

HOT ISSUES: THE 1997 KAMABOLON CEREMONY

IN KANGABA (MALI)*

By Jan Jansen

Every seven years the Kamabolon, a sanctuary in the form of a traditional mud hut, is restored and reroofed in Kangaba during a famous ceremony that some even consider to be "the official focus of Mandenka traditional rituals"¹ Part of this ceremony is the recitation of the *Mansa Jigin* ("the gathering of the kings"), the narrative that has gained fame in African literature as "the Sunjata epic" This recitation takes place in the sanctuary, and is accessible only for the performers, the Diabate griots from Kela, and audible only for a selected group of people from the Kangaba region Other people are held at a distance

There are two reasons this ceremony has always had a wide appeal for a large part of Mali's population as well as for researchers First, because it is generally believed that Kangaba is the locus of origin of various West African ethnic groups The presumed thousands of people who "return to" Kangaba during the ceremony are said to include people from Kumas² Second, because of the *Mansa Jigin* recitation, which has the status of being the "authorized" version of the Sunjata epic,³ although it can't be heard by outsiders and has never been recorded

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¹ P F de Moraes Farias, "Pilgrimages to 'Pagan' Mecca in Mandinka Stories of Origin Reported from Mali and Guinea-Conakry," in Karin Barber and P F de Moraes Farias, eds., *Discourse and Its Disguises The Interpretation of African Oral Text* (Birmingham, UK, 1989), 155 Kangaba (or Kaaba) is a small town of circa 5,000 inhabitants, 95 kilometers south of Mali's capital Bamako, at the border of the Niger River It is considered to have once been the capital of the Mali empire In 1880 it had about 1,000 inhabitants For a brief description of the important political role of Kangaba in the region's political system, see S de Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama blon de Kangaba—Histoire mythes, peintures pariétales et Ceremonies Septennales* (Paris, 1995), 13 16, and J Jansen, "The Younger Brother and the Stranger In Search of a Status Discourse for Mande" *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* XXXVI-4, 144 (1996) 659–88

² Germaine Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale au Soudan français," *Journal de la Societe des Africanistes* XXV (1955), 38–76, and XXIX, 1 (1959), 119–38

³ See, for instance, J W Johnson, *The Epic of Son Jara—A West African Tradition* (Bloomington, 1986), 25, and the title of J Vidal, "La Legende officielle de Soundiata, fondateur de l'empire Manding," *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 7 (1924), 317–28 The Kela version of the Sunjata epic has attracted much scholarly attention Vidal had already published a recording from Kela in 1924 In 1979 SCOA a French-Malian trade foundation, financed the recording of the Kela version of the Sunjata epic The six hour recording has been published by M Ly Tall, S Camara, and B Dioura, *L'histoire du Mande d'après Jeli Kanku Madi Jabate de Kela* (Paris, 1987), as well as in Seydou Camara, "La Tradition orale en question conservation et transmission des traditions historiques au Manden Le centre de Kela et l'histoire de Minnjan," II (thèse pour le doctorat de l'EHESS, Paris, 1990)

Most of the people of Mali consider Sunjata the founder of their society and his empire a predecessor of the present-day republic of Mali.⁴

Moreover, many researchers (Dieterlen among them) believe that a Mande creation myth is recited during the ceremony, some even hold the opinion that the Kela griots still preserve secret oral texts which they only recite in the Kamabolon. Therefore, because of the alleged pluri-ethnic reunion as well as the current status of the Kela griots and the Sunjata epic as both a masterpiece of African oral literature and an important source for the study of West African history, the Kamabolon ceremony is an event of great importance for African studies.⁵

I will argue that the ceremony represents a recreation of society. The original impetus is the inauguration of an age group (*kare*), but the entire ceremony represents a complex interaction of various social processes, such as army organization, age group organization, celebration of brave ancestors, and hereditary leadership. During the ceremony, the old roof is taken off the Kamabolon, and then society comes into transition. This situation is represented as "hot," not because it stirs emotions, but because society is remodeled, as in many other African cultures, concepts and notions related to blacksmithing are used in describing the making of society. During the period of transition every group has to behave perfectly, because the new society is being modeled. A fear of making mistakes during the period of transition explains the acts of violence that then take place.

The restored Kamabolon represents the new society, in which the new age group has been incorporated. The performance of the *Mansa Jigin* is a necessary act in order to "cool down" society, before it is "fixed" by the act of reroofing.

⁴ Cf. David C. Conrad, "A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital," *Journal of African History* 35 (1994), 355-77. The ceremony has gained a certain national political interest. In 1954 the famous politician Mamadou Konate attended the ceremony, and he compared his attendance with a trip back to his roots (De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire* 180-182). In 1989 a minister donated 6,000 FF to feed the guests, as I was told in Kela. Also in 1996 and 1997 state concern was clear. In 1996 government officials visited Kela in order to inform about the delay (infra), and in 1997 Minister of Culture Bakari Koneba Traore attended both a rehearsal of the Sunjata epic in Kela (see J. Jansen, "The Sunjata Epic—The Ultimate Version," forthcoming in *Research in African Literatures* (2000)), and the reroofing of the Kamabolon at Friday afternoon, May 2. Moreover, President A. O. Konare donated 2 million F CFA (20,000 FF) to the griots in Kela. The president also donated three tons of rice to the Keita who organized the ceremony. These are obvious signs of "neo clientelism" (cf. C. Fay, "La démocratie au Mali, ou le pouvoir en pâture," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 137 (1995), 22). Kangaba attracts also young Malians who are in search of their roots—see, for instance, I. S. Traore, ed., *Kaaba* (Bamako, 1994), the result of a project called "Le Caravane." A visit to the Kamabolon has become an obligation for scholars who work in the area. For instance, both participants of the first SCOA conferences in the 1974 and the Second International Conference on Mande Studies in 1993 visited the Kamabolon.

⁵ Ralph A. Austen, "The Problem of the Mande Creation Myth," paper presented at the annual African Studies Association conference, 1996, Raymond Mauny, "Notes bibliographiques," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* XXXV, B (1973), 759-60. Compare Ralph A. Austen, "The Historical Transformations of Genres: Sunjata as Panegyric, Folktale, Epic, and Novel," in Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Epic as History, Literature and Performance* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999).

It is a widely assumed that participants put much effort into the correct execution of a ritual or ceremony. In this case, however, I hold this presumption to be incorrect: participants focus merely on the correct execution of their own role in the event. This is what makes the Kamabolon ceremony so fearsome and complex for the participants as soon as different social groups are involved, there is no general master plan and all the participants are afraid to act incorrectly or to be accused of doing so. Although the performance of the ceremony almost dictates that the researcher describe the ceremony in a structural-functionalist idiom, he must always take into account that the "harmonic" performance during the ceremony itself is a fragile and temporary balance.

In spite of the restrictions the investigations have been subject to—no recordings during the ceremony, no questions about the ceremony—I think that I am able to elaborate a new perspective on the ceremony's often-mentioned function as a marker of male age groups as well as to refute some of the popular myths about the Kamabolon ceremony. I will do so by relating my observations made during the 1997 ceremony to descriptions of earlier Kamabolon ceremonies by such renowned French and Malian researchers such as Germaine Dieterlen, Claude Meillassoux, Solange de Ganay, Youssouf Tata Cisse, Wa Kamissoko, and Seydou Camara, and by exploring archival material that may shed light on processes of transformation of the ceremony.⁶

My attendance at the 1997 Kamabolon ceremony was well prepared, since I had conducted fieldwork for two years (between 1988 and 1997) among the Diabate griots (or traditional bards) of Kela. My host in Kela, Lansine Diabate, was *kumatigi* ("master of the word") during the ceremony, he was thus the person responsible for reciting the *Mansa Jigin*.

The Crucial Issue of the Translation of Key Concepts

Before I give a description of the 1997 ceremony, I will first present some explanations for its function and form. I will argue that scholars often present different translations of key notions, and that this is at the origin of the variety in interpretation.

One can discern two poles in the interpretations about the nature of the power to which the Kamabolon is related. One pole stresses the idea that power is something occult and religious, and that these dimensions will be revealed by a serious study of texts, symbols, and graphic signs. The other pole represents the opinion that power is royal and political. Authors who adhere to this point of view look for evidence in social principles. The first pole has been stressed by researchers inspired and/or supervised by Marcel Griaule, such as Germaine

⁶ See Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation," and "Note complémentaire sur le sanctuaire de Kaaba," and Claude Meillassoux "Les Ceremonies Septennales du Kamablon de Kaaba," both in *Journal de la Société des Africainistes* 38, 2 (1968), 185–88 and 173–82, S. de Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama blon*, Y. T. Cisse and W. Kamissoko, *La Grande geste du Mali, des origines à la fondation de l'empire* (Paris, 1988), and *Soundjata, la gloire du Mali* (Paris, 1991), Y. T. Cisse, *La Confrérie des chasseurs Malinke et Bambara—Mythes, rites et recits initiatiques* (Paris, 1994), Seydou Camara, "Conservation et transmission des traditions orales au Mande" (thèse des études approfondies, Paris, 1986), and "La Tradition orale en question."

Dieterlen, Solange de Ganay, and Youssouf Tata Cisse The second interpretation has been put forward by Claude Meillassoux and Seydou Camara

The "Griaulians" pay much attention to texts that express symbolic meanings, and they link the Kamabolon to a set of sanctuaries expressing a shared system of belief of the peoples inhabiting the Niger bend According to them, good harvest, good fishing, and well-being of social life are all points of concern during the ceremony Moreover, images of the world's creation are said to be expressed in actions in relations to the water goddess Faro, and her earth twin brother, the first blacksmith Ndoma Dyiri, who is the "owner" of the Kamabolon Especially this last part, about the "gods," has been subject of critique, since it seems to have been mainly a research premise, or even a popular myth,⁷ in Kela I have never heard references to water gods or a first blacksmith

The translation of some key notions is crucial to the interpretation forwarded by the Griaule group In order to illustrate this, I will discuss three terms *mansa*, *bara*, and *gundo*

Mansa is generally translated as "king," "ruler" or "ancestor" The Griaulians, however, often translate *mansa* as "God," "the divine principle," or "priest-king,"⁸ although they never argue the choice for this translation, which has an enormous impact on their analysis of the Kamabolon ceremony

The space on which the Kamabolon sanctuary stands is surrounded by a hedge during the ceremony This space is called *bara* Bailleul's dictionary gives "dancing place" as the translation of *bara*⁹ Since there is a lot of dancing during the ceremony, "dancing place" is a plausible translation in this context However, the Griaulians use *bara* and *bàra* for the space on which the ceremony is performed They use various, changing, and minor significations of both terms According to Bailleul, *bàra* also means "calabash," "a kind of fetish," and "umbilicus" One can imagine to what kind of puns and translations an at-random translation of this term might lead, a dancing place becomes similar to a calabash, an object related to sacrifices for the water deity Faro,¹⁰ which becomes similar to umbilicus Thus the Kamabolon becomes the umbilical cord of the world, and the first place created¹¹

⁷ See Austen, "The Problem of the Mande Creation Myth"

⁸ I will give some examples on De Ganay out of many I collected from the Griaulians De Ganay (*Le sanctuaire* p 114) translates *mansa* as "Dieu" in the term *mansa jigin* (while C Bailleul, *Dictionnaire Bambara Français* [Bamako, 1996], 270, gives "genealogie royale"), and on p 140, n 143 as "prêtre-roi" Note that Bailleul, who was a Roman Catholic priest, does not translate *mansa* as deity or God For other examples of mystifying translations, see De Ganay (*Le sanctuaire* p 74) on *sansaran mansa* which is a bamboo element in a traditional roof as well as on *santoroko* (a bamboo element in the top on the inside of a traditional hut—a typically Malinke word that people loved to teach me), which she translates as "chose (culte, valeurs inhérentes au) figurer céleste"

⁹ Bailleul, *Dictionnaire Bambara Français*, 25

¹⁰ Germaine Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara* [1951] (Brussels, 1988), Plate II b, D Zahan, *The Bambara* (Leiden, 1974), Plate III 2

¹¹ In this context it may be interesting to note that the Griaulians worked with interpreters from north and east of Bamako Cisse, in turn, is a Bamana from San (cf Cisse and Kamissoko,

Gundo is the third notion I will discuss here. It means, undoubtedly, "secret." Given such a meaning, one must, however, observe in which semantic field a concept like "secrecy" operates in the Mande world.¹² A *gundo* is something many people may know, but which is not allowed to be stated in public, this will lead to sanctions. However, the Griaulians translate *gundo* as "mystery," and in doing so, they mystify the object of their study, which is turned into a religious phenomenon that must be revealed by informants with a lot of allegedly esoteric knowledge.¹³

Research premises by the Griaule group are also visible in the way they relate the Kamabolon sanctuary to other sites. De Ganay describes nineteen sacred spots in Kangaba, and concludes that these undoubtedly represent the prestige of Kangaba. This argument may be questioned, since Mande villages used to be filled with all kind of ritual sites.¹⁴ Lansine Diabate told me, in March 1997, that his native village of Kela was full of so-called *solidaw*, sites for sacrifices, "They were everywhere around you, wherever you looked." One may ask if all these spots and rituals are part of one more or less closed system or ritual cycle, since in

La Grande geste, 10), although he wrote almost all his publications about the Maninka, to which the Bamana are closely connected on a linguistic and cultural level. Of course, my own knowledge of Maninkakan is also deficient, but yet I think that this does not refute my critique, which is methodological, and not linguistic. According to Alou Keita, linguist at the University of Ouagadougou, the words for dancing place and umbilicus are the same (in Djula) (personal communication, Leiden, July 24, 1997). This shows how careful one must be when translating and interpreting texts in Mande languages, since prescriptions for pronunciations may be overruled by locally bound linguistic particularities.

¹² Cf. B. L. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy—Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), C. Zobel, *Das Gewicht der Rede—Kulturelle Reinterpretation, Geschichte und Vermittlung bei den Mande Westafrikas* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997).

¹³ For instance, see De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire Kama blon*, 68, see also the critique in W. E. A. van Beek, "Dogon Restudied—A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology* 32, 2 (1991), 139–65. In this respect, opinions about the paintings on the Kamabolon are worth mentioning. Dieterlen is convinced that the 1954 paintings refer to ancient traditional religious knowledge. However, regarding the 1961 and 1968 paintings she writes that they express national pride (see G. Dieterlen, "Note complémentaire"). Thus, some knowledge seems to have been lost or hidden. Cisse and De Ganay (in De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*, 201–203) claim that the paintings are different every seven years, because they represent predictions related to contemporary topics of discussion. The 1975 performance was attended by Cisse (*La confrérie des chasseurs*, 302) and De Ganay (*Le Sanctuaire*), who analyze the 1975 paintings. In the 1980s the paintings on the Kamabolon changed again. The flags disappeared, and hunters' signs—such as bows and arrows, and wild animals—prevailed, and there was also room for a sun and a face. Cisse suggests that the paintings of the Kamabolon can be linked to a painting practiced by hunters called *dyaruw*, a group he holds responsible for the ancient paintings in grottos all over the Sudan (See *La confrérie*, 19). Although I agree with Cissé that the paintings must be analyzed in relation to images about hunting, I think that his hypothesis on *dyaruw* is implausible, since in the West African Sudan wall paintings are made by women.

Seydou Camara and I agreed that the 1997 paintings were more or less similar to those made in 1989. A minor difference was the picture of a leopard. Camara told me that this picture was originally a hippopotamus, but after some disapproval by the old men spots had been added in order to make it look like a leopard. The characteristics of a hippopotamus were yet clearly visible.

¹⁴ De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire Kama blon*, Ch. 4. Cf. D. N. Keita and S. Kouyaté, eds., *Narena pendant notre enfance* (Narena, 1997) for the neighboring village of Narena.

Mande areas every social group (including age groups, professional groups, kinship groups, voluntary associations) had its own *solida(w)*, or used the same site in different contexts for different purposes.

An example of such a site with more than one group of "users" in Kangaba is the Faragwè, the White Stones (*pierres sacrées*, in local French), on which women perform an annual fertility ritual in June, and which function during the Kamabolon ceremony as the site where the griots are welcomed and change clothes, after having walked from Kela to Kangaba. In relation to the Kamabolon ceremony, there are ritual functions for some sites on the *bara*, the immediate surroundings of the Kamabolon: a grave and a water pit.¹⁵

On the basis of its physical appearance, it is tempting to consider the Kamabolon to be the gatehouse of an ancient palace, thus linking it to kings' rituals. Everywhere in West Africa sanctuaries in the form of gatehouses can be found; these were often the sites where royal families venerated their ancestors.¹⁶ Although the Kamabolon is a gatehouse as well as being linked to power, it would be reductionist to link it only to the person of the king or to royal power. Both the Kamabolon and the king were representations of mechanisms that regulate society; Mande kings and sanctuaries had no direct power over territories or people outside their own lineage and household, but both shaped individuals' behavior in the public domain.¹⁷ In the immediate surroundings of Kangaba several other gatehouse sanctuaries can be found; they all follow a cycle of seven year, thus marking the transition of age groups.¹⁸ Therefore, the Kamabolon is related in a certain way to Komo sanctuaries, since the Komo is also related to the initiation of age groups, and in both ceremonies there is a role for the blacksmiths' idiom.¹⁹

The other pole of interpretation is represented by Meillassoux and Camara. These authors don't base their analysis on a religious interpretation of key

¹⁵ In literature about the Kamabolon the idea is often expressed that a sanctuary similar to the Kamabolon ("Konnègèba" owned by the Camara earth chiefs) was related to the Kamabolon as the earth chief's counterpart, since it was said to be restored and reroofed—in silence—after the Kamabolon ceremony. However, it may be doubted if such a relation exists or has existed, since Konnègèba was restored in 1996, although the restoration of the Kamabolon was postponed until 1997.

¹⁶ Cf. discussions in J. Bazin, "Princes désarmés, corps dangereux. Les rois-femmes de la région de Segu," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 118–19 (1988), 1–67, and Meillassoux, "Les Cérémonies Septennales."

¹⁷ For an alternative view of Mande kingship, see S. Buhnen, "Brothers, Chiefdoms and Empires," *History in Africa* 23 (1996), 111–20.

¹⁸ Cf. De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama blon*, 60ff. The one in Kènyoro (west of Siby) is quite well known, and discussed by De Ganay. In 1994 it was reroofed for the last time during a ceremony that was not attended by many people, which lasted only one day, according to information from the village chief (whom I interviewed in February 1997). Other sanctuary gatehouses are said to be in Degela (north of Kangaba) and Selefougou, according to Badigi Kouyate, a hunter from Kangaba who is often consulted by scholars. Mr. Kouyate told me that the reroofings of these two sanctuaries were not great public events. Leynaud (in De Ganay) mentions sanctuaries for Taboun, Niènkèma, and Balanza in the early 1960s, but I neither saw sanctuaries nor heard about them during research there in 1996 and 1997. Probably they disappeared long ago.

¹⁹ Cf. P. F. de Moraes Farias, "Pilgrimages to 'Pagan' Mecca," 155.

notions, although Meillassoux claims the ceremony to be animist cult. Both authors relate the Kamabolon ceremony to political and social organization.

Meillassoux stresses the relation between the ceremony and the segmentary character of the region's political organization, and argues that the Kamabolon ceremony expresses the *fadenya* ("rivalry among half-brothers") between the organizers of the ceremony and a rival Keita branch from Figuira who were appointed by the French colonial regime as rulers of the Kangaba "canton" after the French occupation of the territory at the end of the nineteenth century, thus replacing their rivals from Kangaba. Meillassoux notes the paradoxical position of Kangaba's rulers as being the "youngest" branch among the descendants of Sunjata, while the Keita of Figuira are an alleged older branch of the same family. Thus, Meillassoux argues that the expression of group identity on canton level is constitutive for the ceremony.²⁰

Camara relates the ceremony to the organization of the army and to funeral ceremonies, but does not elaborate these factors. After having attended the Kamabolon ceremony, I consider Camara's insights of great importance. Probably Camara has not worked fully out his ideas, because many things are self-evident for him, since he is a Malinke from Bancoumana. Camara focuses on the installation of the new male age group (*kare*) as the reason for the septennial character of the ceremony.²¹ The three youngest male age groups, Camara informs us, formed the army in precolonial times, and thus the ceremony incorporates the new part of the army as well as it designates the group which has to organize the next ceremony.²²

Camara's remark becomes valuable in relation to the way how traditional Malinke warfare was executed by an army divided in three divisions. An unpublished nineteenth-century ethnography on Nyagassola (70 km west of Kangaba) gives the following information:²³

Pour s'emparer d'un tata, les Malinkés opèrent de la façon suivante. Leur troupe est toujours partagée en trois colonnes qui attaquent à la fois le tata.

²⁰ Meillassoux, "Les Cérémonies Septennales," 182, 180ff, 173

²¹ The Kamabolon ceremony is performed every seventh year before the rain season starts, in the period end of March—beginning of May, thus following a cycle well known in the West African Sudan. See also H. Labouret, "Les Manding et leur langue," *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, série A (1934), 93, who describes a septennial initiation of age groups, and Keita and Kouyaté, eds. *Naréna pendant notre enfance*, 11, 13, about the ceremony called "Sîdèba": "El Hadji Lamini Coulibaly dit 'Le grand baobab Tous les sept ans, des sacrifices étaient faits au baobab. Le groupe d'âge qui était chargé de faire les sacrifices devait s'occuper de chercher les offrandes: vaches, moutons, chèvres, dègè. J'ai moi-même assisté à cette cérémonie. Le groupe d'âge de Nana Bala a été le dernier à avoir organisé cette cérémonie.'" D. N. Keita, one of the authors, told me that this must have been in the 1920s or 1930s.

²² Camara, "La Tradition orale en question," 333ff.

²³ This text is entitled "Notice historique sur le cercle de Nyagassola par M. de L'Orza de Reichenberg—1890"—catalogue number in the French National Archives is 1 G 166. It is signed in Nyagassola at 19 September 1890 by "le Commandant du Cercle De L'Orza de Reichenberg." I consulted the text at the CARAN (Centre d'Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales) in Paris, on microfilm "robine 200 m 662."

Dès que les guerriers sont arrivés au pied du mur d'enceinte ils se placent entre deux creneaux. Avec des pioches ils font dans le mur du tata des trous pouvant livrer passage à un homme.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the installation of a male age group and the funeral of an important Keita share a conceptual framework. A *Mansa Jigin* is performed by the Kela griots at the funeral of an important male Keita. This was for instance the case in October 1993, at the funeral of the *bolontigi*, the "owner of the Kamabolon," a function attributed to the classificatory oldest member of the royal Keita from Kangaba. When we were discussing this funeral in March 1997, Madu Diabate (born 1960) told me that no one is allowed to touch the body of the *bolontigi*, before the Diabate have come in order to give their blessings. He also said "At his funeral the griots walk three times around his body, just as we walk three times around the Kamabolon during the ceremony. We perform the entire *Mansa Jigin*, it lasts the whole night."

The Age Group's Ritual Labor and the Calculation of the Date

I was in Kela long before the ceremony started, and this proved to be fruitful regarding the collection of data about planning of the ceremony as well as to the age group's ritual labor.

When I arrived in Kela on 4 March 1997, I was told by several young men that there would be a ceremony this year. I did not believe them, and thought that they only wanted to console me with the fact that I had come for nothing in 1996.²⁴ The old Diabate, the people whom I lived with during my fieldwork, refused to make guesses about the date of the Kamabolon ceremony, both in 1996 and in 1997. They said that the organization was not their affair, and that they waited until the Keita from Kangaba sent ten kola nuts with the request to perform the *Mansa Jigin*. This demonstrates how much they are aware of their role in the ceremony, but don't bother about the ceremony in its totality! I went away for a few weeks, but kept on hearing rumors about a ceremony wherever I came.

When I returned to Kela on 18 March, I was told that the date of the ceremony was to be announced on Monday, 24 March. That day all the young men of the region were said to gather at the White Stones in order to announce the date. On 19 March, I went to Kangaba and saw that the site of the White Stones had been cleared, grass and plants had been burned. Moreover, the space around the

²⁴ The ceremony should have been organized in 1996, but it was postponed for unclear reasons. Many authors tended to blame Islam, and more particularly rising fundamentalism (Wahhabism) for this delay (De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire*, 66, 98, 200, and cover page, Jean Loup Amselle, "Présentation," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* XXXVI 4, 144 [1996], 590, Camara, "Conservation et transmission des traditions." However, fundamentalism is mainly an urban affair, see J. L. Amselle, "Le Wahabisme à Bamako [1945–1985]" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 19 (1985), 345–57. Personally, I thought that the increased scale of the ceremony's logistics were the reason, see J. Jansen, "Powerful Myths, Powerless Performers—The Non Performance of the 1996 Kamabolon Ceremony in Kangaba (Mali)," paper presented at the annual conference of the African Studies Association, San Francisco, November 23–26, 1996, but after having attended the 1997 ceremony, I know that this hypothesis can't hold. In retrospect I think that a conflict among the organizers, probably among the age group that had to be installed, may have caused the delay. This reason was also mentioned in 1996.

Kamabolon had been swept clean, and stones had been added to the *washi*, the site where the old men sit, next to the Kamabolon. I saw people were painting (in salmon and terracotta colors) the mosque west of the Kamabolon. When I told Lansine Diabate what I had seen, he said that a royal grave had also been restored, but I did not understand where it was.²⁵

These acts of clearing and restoration are crucial to our understanding of the Kamabolon ceremony, since they have been overlooked so far. Seydou Kamisoko (born 1972) from Kela told me, on April 14, 1997, that every age group in Mande has to prepare its official inauguration by restoring and cleaning the village as ritual labor. He said that an age group is supposed to work on the land together in order to earn the money necessary for restoration of buildings, in particular the mosque. He said that his own age group had never been inaugurated, since he and his age mates had never fulfilled these obligations. Nowadays, Seydou explained, groups of young men did not work together anymore on the fields due to the vanishing of communal fields (they are being split up among the individual members). Thus, although Seydou did not know what I had observed in Kangaba in March, I concluded that the cleaning of Kangaba, and even the restoration of Kangaba's mosque, was a necessary preparation to create the context for a correct performance of the ceremony. (However, I don't have information to prove that the mosque's restoration was executed or financed by the young.)

Moreover, Radio Mande—which broadcasts from Kangaba—several times invited all the young people (male and female) in the region to come to Kangaba to participate in cleaning. It was added that all the visitors to the ceremony should get a positive impression of the village. It must be noted these acts of cleaning and restoration can be placed in a wider context: in southwestern Mali, huts are restored in March-April, during the dry season. Then, young women restore walls and clean compounds, and young men restore roofs. Restoration of buildings also fits in the general pattern of recreating society (see below).

I was told several times that "all the young men of the region" were supposed to participate to the ceremony. I heard people in Kela explaining to each other that "eleven Keita villages" plus Kela participate. I did not have the opportunity to note the names of these villages. However, this reflects the way influential families in Mande—in this case the Kangaba Keita and families historically attached to them—used to spread over a region during the process of creating new villages. Regarding the ceremony, the origin of its participants shows that it is an internal "Kangaba affair," and not such a mega-reunion as Dieterlen wants us to believe. On the other hand, it must be noted that not only Keita participate in the ceremony, as the authors suggest; all the inhabitants of Kangaba do.

I spent the period March 24–26 in Sirakoro, the village where the ancestor of the Diabate of Kela came from. Together with the Diabate of Sirakoro and a few relatives, the Diabate of Kela restored the ancestor's grave. The Diabate told me that this had been done for the last time in the 1940s, and they assured me that this had nothing to do with the Kamabolon ceremony. When I mentioned the events in

²⁵ Probably the one called "the grave of Mansa Sema" (next to the Kamabolon) mentioned by De Ganay. See map of the *bara* in Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale."

Kangaba that day at *Faragwè*, I was told that the date was not announced, but only the name of the new age group. This appeared to be “Mògòyası”²⁶

After our return from Sirakoro, on Wednesday, March 26, at 5 30 p m, Lansine Diabate came to me and said “*Woro tan nana*” (“The ten kola nuts have arrived”) The kola nuts had been offered Wednesday morning by Balimadi Berete²⁷ and accepted by old Kelabala Diabate, who had stayed in Kela because he could not walk “Now,” Lansine told me, “the point of no return has been passed” One day later I was informed, together with all those who had visited Sirakoro, that the ceremony would be held from 28 April until 2 May²⁸ It was added that the ceremony actually should take place one week earlier, but it was postponed due to the fact that the feast of Tabaskı (the “sheep feast”) was on 18 April, and this feast had to be celebrated first before the Kamabolon ceremony could be organized Immediately after this announcement a few dozen letters of invitation were written by old Diabate and taken to the post office

The analysis of the calculation of the timing of the Kamabolon ceremony has suffered from a lack of information, partially caused by the informants’ silence on this topic The 1997 ceremony gives some clues to this calculation First it is clear that the inauguration of age groups (*karew*) is at the basis of the ceremony The gathering of the young man took place on the fourteenth day on a month of the Islamic calendar, it coincided with a full moon The ceremony itself should have started at the next full moon, but was postponed because of Tabaskı This was, as people said, comparable to the 1989 situation when the ceremony was postponed in order to celebrate it after Ramadhan Thus, Islam has an impact on the calculation of the date, Tabaskı is a big social event Every family is occupied with its preparation for weeks, seeking money for clothes and a sheep Planning the Kamabolon ceremony just after Tabaskı would be logistically messy²⁹

Thus, the ceremony follows a ritual calendar that starts with a meeting by the age group on a full moon in (the first half of) March The next full moon must, ideally, coincide with the beginning of the ceremony The week before the Kamabolon’s roof is lifted off, many preparations must take place, for instance the surrounding of the *bara*³⁰ Moreover, the Diabate start the rehearsals of the Sunjata epic a week before the roof is lifted off³¹

²⁶ The Mogoyası is always mentioned last (cf. De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*, 123, Camara, “La tradition,” 323–33), and Camara explains that this is the name of the youngest group De Ganay adds that the name of the age group of a young man is often the same as that of his grandfather However, such a fixed list of seven stages is not described by Meillassoux, “Les Cérémonies Septennales,” 176 Further research is necessary in order to determine how these cycles work and how the labeling is done For the moment, the data seem to contradict the models for Malinke age groups described by Denise Paulme, *Classes d’âge et associations d’âge en Afrique de l’Ouest* (Paris, 1971)

²⁷ Son of the famous N’Faly Berete, whose picture is in Johnson, *The Epic of Son Jara* as “priest standing before the sacred hut in Kangaba,” following p. 83

²⁸ On Friday, April 11, the ceremony was announced on national television and radio

²⁹ This calculation may be related to the delay of one year, since Tabaskı was “too late” in 1996 in order to guarantee that the ceremony would be held before the rains came

³⁰ On Friday April 4, at 9–9 30 a m, I saw about one hundred young men in Kangaba (most of them teenagers) carrying wood on their head to the *bara* Coming from the north where the

Hot Issues: Violence and Social Change

The restoration of the Kamabolon is a fearsome experience for visitors as well as participants. Many people in Kela had warned me not to go to Kangaba on Monday, 28 April. When I arrived there on bicycle, several inhabitants warned me not to wear red (*bilen*) cloth, although I wore a white shirt and blue jeans. I planned to watch the activities in the *bara* from a distance. From far, I heard the sound of *jembe* drumming. When I approached the *bara*, southwest of the sanctuary, I had a glance at the de-roofed Kamabolon, at a distance of about 100 meters. A clear view was impossible due to the wooden hedge around the Kamabolon. Hundreds of young men were inside, as guards, armed with long reeds.³² A few were outside, with the same armature. I saw hundreds of attendees, all standing at a distance of five meters from the hedge. When the guards noticed me, they started to yell, and I was chased away. Attendees shouted to me that I was suspected of carrying audiovisual equipment in the bags on my bicycle.

Having arrived at a quieter place, I was informed that early that morning the young had checked all the roofs and trees in Kangaba for hidden cameras. Moreover, little children had been chased away for wearing red objects; some had even been beaten. I knew from written information about the "hot" situation in Kangaba, but I had never realized how tense the atmosphere could be.³³ I was amazed and shocked. Butterflies, flies, and chickens were chased away, because it was believed that these animals might be transformed human beings who would try to enter the roofless Kamabolon.

The gravest act of aggression was, to me, the beating of a young man at Friday morning May 2, on the last day of the ceremony. The man was transported to the local hospital. He lost a great deal of blood and it was said that he had died before arrival at the hospital; it is generally believed that one cannot live after having been beaten by guards during the ceremony. The victim was said to have entered the Kamabolon invisibly—due to the help of a *marabout*. There he did his

bush is, they walked two by two in line and deposited the wood in corners of the ceremonial space. About two hundred young people were already present, among them some *jembe* players and a few dozen girls who were dancing, singing, and hand-clapping. Some young men were busy transporting a huge pile of garbage, with a donkey cart, not far from the Kamabolon. A French visitor to a Kerta family in Kangaba told me that on the evening of Wednesday, April 23, the official activities were started by a meeting at the *bara* during which the young people made music, danced, and sang.

³¹ For a description of these rehearsals, see J. Jansen, "The Sunjata Epic."

³² Cf. De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*, Plate II, picture 5.

³³ Everyone in Kangaba knows that "le commandant de Narena" was beaten for entering the hedged area without permission (according to Seydou Camara, this happened in 1968). De Ganay (*Le sanctuaire*, 129, 132, 135) gives examples of acts of aggression towards people, animals, or natural phenomena (tornadoes are chased!). Ouana Faran Camara, who teaches at the DNAFLA in Bamako, told me (Bamako, May 3, 1997) that he attended the ceremony "just after independence" (= the 1961 performance) when he was a schoolboy at Bancoumana, and that he remembers that the atmosphere was very peaceful. When I expressed my amazement about the violence to colleagues at my department, some replied that violence often is an integrated part of ceremonies, and that masks often act violently as well as create an atmosphere in which violence by the ceremony's participants is accepted.

Islamic rosary prayers, and he left the hut as a human being. Several people have written me afterwards that the victim is still alive.

Although Griaule was allowed to take pictures in 1954, De Ganay's report demonstrates that there were major problems in Griaule's relations with the Diabate of Kela. The French researchers were sent away and De Ganay's assistant Nyamablé Diarra was severely beaten for wearing a red hat.³⁴ In 1954 it might still have been possible to make recordings, under the protection of the French colonial administration. In 1968 Meillassoux was allowed to take pictures during the ceremony, but one of his research assistants was beaten.³⁵ In 1982 Seydou Camara's notes on the ceremony were taken away from him and destroyed (personal communication). On the other hand, rumors about secret recordings of the ceremony flourish in present-day Bamako.³⁶

People did not object to this violence at all. "C'est bon pour la cérémonie," a young man said to me. Gendarmes did not interfere in this "local" affair, on Wednesday, April 30, a senior officer of the gendarmerie told me that he would never interfere with anything in Old Kangaba during the five days of the ceremony.³⁷

³⁴ De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire*, 129.

³⁵ Meillassoux, "Les Cérémonies Septennales," note 1, additional information at the ISH, Bamako.

³⁶ In this context of increasing tension and aggression the presence of an ORTM (Malian television) film team in Kangaba and Kela during the preparations for the ceremony is noteworthy. Kangaba's village chief had given this team permission to record the ceremony, I was told. (Some say this permission by the chief had been broadcast.) After having received permission from the village chief, the team, headed by a Mr Soumano, went to Kela. The Diabate refused permission to record their words. Quite disappointed the team returned to Kangaba. Then, the young had forbidden Mr Soumano to make recordings. They argued that he had never asked their permission. A few days later I heard that Mr Soumano had no permission to film the Kamabolon without roof, but was allowed to film the restored Kamabolon. Friday evening, after the ceremony my best friend in Kela, Damori Diabate, asked me "Have you seen that Soumano started to film immediately after the reroofing of the Kamabolon? He has been very lucky." "What do you mean?" I asked, "Did he have the luck to film the Kamabolon?" "No, he was lucky, because he has not been killed."

³⁷ Another remarkable act of aggression was the burning down of the Kamabolon, two weeks after the reroofing. The roof was burned down almost completely, but restored by the population. It appeared that four inhabitants of Kangaba were responsible, among them a young Keita whose father was a *bolontigi*. Two of the four were arrested by the gendarmes, who were assisted by gendarmes from Bamako, two others managed to flee. The local population wanted to kill them, but the gendarmes protected them by transporting them to Bamako. This is a remarkable situation, since civil servants had not interfered when the young man was beaten during the ceremony.

This was not the first time that the Kamabolon was burned down. In the mid-1980s it was burned by a lunatic and rebuilt very quickly. The fire in the 1980s has been communicated to me by Marja de Jong, a Dutch woman who worked in Kangaba from 1982 until 1989, and Ouana Faran Camara. The latter said that a lunatic was caught, but not punished. Camara informs us ("La tradition," p. 332) that the official reroofing is done with material not available (anymore 'due to ecological deterioration?') in the immediate surroundings of Kangaba. If this is true, the quick reroofing is done with unofficial materials, since Mr Camara told me that the reroofing in the 1980s was done on the day after the burning. "That day, outsiders (*étrangers*) like me were not permitted to approach the *bara*," he added.

One hour after my first visit to the *bara*, I was convinced to return. I went without any luggage and, indeed, was allowed to watch the spectacle without any problem from 11 a.m. until noon. I heard *jembe* drumming and saw some old people visiting the hedged area; I noticed that tension clearly decreased. For instance, at 11 a.m. a school child with a red sack was sent (not chased) away, but at noon I saw a little boy with red trousers strolling around near the hedge. At noon, people left the area for lunch, and I decided to return to Kela. There, everyone was much relieved that I had returned safely.

The relation between violence and ritual is a universal phenomenon, and therefore the violence during the ceremony cannot be considered to be a coincidence or peripheral. I will elaborate the idea that the ceremony represents a process of social transition in which violence is temporarily inevitable.

I start by presenting an often-used notion in the description of social processes in Mande worldview. This notion is "heat." When discussing the status of blacksmiths in Mande society, McNaughton writes:

Both hunters and blacksmiths are associated with concepts of heat, in the Mande sense of staggering accumulations of power and the imbalance of aggressive action. Thus a favorite line in hunters' epic poems says that when great hunters die, "The world has cooled off...."³⁸

However, heat is featured not only in the discourse of hunters and blacksmiths; it is also, in Mande and in many other African cultures, a notion used to describe processes of modeling society. An often-sung line in praise songs for Sunjata is "Mande bugu sumayalen"—"Mande has cooled off." It means that the world has got a fixed organization, after Sunjata became ruler of Mande. One sees a different perspective between a hunter, who is active in the bush, and the ruler, who is active in the civilized world. The death of a hunter undermines the mobility of the wilderness, and thus "cooling off" is negatively valued, while the installation of a ruler brings stability in the village, and therefore "cooling off" is valued positively.

Heat is a notion often mentioned in relation to funerals, which I heard several times being described as *ko kalamaw* (lit., "hot issues") or, in French, "C'est chaud." Funerals are hot because they are processes of social transition. Funeral ceremonies have often been analyzed as ceremonies expressing relations with the deceased and the ancestors, but—as far as Mande is concerned—I argue that they are at least as much related to the formation of the new social hierarchy. This is, at least, a social function of the fortieth-day ceremony (*tile binaani*) within the cycle of funeral ceremonies; this ceremony is performed only for important people whose death has a serious impact on the social organization.

"Hot" was also the term the participants of the Kamabolon ceremony used to describe the events during the ceremony. The hot situation started as soon as the Kamabolon's old roof was lifted (Monday morning, April 28) until the new roof was put on top of the sanctuary (Friday afternoon, May 2).

³⁸ Patrick McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), 71.

Heat is related to pollution, and pollution to transition.³⁹ This explains why Kangaba must be cleaned—by the young people—before the Kamabolon can be de-roofed. The prohibition on the color red is also significant in this respect. Red is associated with heat, blood, activity and “progress,” and with power.⁴⁰

Words are also related to heat in Mande worldview. Just as blacksmiths do, their counterparts as “casted artisans” (or *nyamakala*) the griots (*jeliw*) master the craft to transform hot things into cold and vice versa, within the borders of the village.⁴¹ The power to heat and to cool down intrinsic to the spoken word is the reason why the Diabate did not talk either to strangers or to others in Kangaba during the ceremony, with the exception of some short greetings. The only person allowed to speak was *kumatigi* Lansine Diabate.⁴² The notion of heat explains the similarity between the function of the griots’ words spoken during the Kamabolon ceremony as well as those spoken during a funeral of the man classified as the oldest Keita, the “owner of the Kamabolon.” Both mediate a period of social transition.

In sum, although the ceremony was “hot,” objects that represented similar notions (words, the color red, garbage) were excluded. It is clear that society is in transition, or impure,⁴³ or “in progress” as De Ganay writes, during the period the roof is not on top of the Kamabolon. Therefore, other hot issues must be kept away from society as it is represented by the Kamabolon.

The Kamabolon is a “recreation” of society, and more than a “regulation.” First, society comes into disorder when the old roof is lifted off, and during five days a new society is created. The Griaulians were right to mention “recreation,” although they wrongly described this re-creation in terms of a religious process. Camara’s remarks on the army in precolonial times, in combination with archival data, give reason to connect the ceremony to the internal social organization of the once-powerful city-state/kingdom of Kangaba. The army’s role is corroborated by the often-sung incantation during the ceremony, and—of course—by the Sunjata epic, which represents a role model for heroic behavior as well as a status claim for Kangaba’s political status in relation to rivals.⁴⁴

³⁹ Stephan Buhnen, personal communication, July 2, 1997. Buhnen wrote also in an e-mail on this topic: “In Senegambia and the Western Sudan the colour red is associated with ego, agitation, aggression, war. When receiving a stranger, you would never offer him a red kola nut, but always a white one, which symbolizes peace.” On red kola nuts, see also Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara*, 240 ss.

⁴⁰ De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire*, 183.

⁴¹ This is a major difference between hunters and *nyamakalaw*, cf. J. Jansen, “Africa, West Central. The Mande World,” *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (Washington, 1998), see also David C. Conrad and B. F. Frank, eds., *Status and Identity in West Africa. Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington, Ind., 1995).

⁴² See also De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama*, 149, S(ory) Camara, *Gens de la Parole* (La Haye, 1976), C. S. Bird, M. Kendall, and K. Tera, “Etymologies of Nyamakala,” in Conrad and Frank, eds., *Status and Identity in West Africa*, 36–45.

⁴³ Pure Keita descent is proven during the restoration of the walls and the lifting of the new roof, see Dieterlen, “Mythe et organisation sociale.”

⁴⁴ See below, and Appendix in Jansen, “The Sunjata Epic”, J. Jansen, “The Younger Brother.”

The ceremony will decide on someone's social status for the next seven years, or even for the rest of his life. Therefore, if an individual threatens the future status of your group, sanctions are severe and immediate because the normal prescriptions of punishment are not at work. Therefore, every individual is "obsessed" by playing his or her role correctly during the five days of heat, since a new status has to be acquired.

The Night Before the Reroofing

I will now describe the last two days from the perspective of my hosts, the Diabate griots from Kela. In doing so, I will add new material to previous research on the Kamabolon, since there is hardly any information on what happens during the night during which the *Mansa Jigin* is recited. After my safe return to Kela on Monday, April 28, I had to promise my hosts not to visit Kangaba again before Thursday afternoon, when the Diabate go to Kangaba to recite the *Mansa Jigin*. From what I heard from other European and Malian visitors to the ceremony, the proceedings in Kangaba were similar to those described by De Ganay, Dieterlen, and Meillassoux.⁴⁵

Some preparations in Kela are noteworthy. First, there were two "fetish meals" for everyone, male and female, family and visitor. On Wednesday afternoon the roof on the gatehouse to the compound of *jelikuntigi* (chief of the griots, the classificatory oldest male Diabate) Mambi Diabate was restored. This event had no official character. On Thursday morning, a magic potion—of rotten leaves and twigs—was prepared and distributed by Lansine, and we all washed ourselves with it. Many visitors kept a little bit aside to take home. And, last but not least, there had been three rehearsals of the *Mansa Jigin*, which showed me that the *Mansa Jigin* is similar to the Sunjata epic as we know it, but then embellished with a lot of *fasaw* (traditional praise songs).⁴⁶

On Thursday, May 1, at 2 30 p.m., the guests (about twenty people, among them three from Europe and many from Bamako) were brought to Kangaba by means of a pick-up truck.⁴⁷ When we arrived at the *bara*, Lansine Diabate's brother Fantamadi brought us to a shed, about twenty-five meters from the Kamabolon. No one said a word, the audience gazed at us. It appeared that seats

⁴⁵ Remarkable is the information that only two Keita girls were determined to be "pure Keita." Before they start to plaster the sanctuary, all young Keita women must throw mud at the wall. If the mud does not fall, pure descent has been proven. The fact that only two girls were "pure" turned the 1997 plastering into an event that took much time. This "crepissage" is always very problematic, in 1954 it was done twice (De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*, 132).

⁴⁶ For descriptions of these rehearsals, see Jansen, "The Sunjata Epic."

⁴⁷ My descriptions of the next forty-eight hours have been based on an account written on Saturday May 3, the day after the reroofing. Literature says that many griots stay in Kela, in the period before the ceremony, in order to learn to tradition (cf. Johnson, *The Epic of Son Jara*, 25), but I did not find this idea confirmed in 1997. Many visitors to the ceremony came from Bamako by car Thursday night or Friday morning and returned Friday afternoon after the reroofing had been finished. I would guess there were a few hundred, most of them close friends or relatives. Thus the stories about huge reunions of families (Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation") and the immense logistic problems to feed and instruct them (Jansen, "Powerful Myths") have not been confirmed by my observations.

under this shed had been reserved for "the guests of Kela." There were about 150 seats in total, the rest of the circa 2,000 attendees had to stand. Our luggage was checked several times, any kind of recording was prohibited.

Young girls with uncovered breasts and a tiny strip of cotton around their head were just leaving the *bara*.⁴⁸ At the exit, many of them immediately covered their breasts. Then, I heard *jembe* drumming, and, after a while, saw young men dancing. The *jembe* players made a tour in the *bara*, followed by enthusiastic male dancers, who were applauded by the audience.

In the meantime, the griots were marching from Kela to the White Stones, on the "old road," nowadays a path used by cyclists and pedestrians. This is about five kilometers. Fodekaba Diabate (born 1960) told me about this trajectory:

The griots arrive and sit down on the southern part of the White Stones. The Keita are already waiting for them on the northern part. Then the Berete intermediary offers water to the Diabate, and invites them to speak at the ceremony. Then they change clothes and go to the Kamabolon in procession, headed by Berete who carries a lance. No one is allowed to cross the road the Diabate walk on.⁴⁹

About 5 30 p.m. the people hushed, and the spouses of the Diabate together with some young male Diabate entered the *bara*. They seated themselves against the hedge, at the northern side. There were some first-born sons among the young men, while several second-born sons had not yet showed up. This shows that the Diabate select participants not solely on criteria as age and hereditary rights. Since I know the young Diabate individually, I saw immediately that the more clever young men had yet to come.

Then at 6 00 p.m. the hundreds of attendees became completely silent. From far off, I heard the singing of an incantation that starts with *Dibi kèlen* ("It is getting dark"), a praise for the dead which it is forbidden to record, and which the Diabate sing only during a *Mansa Jigin* performance.⁵⁰ I had heard this incantation often during the rehearsals of the *Mansa Jigin* in Kela. Madu Diabate (born 1960) told me in March 1997 that the Diabate start to sing only at the moment when they pass a bridge, crossing a small stream that separates Old Kangaba from its adjoining neighborhood. This bridge is about 100 meters from the *bara*.

Between 6 00 and 6 30 p.m., about fifty male Diabate appeared.⁵¹ They formed an east-west line at a southern entrance of the *bara*, looking to the north,

⁴⁸ Cf. photo in Meillassoux, "Les Cérémonies Septennales," following p. 178.

⁴⁹ See a similar description in De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama blon*. According to De Ganay, a "war chief song" is sung at the moment the Diabate meet the Keita at the Faragwè. In 1997 such a recording would have been impossible, since it was forbidden for the "official guests" to attend this meeting. For De Ganay the same conditions were at work (see p. 138), but she does not explain how she solved this "technical" problem.

⁵⁰ For the text, see Appendix in Jansen, "The Sunjata Epic."

⁵¹ I counted between forty-eight and fifty male Diabate. (De Ganay claims that there used to be twenty-eight, but that this custom was changed after 1954, *Le Sanctuaire* 137, 140). The Diabate walked in line according to classificatory age: first El Hajj Mamadi and "Yamuducinin," followed by their classificatory brothers El Hajj Yamudu, Sokemadi, and *kumatigi* Lansine.

and repeated this action. They entered the *bara*, walked to the space between the mosque and the Kamabolon, and, facing east, they repeated the "Dibi incantation." Then they walked in line, still headed by Berete, a few times around the Kamabolon.⁵² The next fifteen minutes one of the oldest men, "Yamuducinin" Diabate, stopped and started the Dibi incantation about a dozen times, accompanied by the other Diabate. When they walked, *kumatigi* Lansine Diabate recited well-known praise lines.⁵³ Sometimes Lansine's classificatory younger brothers Fantamadi or Mussa took over for less than a minute. During this performance various "circles" were walked, around the water pit, the new roof—which stood ten meters west of the Kamabolon—and around the roofless Kamabolon, or around some combination of them. Then the *bara* was left at the northern entrance, and the Diabate proceeded to the houses of their hosts, while Lansine was still reciting. Outside the *bara* the Dibi incantation was repeated once again. The pattern is clear: the Dibi incantation, a praise for the dead, is sung communally while standing still, and the *kumatigi* recites praise lines, an exhortation to heroic behavior, when the group walks.

The group of Diabate was headed by the old Berete, who carried the lance. Last in line was Kunba Diabate, the "doyenne" of the Diabate women.⁵⁴ The men were all dressed properly but not luxuriously; Lansine Diabate told me that ostentatious clothing was forbidden during the performance. Many of the Diabate under the age of fifty wore a traditional light brown cotton hat. Moreover, most of them had a small "stick" in their mouths.⁵⁵

At 10:00 p.m., after dinner, the tour in the *bara* was performed again. Then Lansine and many others (impossible to see exactly by moonlight) entered the Kamabolon.⁵⁶ The *bara*, especially the *washi*, was already populated with many men, young and old, plus the wives of the Diabate.

Diabate Kelabala had died on April 19, and Mambi Diabate, the griots' chief, did not participate, probably because he can hardly walk—he is a leper. Moreover, this man with a very gentle and sympathetic character is often excluded from formal activities, since the other Diabate consider him to be too weak, both mentally and physically. I knew almost all the participating Diabate personally, with the exception of a few relatives from Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire) who had arrived a few days before the ceremony. The last male in line was Lansine's second son Damori Diabate. This is a remarkable choice, because his first son Brehman had been passed over. A few Diabate played acoustic guitar, some others the *ngoni*, the traditional Mande plucked lute.

⁵² El Haji Yamudu abstained from walking around the sacred spots, but he joined his brothers in the rest of the procession. His argument was that some who walked around the Ka'aba in Mecca is not allowed anymore to walk around the Kamabolon (cf. Camara, "Conservation"). This argument does not seem to have bothered his classificatory older brother El Haji Mamadi.

⁵³ See PAN-records, "An Bè Kelen / Griot Music from Mali" (CD 2015, Leiden, 1994), for recitations of these texts by Lansine Diabate.

⁵⁴ See also Meillassoux, "Les Cérémonies Septennales," 177.

⁵⁵ The hat resembled that shown in Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara*, 130–31, see also Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale," 68. On the stick, cf. the "frotte-dents" mentioned by De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire Kama blon*, 173, 140.

⁵⁶ De Ganay (*Le Sanctuaire*, 152) writes that they walk backwards into the Kamabolon, but in 1997 this was not the case.

Recitation started then, but the “visitors” (that is, those outside the *bara*) could hardly hear Lansine’s voice, in spite of the fact that the attendees were very silent. All the sung parts, however, could be heard well. Many attendees went home before midnight. However, at that time many words could be heard outside the Kamabolon, since people started to donate money. Most of these people were seated inside the *bara*, but some gifts came from people outside. Almost every donation was 500 francs CFA, a small amount of money that everyone can afford to donate. The money was received by someone at the entrance of the Kamabolon, who shouted the amount of money, and the name of the giver with the addition “so that you will give him blessings.” These money donations were in form similar to those made during the rehearsals, but lasted much longer, almost non-stop until 2 30 a m.

Between 10 00 p m and 2 30 a m I “caught” many words. A few times the Dibi incantation was sung inside the Kamabolon. Moreover, sometimes the Diabate sang praise lines. Kunba Diabate was seated at the entrance of the Kamabolon, and now and then she yelled a blessing to the Diabate. In the beginning of the evening, Madu Diabate gave a recitation of an Arab text. A few times during the night (not more than six times), I heard the slow beating of a drum. This was also observed at the afternoon during the 1954 ceremony.⁵⁷ However, its meaning was not clear to me. Partially thanks to Seydou Camara, who sat next to me, I got an impression of the stories recited by Lansine. Between 10 30 p m and midnight Seydou Camara heard two things: first the name of Adam, and much later (after a Dibi incantation) the words “Adam, Eve and their children.” For me this shows that Lansine was reciting a cycle he had recited in my presence on April 3, the product of the fusion between knowledge about the Koran and regional/Mande stereotypes of heroic behavior.⁵⁸ This story had not been part of the rehearsals of the *Mansa Jigin*.

At 2 30 a m the Diabate came out of the Kamabolon. This action had never been mentioned in previous accounts of the ceremony, although it seemed to me a “standard procedure.” In line they walked around the Kamabolon, and Lansine recited praise lines. Again they made some tours inside the *bara*, and sometimes they stopped to sing a Dibi incantation, always at a sign by “Yamuducinin” who started singing. Having done this, they re-entered in the sanctuary. At that time there were only a few dozen of people left outside the hedge. Most of them were asleep, and so were most of the people inside the *bara*.

Between 2 30 and 3 30 a m, I twice captured some of Lansine’s words, which showed me that the recitation of the Sunjata epic had just begun. At a certain moment, after quite a while, I heard that Lanfia Diabate started to sing “*I bara kala ta*,” the well-known refrain of the famous praise song for Sunjata. Other people joined Lanfia. This showed me that the story had “arrived” beyond halfway.⁵⁹ I was very tired then, and not able to concentrate well, but clearly remember that I was astonished that the Diabate had already arrived at that point.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁸ For an elaborate description, see Jansen, “The Sunjata Epic.”

⁵⁹ Cf. line 462 in J. Jansen, E. Duintjer, and B. Tamboura, *L'Epopée de Sunjata d'après Lansine Diabate de Kela* (Leiden, 1995).

of the epic, since it had taken about five hours to reach that point during the rehearsals I also remember that I reflected about which part must have been skipped, and concluded that at least part of the exile must have been summarized⁶⁰

Thus it seems that the Diabate were in a hurry to finish the epic—the stories about Adam and Eve plus the money donations had taken so much time that there was not enough time left to tell the epic in an “appropriate” way. The rehearsals that I had attended in the period preceding the ceremony had proven that a live performance of the Sunjata epic takes about seven hours. Just as in 1954, it looked like the performance had fallen victim to lack of time.⁶¹

I vaguely remember that between 3 30 and 5 30 a.m. the Diabate had come out of the hut once more, for walking and singing. At 5 30 a.m., at first daylight, some of the participants came out of the Kamabolon. I recovered a bit from my sleep, and I heard Mamadi Diabate starting to sing inside the Kamabolon a *janjo*, followed by a change of melody. The *janjo* is the praise song for the hero Fakoli, the ancestor of the Dumbaya. Mamadi sang the *janjo* for about ten minutes. At 6 15 a.m. all the Diabate came out of the Kamabolon. Again praise lines were recited, and the Dibi incantation was sung. All the people looked very tired, and Lansine could hardly speak any more.

The *Mansa Jigin* in the ceremonial context, the source of so many popular myths on secrets knowledge, may be so much “worse” (that is, less attractive from Western literary standards), since at that very moment in the ceremony the text does matter less than correct behavior. During the rehearsals in Kela, a correct text is required, and the *kumatigi* is checked and corrected by older men. The rehearsals are an internal affair, no one is invited, although accidental visitors are not sent away. However, the recitation during the ceremony is an affair in which relations with outsiders are established. The Diabate of Kela are invited as spokesmen of the real truth, and thus their words are not subject of discussion any more, but their behavior is what matters. Therefore, the text becomes a side-issue, and completeness is not a prerequisite for the correct performance of their part in the ceremony.

The Last Day

On Friday morning the fabrication of the new roof was finished, by putting some objects on top. The construction of the roof was checked thoroughly. This event was attended by many people, but not by the masses. Then the Diabate and their

⁶⁰ See also Jansen, “The Sunjata Epic.” For a different opinion regarding the words told inside the Kamabolon, see De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*. For a critique on her point of view, see W. E. A. van Beek and J. Jansen, “La Mission Griaule à Kangaba (Mali) en 1954,” forthcoming in *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*.

⁶¹ See De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire*, 171–72. De Ganay explains that the ceremony was said to have started one hour late due to the team of French anthropologists who were present to make recordings. However, in 1997 the night performance started also at 10 00 p.m., although there was no sign of delay. Moreover, a full performance should take eight hours, and the griots had only four when they started the Sunjata epic, therefore one hour's delay is not enough to explain the “abridging” of the Sunjata epic.

guests had an abundant meal, offered by their Keita hosts, from noon until about 2 00 p m Still the Diabate restricted communication with outsiders to a minimum The old men went to the mosque, while many young made their prayers at home At 2 30 p m the visitors all were ordered to go to the shed in order to find a place to attend the act of reroofing

At that time there were hardly any seats left for the guests invited Politicians, ambassadors, civil servants, scholars, and many others had responded to an invitation⁶² People were chatting until the moment the Diabate came, singing and reciting the same things as the day before Again they made several tours inside the *bara*, around the new roof Then, suddenly, the Diabate stepped aside, leaving Lansine alone next to the new roof Immediately, a few dozen young men ran to the roof Lansine recited praise lines, and then the roof moved upwards, it is generally believed that the words of the *kumatigi* make the roof jump on the sanctuary This was a moment of extreme tension and silence

The roof “went” to the Kamabolon, and arrived on the right spot on top of it, within five minutes⁶³ At that moment, the audience and the participants started to applaud and shout Many attendees crossed the hedge in order to touch the new roof, since it is believed that brings blessings The guests under the shed were all invited to touch the roof, and so they did

A few minutes later, dozens of young people started to run out of the *bara*, into the village They shouted “Mògòyasì, Mògòyasì, Mògòyasì,” the name of their age group Then it appeared to be over I did not observe speeches by old men in order to thank each other⁶⁴ I walked back to Kela, and was passed by cars that brought the old Diabate back home to Kela The old men waved enthusiastically to me This assured me that everything had gone back to normal, the world had cooled off At night Lansine—who could hardly speak any more—was congratulated by several people for having executed the reroofing so successfully Many acts of the ceremonial process, such as the quick reroofing, are considered to say something about the state of society⁶⁵

Exploring Historical Processes: The Kamabolon Ceremony 1880–1997

My own contribution thus far is related to the contextualization of the ceremony in a broader context, that is, the Mande worldview Now I will examine the ceremony’s historical dynamics Regarding the ceremonial process, I have not been able to find a structural transformation in the period 1954–1997 As I explained in the first section, the differences in interpretation of the ceremony

⁶² Minister of Culture Bakari Kone Traore came too late, just after the Kamabolon had been reroofed Thus, one does not wait for a minister, as some might have expected

⁶³ Camara observed that it took much time in 1982 to put the roof on top of the hut Camara writes that the roof allegedly refused to be lifted, because there were “bastards” among the young Keita who put the roof on top (Camara, “Conservation”)

⁶⁴ Cf De Ganay, *Le Sanctuaire*, Meillassoux, “Les Cérémonies Septennales ”

⁶⁵ Recently Kangaba has gotten electricity, telephone, a radio station, and tap water facilities A road will be constructed soon Indeed, the people of Kangaba have not much to complain about economic development

depend to a great extent on the translations induced by various research premises; all the authors agree about the ceremonial actions.

Since there is no archival information on the ceremony,⁶⁶ I will now explore the dynamics of the ceremony through sources that are "evidence in spite of itself." These sources hint to some minor transformations in the ceremonial process.

First, I see a line of change in relation to the space in which the ceremony takes place. Due to measures taken by the French administration at the end of the nineteenth century, some members of the ruling Keita family of Kangaba were sent into exile.⁶⁷ The Kangaba-Keita had their property confiscated, and have never been able to regain their former wealth.⁶⁸

The Kangaba Keita were replaced by an older branch of their "family" who lived in Figira, a village not far from Kangaba, but on the right bank of the river Niger.⁶⁹ The Figira Keita moved to Kangaba in order to improve their communication with the French. From this family the "chef de canton" (*jamanatigi*) was chosen until 1951, when the Kangaba region and the Figira region were split up into two separate cantons due to the internal rivalry within the Figira branch as a result of the struggle over former canton chief Fajumba's political heritage.⁷⁰

A large group of Figira Keita, however, remained living in Kangaba "beyond the stream" (*supra*), where Fajumba had built a "palace." Although the Figira Keita and the Kangaba Keita often collaborate with each other, there is always a sense of rivalry between them. This rivalry is inevitably expressed during the

⁶⁶ Austen, "The Problem of the Mande Creation Myth," plus personal experience

⁶⁷ Described in E. Leynaud and Y. Cissé, *Paysans Malinke du Haut Niger* (Bamako, 1978), Camara, "La Tradition orale en question", Jansen, "The Younger Brother and the Stranger"

⁶⁸ Camara, "La Tradition orale en question," II.

⁶⁹ The French "reorganization" may have been a mistake, although it was inspired by a sincere wish to reconstruct the indigenous society as it used to be. I have argued that this position of "youngest brother" is a status and not necessarily an expression of real kinship ties. The status of "branch descendant from the youngest brother" represents leadership of the communal army in times of (temporary) collaboration between two more-or-less independent kingdoms (Jansen, "Younger Brother").

⁷⁰ Fajumba (Sanuge Gınba) Keita was a very influential "chef de canton" who served from 1923 until 1947. For "embellished" information on Fajumba, see I. S. Traoré, ed., *Kaaba* (Bamako, 1994), 73–78. The French administrators had liked Fajumba very much, he was one of the six rulers in the French Sudan invited to the "Exposition Internationale" of 1931 in France. See the report of 1931 in Archives Nationales du Mali à Koulouba [ANMK], Fonds Récents [FR], 1-E-70, "Rapports politiques et rapports de tournées, cercle de Bamako 1921–1944." In the late 1940s the Figira group suffered from rivalry between the faction of Canton Chief Nambougary Keita and that of Mandébougary Keita, who had worked with the French and accumulated some wealth. He protested against the French colonial system, especially against forced labor. The French administrator (probably J. Pourcel) called this "homme au tracteur" "un gâté" (see Rapport 4, Kangaba—1954). The relationship between Nambougary and Kamory Keita, canton chief of the new canton Mininyan (= Kangaba plus adjoining villages), was good, according to the same source (ANMK, FR 1-E-20 Rapports politiques et rapports de tournées, subdivision de Kangaba). After 1951, and especially around 1954, the political climate in Kangaba was "finalement tranquille" (from the French perspective) after many years of unrest (see ANMK, 1-E-7. Rapports politiques et rapports de tournées, cercle de Bamako 1950–1958).

Kamabolon ceremony When marching from the White Stones to the *bara*, the Diabate of Kela must pass Fajumba's palace in silence Then, at the bridge, 100 meters after the passing of the palace, the incantation is started This may be an old custom, but history has turned it into an expression of rivalry

The silent march may be a part of the ceremony that has been added quite recently Archival material suggests that the Diabate may have settled in Kela relatively recently, although this is not imagined in local oral traditions Lansine Diabate showed me the site—in Old Kangaba—where the Diabate used to live, nowadays it is inhabited by a Camara family The Diabate claim to have come from Sirakoro (not far from Figira) to Kangaba and then moved to Kela

The Diabate say that they settled in Kela seven generations ago, but I think it happened more recently According to the French colonial administrator Gallieni, Kela was a hamlet, “un petit village facile à conduire” in the 1880s ⁷¹ In 1904 “Kila” had 390 inhabitants and a certain Bala Diawara as its village chief ⁷² Nowadays the Haidara hold the position of village chief People in Kela say, indeed, that the village chief used to be a Konate or a Diawara, but they have only a vague idea when it changed, some say that the French wanted a member of the biggest family to be the village chief

In the 1920s Kela was already a center of traditional learning, and in 1924 it was, in population size, the third village of the canton (out of 27 villages), it had 1006 inhabitants—only Kangaba and Figira had more (2,986 and 1,939 inhabitants, respectively) ⁷³ On October 6, 1943, a French administrator described Kela succinctly “Kéla Village des Haidara, nombreux marabouts et dioulas Doit être toujours surveillé” ⁷⁴

What a difference within a few decades in 1943 Kela had acquired its present-day status as a “dangerous” place Moreover, its population had increased by 150 percent between 1904 and 1924, and the Haidara had acquired village chieftancy Therefore, it is plausible that the village of Kela got a major population influx (by the Haidara, who were the Kangaba Keita's court preachers according to Vidal, and Diabate griots) just after 1900 This move may have been caused by the vanishing of court life in Kangaba, which made the Haidara and the Diabate lose their traditional hosts

Since a procession from Kela to the White Stones is highly unthinkable as long as the actors don't live in Kela, the 1880s is the oldest possible starting date for this part of the ceremony The exile of the Kangaba Keita and the presence of the Diabate in Kela show that the first Kamabolon ceremony *in its present-day*

⁷¹ Camara, “La Tradition orale en question,” II

⁷² Data from a list at the end of a document consulted at the Centre d'Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales in Paris 1 G 299 Monographies du cercle de Bamako—1904

⁷³ Cf Vidal, “La Legende officielle,” 317–28, ANMK 1 E 70 Rapports politiques et rapports de tournées, cercle de Bamako 1921–1944

⁷⁴ ANMK FR 1-E 46 Rapports politiques et rapports de tournées subdivision Kouroumale 1942–1946 “Marabouts” are Koranic scholars, “djoulas” are merchants Nowadays the village counts about 250 Diabate among its population and has four Koranic schools supervised by Haidara families who form 40 percent of the total population of 1,700 Camara, “La Tradition ”

form may date from the period 1880–1912, although the sanctuary itself is older,⁷⁵ and the Sunjata epic dates at least from the Middle Ages.

The year 1909 is mentioned by Camara as the year of the return of the exiled Kangaba Keita.⁷⁶ However, archival documents I consulted demonstrate that this image needs some nuance; some Kangaba Keita never left the village. A 1893 source shows what the French did to the Kangaba Keita:

Les jeunes indigènes MAHMADY KEÏTA et NAMA KEÏTA fils de Mamby Keita ancien chef de Kangaba, actuellement chef du village de Goundiourou, seront admis à l'école des Otages, à compter du premier Octobre 1893,

—Kayes, 1–10-'93 Bonnier⁷⁷

However, as other documents show, the “Mamby group” remained a permanent political factor in Kangaba. The 1897 “Fiches de Renseignements” (ANMK, FA, 2 E-43) contain the following data about the old canton chief Diola Keita, a member of the Figira branch (literal transcription):

Est venu de sa propre initiative se mettre à la disposition du Ct Supérieure. A pris part au combat de l'OYAKO (1883) et en 1888 lors au passage de la colonne à Kangaba a été appelé au comm.t du pays.

... Est battu en brèche par les Mamby qui voudraient bien redevenir les maîtres effectifs de Kangaba dont la moitié de la population est composée de leurs anciens captifs. La plus grande partie des gens de Diola Keita,

⁷⁵ See Kathryn L. Green, “Mande Kaba, The Capital of Mali: A Recent Invention?” *History in Africa* 18 (1991), 127–35. De Ganay gives us “Mansa Sema” as the founder of the Kamabolon, and adds that he is surnamed “mansa sama, [le roi-éléphant]” (*Le Sanctuaire*, p. 71). This remark evokes the hypothesis that the ceremony may have incorporated elements of an ancient cult in which animal totems (*tanaw*) played a crucial role. It must be noted that the elephant is the royal animal (Stephan Buhnen, personal communication).

Another sacred place in Kangaba seems also to refer to totemic cults. There is for instance the so-called *miniminkolon*, nowadays translated as “le puits tournant.” However, Stephan Buhnen writes (letter to the author, March 6, 1996) “Could the *miniminkolon* be rather a well of ‘Ninimink,’ a Bambara variant of the Malinke Ninkinanka or ‘Ningnanga’ according to Leo Frobenius, *Dämonen des Sudan. Allerhand religiöse Verdichtungen*, VII (Jena, 1924), 11–12. The *ninkinanka* is of course the mythical python representing a descent group ancestor.” Buhnen’s idea is worth keeping in mind in relation to the regional name for the Kangaba region. Mininyan. The Bambara word “mininyan” means python. However, local informants always rejected my suggestion that the etymology of the geographical name “Mininyan” refers to the python. B. Keita, *Kita dans les années 1910* (Bamako, 1988), 148–51, text from early twentieth-century Kita, talks about a sacred snake *miniminkolon* to which people make big sacrifices. The relationship between Sunjata (Jata = lion), the Kamabolon ceremony, and a lion cult is also worth attention, especially since Frobenius gives “Kulikorro Nyama” as the site of an ancient lion cult (L. Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* [Zurich, 1933], 83), and this site still is important in the Sunjata epic as the place where Sunjata’s adversary Sumaworo Kante transformed himself into a rock.

⁷⁶ See Camara, “La Tradition orale en question,” 289–90.

⁷⁷ ANMK, FA, A-5. Ordres Particuliers du Commandant Supérieur Bonnier 1893, Ordre Particulier no. 124. The village of Goundiourou is located along the lines of what is now the Dakar-Bamako railway.

ceux qui le soutenaient, ont traversé sur la rive droite de sorte que les Mamby étants plus nombreux, il n'est guère écouté ⁷⁸

The "fiche" of the first semester 1898 informs us about the following

Diola ne s'est pas signalé d'une manière particulière, il a su faire rentrer son impôt, il importe pour favoriser son autorité de continuer à surveiller la famille du Mamby et de l'empêcher absolument de reprendre pied à Kangaba

Then by 1903 the situation seems to have been appeased, since the "fiche" tells about Diola

Vieux et bon serviteur, affaibli par l'âge, mais avantageusement remplacé par son fils, Diogo, qui parait intelligent et énergique Les Diola et les Mamby vivent à Kangaba en bonne intelligence apparante ⁷⁹

Given this historical data on the "political presence" of the Kangaba Keita in Kangaba and the rapid changes in population size and composition in Kela, I think that the Kamabolon ceremony entered a new phase in which the rivalry with the Figira group became a new dimension in an originally internal affair ⁸⁰ The rivalry has given the impetus to restore the sanctuary every seventh year during the "exile" ⁸¹

⁷⁸ ANMK, FA,2 E-43, Fiches de Renseignements sur les chefs, Bamako

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ It is generally accepted that during the jihad of El Hajj Umar Tall (that is, in the 1850s and 1860s), all kind of "pagan" sanctuaries were destroyed. Among Mande specialists there has been some discussion on what could have happened with the Kamabolon in those times (cf. Camara, "La Tradition"), since Umar's empire included Kangaba. However, De Ganay (*Le Sanctuaire*, 98) notes a quite different tradition that says that Tall donated a copy of the Koran to the Kamabolon. I heard similar stories.

⁸¹ De Ganay (*Le Sanctuaire*) gives a picture (Plate I) of a nicely restored Kamabolon. She adds "Le Kama blon en 1905 (?) Cliché Captain Desplagne (sic), Musée de l'homme." In her book she does not refer to this picture. In the picture, the Kamabolon—if it really is the Kamabolon—stands between two trees of which only one was left in 1954. I look forward to more information on this slide. On the basis of the summary of Desplagnes' diary (O. Gollnhofer and R. Sillans, "Archives de la Société des Africanistes. Documents Desplagnes," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 44 [1974] and 45 [1975]), I conclude that Desplagnes was never in the region south of Bamako: he worked and traveled in the Dogon region and beyond. However, the diary mentions a summarized version of the Sunjata epic and some information on the Mande population, and therefore Desplagnes certainly was interested in the Mande material. Moreover, I can hardly believe that De Ganay ascribes a picture to Desplagnes with no reason, in particular since Y. T. Cisse worked with both her and the Desplagnes documents (Ibid., p. 189).

In the early twentieth century there must have been Kamabolon ceremonies in which the Diabate featured, since in 1954 the old Bintusine (Lansine) Diabate (his picture is in De Ganay, *Le sanctuaire*, Plate XVI 40) claimed to have attended the ceremony seven times (Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation," 68), from the age of seventeen onwards. This brings us back to 1912 (1954 minus 6 times 7, since Bintusine incorporates the 1954 ceremony). Since the Diabate keeps a good record of the times that they attended a Kamabolon ceremony—as I found out during my fieldwork—one has a good reason to consider Bintusine's claim as a correct. However, seven times is not many for an old man. On the other hand, in 1898 (1954 minus 8 times 7) there may already have been a ceremony in which the Diabate featured, because Bintusine also says that his father directed the

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the Kamabolon ceremony is a representation of the process of recreation of society. The ceremony is a five-day event during which society is in transition, since it is remodeled, and therefore is considered to be "hot." Since the entire society is in transition, the ceremony is of great importance to many groups, and it is therefore a tense and violent event, every group concentrates on correct behavior in relation to others. Its all-encompassing character explains why it refers in outlook to other socially marked events in the Mande world, such as installation of age groups, funerals, formation of the army, and attribution of hereditary kingship. However, the basic model of the ceremony is the installation of a new age group. This is demonstrated by the ritual labor before and during the ceremony, the village is cleaned, cleared, and restored before the Kamabolon is restored. At the end of the ceremony impurity has been "chased" completely.

There is no empirical evidence to consider the ceremony (in its present form) as an event for all the royal Keita. The data of thousands of people who visit the ceremony as a trip back to their roots (cf. Dieterlen) must be dismissed as popular myths, these stories merely express the ceremony's local and regional status. Moreover, it is incorrect to consider the separation of pure and impure royal Kangaba Keita—at Friday afternoon—as the ceremony's main function (as Dieterlen did), it is only part of it.

The allegedly religious character of the ceremony is mainly a result of the Griulians' preoccupation with religion and creation myths. Although some minor parts of the ceremony may be related to "traditional" systems of belief, such as the calculation of the ceremony's timing, the existing "evidence" is the result of "mystifying" translations of Mande concepts and notions, there is (nowadays, I admit) no reference at all to water gods, blacksmiths, or fertility.

The ceremony has not changed much in structure in the last century, with the exception of some minor parts (such as the march from Kela by the Diabate griots). I explain this stability by the participants' preoccupation with performing their own roles correctly. Hence the participants' behavior during the preparations (rehearsals of *Mansa Jigin*, restoration and cleaning of the village), which are done without outside control, is subject to different standards than behavior during the ceremony, when groups perform as closed units with strict roles in relation to others, and discussion is not heard.

Given the stress on correct behavior during the ceremony, it is doubtful to expect much new data from recordings of the famous "hidden" recitation in the Kamabolon, a performance that has gained the status of a mystery in African studies. This recitation is set of "abridged standardized oral texts" which have previously been recorded.⁸²

A correct performance of the ceremony, may undoubtedly be experienced as an expression of Kangaba's greatness in relation to its rivals, but the ceremony is

ceremony four times, his uncle three times, and he himself two times

⁸² See also Jansen, "The Sunjata Epic."

in essence an internal affair for Kangaba and villages related to Kangaba. Meillas-soux's analysis of the ceremony as an expression of Kangaba's supremacy over neighboring regions has also not been corroborated. His argument that the ceremony has the function of expressing rivalry with neighboring Keita groups is only partially correct, and too one-sided: it is a relatively recent addition to the ceremony. Thus, the Kamabolon ceremony is a recreation of society that has been becoming hotter and hotter in the last century.