belebele lalen, a banankuforo Samuru solita ka taga. Samuru solilen ka waa bananku fè dò Wòlòfòlu bènba, o waara yira halì bi tubabu la ko Samuru ye banankufè rò. A tagara ka waa o fò Ko nin tè basì ye A nara wuruuu ka garadi cè fila bila ka n'a kama. A manen a kama. Aa, ko, yo, ko kòngò bara ne haliki. Ko òhòn. Ko basì tè! Ni kòngò na e haliki, a k'a ma se fòlò.

A y'a kan ta. A nara ka na nègè k'a kan. Samuru minètuma, a ko ko han-an-an-an-an-an nyangow. Alu y'o kan ta ka taga o di bolo. Samuru wara ka na minta. A minèlen Mandekalu y'o le la la donkili tò. Ko Samuru minènen banankufè dò Ko nyinan ta tè kè bèè nyèna Ko banankufè o, k'a tògò don o donkili tò. Ko tanbe ka taga ko waa a ka nin ta Faransi kògòɿ kan U nò na k'a dabila sisan, o ko, ali waara ka waa tèrèn do dila. O kurun dilanen o tuma ka kan bila o la. Dumansi ni dumansi tubabu bè yen falen ka n'ɿ lajè a kan bolo. A mana na o tuma, alu bè a bila mansin na. A bè karoon ko han-an-an-an-an nyangow, o y'a minètuma ye. O kan bè fansi, kògòɿ, n'alu nò ma k'a tèrèn tinyè. O bè yen.