Narratives on Pilgrimages to Mecca: Beauty versus History in Mande Oral Tradition

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NARRATIVES ON PILGRIMAGES TO MECCA: BEAUTY VERSUS HISTORY IN MANDE ORAL TRADITION

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> The *aesthetic fallacy* selects beautiful facts, or facts that can be built into a beautiful story, rather than facts that are functional to the empirical problem at hand. It consists in an attempt to organize an empirical enquiry upon aesthetic criteria of significance, or conversely in an attempt to create an *objet d'art* by an empirical method. To do so is to confuse two different kinds of knowledge and truth. To the truth of art, external reality is irrelevant. Art creates its own reality, within which truth and the perfection of beauty is the infinite refinement of itself. History is very different. It is an empirical search for external truths, and for the best, most complete, and most profound external truths, in a maximal corresponding relationship with the absolute reality of the past events. Any attempt to conduct that search according to aesthetic standards of significance (most commonly in an attempt to tell a beautiful story) is either to abandon empiricism or to contradict it.
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> —D. H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies,* 87

Introduction: Mande Historical Imagination and Academic Historical Research[1,2]

The figure of Nfa Jigin is featured in Mande[3] oral traditions that relate the origin of the secret Komo initiation society to a pilgrimage to Mecca. In

recent decades the time depth and the interpretation of Nfa Jigin traditions has been subject of systematic analysis, for instance by Sarah Brett-Smith and David Conrad, authors who have also published texts of new variants of the narrative. This article is a methodological exercise to investigate the external validity of their interpretations of Nfa Jigin narratives, and—as a consequence—the personage of Nfa Jigin "himself." The interpretation of Nfa Jigin is an important issue in both West African historical imagination and academic historical research, since it is being *suggested* that—although authors emphasize at the same time that nineteenth- and twentieth-century additions, changes, and deletions continue to occur in the Nfa Jigin narratives—these narratives might represent the fusion of a core of information that is pre-fourteenth century with a set of post-1324 A.D. islamized tales.[4] The date 1324 refers to the visit of Mansa Musa—the king of the Mali empire who was on pilgrimage—to Cairo, an event which has been reported in some fourteenth and fifteenth-century Arab sources (and probably the seventeenth-century Tarikh al-Fattash).

The Nfa Jigin narrative is one of the few issues that have been discussed in a debate on Mande societies in precolonial times (circa before 1850). For the period before 1850 there hardly are any sources, and most of the area where Nfa Jigin stories have been transmitted—roughly the area covered by present-day Mali and Guinea—was occupied by colonial powers only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the argumentation and method become of great importance when a relationship with a medieval source is proposed.

Older anthropologists labeled Nfa Jigin as "a fictive personality . . . created by the Malinke";[5] no particular period was attributed to Nfa Jigin by the scholars of the colonial era. By linking the Nfa Jigin narrative to Islam and to traditions about Sunjata, the legendary founder of the Mali empire, new pathways as well as a new time frame for Mande history have been explored in the last decades of the twentieth century. The difficulties David Conrad faced in this attempt, he expresses as follows:

> Thus, any historian addressing thirteenth-century Mali must either accept the severe limitations of the external written sources and say very little indeed about that period, or face the difficulties involved in supplementing these with references to the oral sources.[6]

Citing Moraes Farias, Conrad continues by "warning against nourishing an illusion instead of contributing to knowledge of the subject."[7] Recently, he summarized the interpretation of Nfa Jigin texts as follows:

> Taken by themselves and at face value, the individual oral texts are virtually worthless as sources of information about the historical deeds of Mansa Musa, something that is unusually clear in this case because the oral traditions can be checked against the relatively substantial external accounts.[8] . . . The Fajigi legend endured because it was an entertaining story about a heroic quest that Mande audiences could appreciate, and in the process it also became an expression of accommodation between religious practices and Islam.[9]

Thus, a connection between Nfa Jigin and Mansa Musa is presupposed, and the endurance is explained not by the importance of the content (a pilgrimage by a pious king), but by the changed function, i.e., the need to announce "the legitimate origin of various autochthonous ritual institutions" as well as the format of "an entertaining story."[10]

In this article I aim to elaborate methodological arguments to judge how and to what extent the "difficulties" mentioned by Conrad have been overcome, and to what extent a connection between Nfa Jigin and Mansa Musa is methodologically justified.

I will observe the tendency, by authors who write on Nfa Jigin and the origin of the Komo, to avoid non-sensational or nonaesthetic explanations. I explain this tendency by referring to the fallacy of narration mentioned above: the aesthetic fallacy. Fischer's quote provides me with the analytical tools and terms that I will use to question the external validity for the historic dimensions of Nfa Jigin as they have been proposed. I elaborate the idea that those who wrote on Nfa Jigin tacitly seem to have "forgotten" to pay attention to rules for external validity. Here I define validity to measure to what extent the data prove what the researcher aims to prove. A difference must be made between internal and external validity. External validity is related to "generalizability"; to what extent the data can be trusted when analyzed in relation to a wider set of data—a routine exercise in philological research. Validity should not be confused with reliability, which is related to replicability. I consider all the narratives on Nfa Jigin as they have been collected and published as reliable data. The focus on internal validity meant in practice that the authors' focus was only on research data regarding Nfa Jigin and the Komo; analysis of the Nfa Jigin narrative in relation to other oral literary products that were collected in the same area during the same period was not undertaken.

Lack of attention to external validity has a narrowing effect on the discussion of precolonial Mande, because it overlooks or underestimates the dynamics of oral tradition and Mande society. This phenomenon I consider to be an omnipresent danger in research on history in and of

Africa—often the local historical imagination is presented as an in-depth study of the local history—and therefore I chose to address to this topic in this volume on methods and sources.

Is elegance proof? This is the title of Jan Vansina's 1983 article in the journal *History in Africa.* At the time, Vansina directed his critique against structuralism. Nowadays structuralism has almost completely disappeared from academia, and the question posed by Vansina seems also to have disappeared from the historians' research agenda. This last aspect is unfortunate, since in recent decades narrativist and literary models for the writing of history have come to the fore and flourish—sometimes presented as "new epistemologies" for historical research—thus turning the question of elegance, a category connected to aesthetics, once again into a central issue in the historian's craft. Hence, I place "beauty" versus "history," since in my epistemology elegance is not proof.

I plan to support my critique on lack of external validity by sketching, on the basis of my own fieldwork data, an alternative interpretation of Nfa Jigin narratives that better meets the scientific prerequisite to maximize the external body of evidence and to maximize corresponding relationships between the available sources (cf. Fischer supra). Most of my ethnographic data for this analysis have been collected during six months of fieldwork conducted among the Kante blacksmiths in the village of Farabako, in the Sobara region (Mande hills) southwest of Bamako, near the Guinean frontier. The Sobara region has, compared to the adjacent area along the borders of the river Niger, a thin population density and an "undeveloped" infrastructure and economy. Islam has not yet fully penetrated the area, but is clearly present is local discourses on correct behavior. Komo societies are numerous, and altars (*boliw*) are omnipresent. I heard stories about Nfa Jigin several times, plus other narratives that I had not heard during previous research along the banks of the river Niger. This inspired me to work on the Nfa Jigin narratives.

A Historiographic Contextualization of the Nfa Jigin Stories

Mande history has been dominated by Sunjata and his helpers, in Mande historical imagination as well as in academic research.[11] Sunjata and his helpers are the alleged ancestors of the present-day Mande peoples, they are at the origin of the system of patronymics ("family names"). These ancestors are often publicly celebrated in griots' performances. Next to Sunjata

and his helpers, other heroes exist, and these are even sometimes incorporated in the 'discourse' on Sunjata [12] However, these heroes are either of local/regional historical importance, or relatively marginal in Mande historical imagination as well as not incorporated in griots' performances Nfa Jigin is a hero of this last mentioned category

I seek to explain the marginality of heroes like Nfa Jigin by the fact that they are not celebrated as ancestors of particular groups, no one claims descent from them I see no reason, in contrast to many others, to attribute the marginal position of Nfa Jigin in Mande historical imagination to an alleged taboo on talking about Nfa Jigin, and as alleged evidence that Nfa Jigin actually would be crucial in Mande culture I draw this conviction from my own fieldwork experiences Indeed, several times someone who told about Nfa Jigin of the Komo society suddenly stopped or was ordered to stop, but this happened also during previous research on Sunjata or on Mande village foundation stories Such sudden stops I seek to explain as (power) games between informants or between informant and researcher, and I do not consider them to be produced by an alleged secret character of the narrative

Nfa Jigin is said to have visited Mecca, where he begot important sacred objects that—in most versions of the narrative—happened to fall in the river (often the Niger) where they transformed into living beings, such as the *tigin,* a subspecies of the catfish As an example of Nfa Jigin's life and deeds, I will present the version that Bala Kante[13] told me

> One day, Nfa Jigin left for Mecca He returned with hundred magical poisons (*korote*), with hundred *kolo* He returned to Mecca once more The sin for which he had departed had not yet been forgiven He left for Mecca, because the fourth wife of his father had hidden herself to spend the night with him [14] Nfa Jigin had not recognized her The next morning she transformed herself and took her former [real] shape When Nfa Jigin arrived in Mecca this sin was not at all forgiven That is the reason why your father's wife is bad, you must never sleep with her Don't sleep with your father's wife
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> He has been liberated after seven years, they let Nfa Jigin go He had studied, he studied much, Nfa Jigin is at the origin of maraboutism [koranic scholarship —J J] He returned from Mecca with the Koran It was Sorijan Kante, the ancestor of the blacksmiths, who left to meet him and to carry his sac made of skin When they arrived at the middle of the river, a ritual object (*basi*) fell and it transformed into a fish which, when it is touched with a stick, trembles [by sending out an electric shock wave], and the shock goes to your brain This fish took the name of "electric fish" (*tigin*) When they

> continued their trip, another object fell and took the name of *manògò* [another sort of catfish —J. J.]; it has two body parts to swim with. If you are hurt by one of these, the effect is equal to a magical poison, although it must be treated in a different way. Another one fell and became a *kònkòn* (*synodontis*). It is quite small, but when you touch it, you must treat it with a *kolo* amulet. Well, another object fell in the water and became the *sumè* (*arius gigas*) whose "touch" is equal to a snake bite. To cure it, you must make use of the medicine to cure a *kòròtè*.

Nfa Jigin's objects, brought from his travels, feature as *basiw* (ritual objects, often translated as "amulet" or "fetish") and *boliw* ("altars") in the Komo secret initiation society; Komo masks are said to represent or to be connected to an object that was once brought from Mecca by Nfa Jigin.

I have two problems regarding interpretations of Nfa Jigin narratives, both related to issues of external validity in historical research. The first is related to the interpretation of Nfa Jigin's name and and Nfa Jigin as a historical personality, and the second is the absence of a deliberate search to contextualize the Nfa Jigin stories as broadly as possible within the framework of Mande oral tradition, thus "maximizing corresponding relationships between the available sources."

Nfa Jigin: Name and Historical Personality

The first syllable of Nfa Jigin's name consists of two parts: *fa* = father, *n* = my. *Nfa* (which is pronounced as "mfa") may be translated as "my father," but it is also a common way of addressing a male person respectfully. A Guinean school teacher explained to me, in Jelibakoro, in November 1992: "This is our way of saying 'vous' in Maninka."[15] This second translation, *Nfa* as "mister," has never been mentioned in literature. This should be done, even when informants do not do so.

Jigi or *jigin* (the "n" is hardly pronounced)[16] can be translated in various ways. Indeed, it is a word used for "hope," "trustworthy," and "descent."[17] However, it has more meanings. As a verb it means "to descend" (in a very broad way) or "to give birth to." Moreover, it is a Malinke man's name.[18] Thus, Nfa Jigin may be translated "magnificently" as Father Hope, but also "simply" as Mister Jigin.[19] These different translations certainly make different impacts on readers and evoke different readings. Methodologically, ignoring the less "aesthetically attractive" "Mister Jigin" cannot be justified, even if informants do so, but yet this is systematically done in

the academic literature, which thus follows in this case Mande historical imagination

Whatever the meaning of Nfa Jigin, it is problematic to derive a historical or cultural meaning from semantic interpretation, since Mande peoples love word games For instance, John Johnson once observed men discussing the deeper meaning of "koka kola / coca cola "[20] An open eye and ear for the word games Mande people enjoy would have resulted in including less aesthetic interpretations of Nfa Jigin than currently is the case

Nfa Jigin's name is also a point of historical debate a point of discussion is whether he was inspired by a "historical" figure Nfa Jigin is often called "Makantaajigi" (or variable combinations of "Makan"' [which can be translated as "Mecca"] and "Jigin") Then, the name means "Jigi who went to Mecca "[21] This name has been used to suggest that Nfa Jigin echoes (a follower of) Mansa Musa, the king of the Mali empire who made a pilgrimage to Mecca according to medieval Arab sources and (probably) the seventeenth-century *Tarikh al-Fattash* I object to this analogy is not evidence

After having connected Nfa Jigin to the historical Mansa Musa, the question is asked whether Nfa Jigin was contemporary of Sunjata [22] Brett-Smith and Conrad thus implicitly accept Sunjata to be a historical figure, although this idea (taught in primary schools and generally accepted) has been constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by ethnographers who read Sunjata's name in Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun, in these sources Sunjata is mentioned as the ancestor, several generations earlier, of the fourteenth-century kings For me, this is no reason to consider him to be a historical figure who lived in the thirteenth century[23] I consider Sunjata to be the central figure in an organizational model in present-day oral tradition Sunjata is (still) told to be seven to ten generations ago, following well-known and almost universal schemes of storytelling

What is even more striking is that in this line of thinking, oral traditions on Sunjata or those related to Sunjata are related to the thirteenth century, thus denying how oral traditions usually develop, transform, and change during processes of transmission The suggestion that a narrative cycle on Sunjata came into existence shortly after the Middle Ages[24] or even before the Mali empire[25] or transformed much in form and content in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, should certainly be taken into account [26] Since Sunjata is the hegemonic framework of Mande imagination of medieval history, it is logical that other stories about heroes are connected to Sunjata in order to increase the prestige and historical importance of these heroes Some people might say that I take a "hardliner's stance" regarding the historicity of Sunjata, but I maintain that this is not

a matter of "belief": it cannot be accepted when one applies generally accepted methodological criteria for historical research.

Exploring Nfa Jigin as related to the Middle Ages and to Sunjata thus denies certain possible changes in Sunjata traditions as well as the possibility that Sunjata traditions have been incorporating other traditions in the long run. Therefore, I consider this to be a case of the static fallacy:

> The *static fallacy* broadly consists in any attempt to conceptualize a dynamic problem in static terms. This form of error represents an intermediate stage of historical consciousness, in which *change is perceived merely as the emergence of a nonchanging entity* [my emphasis —J. J.].[27]

Thus, a discourse with alleged deep history is created by adding probabilities to each other. A variable is presented as a fact, and the leading idea becomes: "If it has not been rejected, why not then shouldn't it be true?" Aesthetic standards of significance (see Fischer, supra) then have taken grip on the researcher, and his topic of research has become an *objet d'art.*[28]

By mentioning Mansa Musa, the perspective has been changed, following the image that is supported by the Malians and Guineans themselves. It is commonly accepted by historians that, in order to study the past, the point of departure should be the present, and not the reverse.[29] Thus, it is not allowed, on the basis of a "wishful reading" of a fourteenth-century text (using analogy as evidence), to suggest an age-old "core" in the oral tradition, in particular since external evidence gives reason to accept a more recent period for the rise as well as the creation of the Nfa Jigin story (see infra). Of course, oral tradition sometimes accumulates, but this is not a given; most of the time it changes into forms in which previous versions are difficult or even impossible to trace. Oral tradition should not be analyzed as the product of an additive patchwork. Fischer could categorize the approach I criticize here either as a fallacy that combines two fallacies of factual verification, i.e., the fallacy of the prevalent proof (Malians love to hear Nfa Jigin is Mansa Musa) and the fallacy of the possible proof.[30]

In Search of Corresponding Narratives: Patarapa and Mamadi Bitiki

In this section I present two narratives that have several similarities with and connections to the Nfa Jigin narrative, and which have been classified as of relatively recent origin. Thus, I explore the external validity of inter-

pretations of Nfa Jigin by incorporating material that is comparable or corresponding, both in form and content. Although in one case—Patarapa—the name of the stories' antagonists has a clear historical origin, the events they relate are not historical. I will argue that these stories offer a more convincing framework of external relationships to interpret Nfa Jigin stories than the interpretations that are usually given. Both of the two narratives deal with the complex position of knowledge—which is conceived as something imported from outside—in Mande society, and both refer to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century experiences, the period when Islam penetrated Mande cultures and colonial powers introduced new technologies: the narrative of Federeba/Patarapa, the "ancestor of the Whites," and the narrative of Mamadi Bitiki, the "first African owner of a retail shop."

Federeba (in Brett-Smith's recording) has some renown in Mande literature. It is generally accepted that his figure has its origin with Faidherbe, the French governor of the West African colonies in the mid-nineteenth century. Faidherbe was open, in his own way, to Islam, which he used as an instrument to get a grip on the colonies. For instance, Robinson writes:

> Faidherbe also inaugurated the practice of the "sponsored" pilgrimage to Mecca for selected friends of the colonial regime—a way of demonstrating the consideration for the Islamic faith. He made sure that these achievements, and the exploratory missions that he commissioned, were widely publicized. [31]

This "open attitude" may explain why his name is being connected to a pilgrimage to Mecca, although Faidherbe is portrayed in oral traditions as the inventor of new technologies: in present-day Mande oral tradition he is the unflattering hero connected to the invention of the bicycle, a reference to both steel and mobility. These inventions are located in Mecca. I will give the version I collected in 1999.[32] This version has some unique features (Faidherbe as a false imam for a period of thirty years as well as the philosophy of wage labor), but is still comparable to the other versions hitherto collected, which often establish a relationship between Faidherbe and Cheikh Umar Tal, the leader of a nineteenth-century jihad:[33]

> I told him [me —J. J.] that he [Patarapa —J. J.] was his ancestor (*mòkè*). He replied that he did not know him. His ancestor is Patarapa. He was imam in Mecca for a period of thirty years. After these thirty years Cheikh Umar Tal departed for a pilgrimage to Mecca. In those times pilgrimages were by foot. When he arrived there, he stayed with his host. At sunrise (*fijiri*), Cheikh Umar Tal did not go to the mosque to pray.

In the morning, people asked him, according to the law (*sariya*), why he had not gone to the mosque to pray. He replied that the person behind whom they pray had not become a Muslim and that he refused to pray standing behind him. The inhabitants of Mecca consulted the law. (They decided that) if he had not spoken the truth, Cheikh Umar Tal would be decapitated the next morning. But if it was true, Patarapa, the ancestor of the White, would be decapitated. So it went.

The next morning, when people were called for the morning prayers, Cheikh Umar Tal went to the mosque, and the ancestor of the White fled. Ha! The Koran descended, "Lanyini" descended, "Tuwerata" descended, "Jaburu" descended, plus another Koran to complete the Five Korans. The ancestor of the White ran away with them. It is said that they contain the divine proposals about how to deal with iron; and the secret names of God are in the Lanyini.[34]

In the morning, when people were called for prayer, Patarapa was not seen. The second call (*kannya*) took place, he was not seen. At the third call, Cheikh Umar Tal rose to his feet and walked in front of the people to pray, to lead their prayers. After the prayers, people said that it was he who had spoken the truth.

Regarding the pursuit of him . . . , an old lady happened to give Patarapa some advice; if he did not flee, the man who was to arrive would reveal his secret (*gundo kòròbò*). If this person could seize him, he [Patarapa] would be killed. He was pursued, he was chased. Being chased, he looked behind and saw a horseman right behind himself. He happened to be close to the horseman. He quickly grasped a branch of a tree, cut it on both sides and joined these sides, did this again and made a bicycle from it.

After he did that, he was not seen again. His first destination was Chad, where he stayed for a while. He left Chad to go tp France, which is called Paris. All the clans (*bonda*) of the White descend from him, Patarapa. This law was established (*jèn?*) between him and the Blacks (*farafinnu*). He acquired this book [*sèbèn,* also "amulet" —J. J.], but if the Blacks had had it, they [the Whites] would never have colonized us.

The secrets they [the Whites] keep,[35] we were getting to know them. However, what they got, we did not get. What we got, is that of the prayer. Putting God's name in an affair. Ah! With the exception of the Christians, there are many Whites who don't pray. But they are afraid of everything that doesn't please God, [for everything] which is without respect. Because, when a White takes you to a job, after you have finished the work, before you relax, he gives you your salary. Such a practice we don't have. We command suddenly people to work for us and do so for one or two years without paying him a salary. Such a situation [of paying a salary —J. J.] doesn't exist there. They don't pray, but they are more afraid of everything concerning God than we are. That is, in short, the case of their ancestor. So! Now you

first turn off your radio [cassette recorder —J. J.]; then I will tell you one more story (*tariku*) later.

It is clear that the main topics and antagonists in this story (invention of the bicycle, use of steel [railway!], introduction of wage labor, technological knowledge from books, Faidherbe and Umar Tal) suggest an origin after 1850, at least post-Industrial Revolution. Islamic ideas, such as pilgrimages to Mecca, may be of older origin (although pilgrimages to Mecca became more common in West Africa in the nineteenth century), but these fit well in the Mande story theme of knowledge imported from outside. The formative period of this narrative will be the nineteenth century.

A nineteenth-century origin (or a later one) can also be attributed to the narrative of Mamadi Bitiki, whose name literally means "Mohammed Shop" (*bitiki* = boutique). Mamadi Bitiki is a popular song that praises either all the fine goods in Mamadi's shop[36] or Mamadi's destiny to loose all the richness he once had. Kaba gives as the following text for this song:

On l'avait surnommé Mamadi Bitiki
Ou 'Mamadi Maison'
Grâce à sa maison
Unique au pays.
Et même les génies
Des savanes et forêts
Surpris et stupéfaits
Devant la célébrité
Qu'il s'était forgé,
Scandaient son nom
A l'unisson:
"Mamadi Bitiki,
Notre meilleur ami." [37]

Narratives about Mamadi Bitiki are, however, rare. The narrative about Mamadi Bitiki that I recorded in Farabako is the first text of this theme ever published, as far as I know. The narrative clearly is about the miracle of retail trade, the knowledge how to acquire money:[38] You just sit down and at the same time you bathe in luxury that attracts women. Physical labor is absent is the story. Part of the narrative is about the bush spirits that multiply your money.

Mamadi Bitiki has, like Patarapa and Nfa Jigin, Islamic dimensions, thus reflecting social changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mamadi nowadays is the most current man's name in Mande, and it is

derived from Mohammed. Moreover, many of old shopowners in Mande have been connected to Islam. Conversion to Islam is a prerequisite for successful commerce; the two are inseparably related. Money, however, is a secret that cannot be explained by Islam; in the Mamadi Bitiki narrative a white man establishes the shop, puts Mamadi Bitiki in it, and then leaves.

Mande culture has always gone through deep changes, not only recently. Islam, money, time, and import products are all issues that ask for an explanation, but at the same time have an explanatory power; Islam as such is a source of knowledge, and it can locally be used as an explanation of a practice.[39]

Narratives like the one about Patarapa or Mamadi Bitiki can be interpreted as dealing with "modernity" and privileged knowledge, and "knowledge-from-outside" is a Mande narrative model that is able to represent modernity, because it can incorporate the histories of Islam and colonialism, trade and books. Pilgrimages to Mecca are a logical category in a Mande etiological legend, since in Mande historical imagination—as well as elswhere in sub-Saharan Africa—power (rulers and founders) always come from elsewhere, and knowledge is acquired outside someone's society.[40]

Faidherbe's stay in Mecca has no historical base; the widespread popularity of Patarapa-(and Umar Tal)-in-Mecca stories demonstrates that the pilgrimage to Mecca is a popular narrative model to explain the world-as-it-is. Authors who write on Nfa Jigin do not deny the "modern" layers in the narrative, as we saw, but they suggest an old core by not pointing to corresponding or comparable narratives, thus not deliberately attempting to demonstrate the external validity for their interpretation. In this article I suggest that this is not done, because that would de-veil the alleged beauty of the Nfa Jigin narrative and would emphasize the historian's impossibility, on *methodological* criteria, to connect Nfa Jigin to medieval events. Criteria for external validity give only reason to place Nfa Jigin in the nineteenth century, since corresponding data exist (Patarapa and Mamadi Bitiki).

Historians therefore can and must analyze Nfa Jigin narratives only as nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives. Oral tradition has to be understood with a processual model that analyzes oral tradition as a product, at any given moment, of an ongoing process of assimilation of the new and loss of some older elements; the fact that "accumulation" sometimes may take place should not be used as a *deus ex machina* to suppose huge time depths to oral traditions. The twentieth-century production of etiological legends with the theme "knowledge-from-outside"—and therefore comparable to Nfa Jigin's—is overwhelming. Thus, the suggestion to relate Nfa Jigin to a thirteenth-century Sunjata or fourteenth-century Mansa Musa

or "traditional" Mande is untenable.[41] Corresponding external evidence justifies seeing Nfa Jigin as a nineteenth-century narrative, and oral tradition has to be studied from the presence (see note 29).

Moreover, data that can offer a counterweight to falsify this interpretation are almost absent; data on the Komo are of relatively recent origin,[42] and therefore the Komo as we have learned to know it can be understood as a nineteenth- or twentieth-century institution.

Some Concluding Remarks

Although I agree with Tauxier's point of view that Nfa Jigin was a "legendary figure," my methodological critique as well as my search for external validity are—as far as I know—new. I argued those who published on Nfa Jigin in the last decades of the twentieth century ascribe to this figure historical dimensions by focusing too much on internal evidence: research is limited to data from many versions of the Nfa Jigin narrative. External evidence (regarding both form and content of other, from a narrative point of view, corresponding Mande oral traditions) has often not systematically been investigated. As examples of possible sources to determine the external validity of the Nfa Jigin narrative, I proposed the well-known narrative of Patarapa/Faidherbe and the seldom recorded narrative on Mamadi Bitiki.

I described how, by evoking an analogy with some references to African pilgrim kings from medieval Arab manuscripts, a historical time frame that connects Nfa Jigin to the Middle Ages is suggested by analogy, not evidence. Even when the speculative character of such a historical reconstruction is mentioned, many authors yet feel tempted to elaborate on this speculation, which is confusing to the reader. In this process of elaborating on the speculation, traditions on Sunjata are used to prove the time depth, although there is no evidence to believe that these traditions are medieval. That would be the "static fallacy." Hence, it is clear that I see no possibility to "supplement" the medieval written sources "with references to the oral sources" (Conrad, supra), without loosening the rules for historical research. The Nfa Jigin narrative is, I propose, one among the many Mande narratives that explain "modern" life by "knowledge-from-outside." Reading them as accounts of pilgrimages can be challenged by rules for validity: these sources do not prove what the authors aim to prove.

The beauty of the argument seems to be the justification for the lack of evidence to connect Nfa Jigin with medieval Mansa Mussa. Moreover, it impeded alternative hypotheses. I explained this by referring to the aesthetical

gratitude to Sarah Brett-Smith and David Conrad—who know that I admire their fieldwork and share their fascination for Mande oral tradition—because of their willingness to discuss previous versions of this article with me, although they are the authors to whom I direct in particular my critique Both these authors see serious shortcomings in my analysis and both of them have announced that they will comment on my point of view in future publications I am also grateful to Peter Mark, Wouter van Beek, Saskia Brand, Akare John Aden, and Geert Mommersteeg for comments on earlier versions of this paper, and to Barbara Flemming and Pekka Masonen for an interesting discussion on medieval royal pilgrimages to Mecca

3 Belcher describes Mande in the following way "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 —J J] 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" (Stephen P Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* [Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1999], 89) The region where I have done all my fieldwork is often called the "Mande heartland "

4 This was the way it was worded by Sarah Brett Smith (letter, May 2, 2001) In 1992, David Conrad was more convinced "The collective pilgrim figure [Nfa Jigin —J J] is based on, or at least largely influenced by, Mansa Musa, the Malian emperor who made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324" (David C Conrad, "Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic the Case of Fakoli," *History in Africa* 19 [1992] 152) In 2001, Conrad wrote "It seems safe to say that this pilgrimage was similarly important for Mansa Musa's subjects back in Mali, and in fact it seems possible that it could have given rise to the legend of Fajigi " (David C Conrad, "Pilgrim Fajigi and Basiw from Mecca Islam and Traditional Religion in the Former French Sudan," in *Bamana Art of Existence in Mali,* ed J -P Colleyn [New York Museum for African Art, 2001], 25–33)

5 Tauxier in Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Artfulness of M'Fa Jigi—An Interview with Nyamaton Diara* (Madison African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1996), 4

6 Conrad, "Searching for History," 147

7 Ibid , 148

8 [Note added by J J] Whether the external accounts are substantial might be a matter of taste However, it should be noted that all the authors discussed here (including myself) accept the "fact" that a rich African king really visited Cairo in the fourteenth century It might be doubted whether a muslim king was allowed to go on pilgrimage B Flemming, emerita Prof of Turkish at Leiden, informed me (e-mail, May 16, 2001) that there is no tradition of pilgrimage to Mecca by Ottoman reigning Sultans Rather, there is a tradition of making lavish endowments to the Holy Places She referred to Hannes Moehring, "Mekkawahlfahrten orientalischer und afrikanischer Herscher im Mittelalter," *Orient* 34 (1994) 314–29 (which I have not read) Pekka Masonen replied to me (e-mail, June 18, 2001), when I asked him about pilgrimages and Al-Maqrizi's text on Mansa Musa in particular "Al-Maqrizi's text lists several rulers (not only West African) who made pilgrimage to Mecca Besides the monarchs of Mali, the rulers of Bornu, for instance visited Mecca

Mansa Musa was not the first Malian monarch who went to Mecca Before him, Mansa Qu and Mansa Sakura performed the pilgrimage For the Malian royal pilgrims, al-Maqrizi is not an original source He largely repeats al-Umari and Ibn Khaldun and some other fourteenth-century Egyptian eyewitnesses " See also Pekka Masonen, *The Negroland Revisited—Discovery and Invention of the Sudanese Middle Ages* (Helsinki Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 2000), chaps 4 and 5

9 Conrad, "Pilgrim Fajigi "

10 Conrad, "Pilgrim Fajigi "

11 For an impression of the hegemony of Sunjata in Mande history, see Ralph A Austen, ed , *In Search of Sunjata—The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1999), for a sociohistorical explanation of this hegemony, see Stephen P D Bulman, "A School for Epic? The 'Ecole William Ponty' and the Evolution of the Sunjata Epic," paper for the conference "Emergent Epics" (Leiden, 21–22 May 2001)

12 This, in my impression, is done often by poorly informed storytellers, who—confronted with a hero they do not know—take a safe escape route by referring to the main frame of historical imagination, which is the Sunjata epic An example of this is the way the famous storyteller Wa Kamissoko—who published several books with Y T Cisse, and who is from a village fifty kilometers from Naiena—incorporated Narena's founding heio Nankoman into the Sunjata epic, although this hero is in Narena the protagonist of an narrative cycle that does not refer to Sunjata (see Seydou Camara and Jan Jansen, eds , *La geste de Nankoman—Textes sur la fondation de Narena* [Leiden Research School CNWS publisheis, 1999]) See also Conrad ("Searching for History") on the way Fakoli and Nfa Jigin "travel" between the Mecca narrative and the Sunjata epic

13 Bala Kante (born 1926) from Farabako was enthusiastic about my work, and in 1999 he often came voluntarily to me to 'talk about the past " He was a unique person In total, I recorded him for more than six hours When I met him in March 2000, Bala had become ill, and he was not so talkative anymore A selection of recordings with Bala Kante is scheduled to be published in a Maninka-French text edition in 2003 The translation I present here is based on a transcription and French translation by Muntaga Jaira (DNAFLA, Bamako)

14 Authors tend to relate Nfa Jigin stories to incest and sex—Nyamaton's account (in Brett-Smith, *Artfulness*), for instance, has many references to sexuality It is often said that Nfa Jigin sinned, because he slept with his mother, thus making of him an African Oedipus In Bala Kante's version, given the terms he uses, the intercourse between Nfa Jigin and his father's wife has—practically—nothing to do with ("biological") incest Maninka have a polygamous marriage system Men marry one to three wives, but some rich men marry a fourth wife The marriage of a fourth wife always generates a lot of discussion This fourth wife is (very) young and very beautiful—I can assure you from the few I ever met She usually is quite younger than the husband's oldest son(s), and therefore the (classificatory) son is a sexually attractive partner to his (classificatory) mother Muntaga Jarra translated 'fourth wife" with "young spouse,' which explains already local tensions related to this phenomenon, thus, in Bala's interpretation, this theme is about lust and sex, not about incest

15 "Vous" can also be produced in Maninka by addressing someone with *koro* or *n koro* ("elder" or "my elder"), or *n ba* ("my mother") to women

16 Charles Bailleul, *Dictionnaire Bambara Français* Bamako Donniya, 1996) gives *jigi* as "hope," and *jigin* as "to descend " In my area of fieldwork, people clearly pronounced the second "n' in Nfa Jigin

17 Mentioned in Brett-Smith, *Artfulness,* and in Paulo F de Moraes Farias, "Pilgrimages to 'Pagan' Mecca in Mandenka Stories of Origin Reported from Mali and Guinea-Conakry," in *Discourse and Its Disguises—The Interpretation of African Oral Texts,* ed Karin Barber and Paulo F de Moraes Farias (Birmingham University of Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies, 1989), 162

18 The name "Jigin" features often in Mande stories "Jigifagajigi" (*faga* = to kill) is mentioned in the Traore praise song as a king killed by Tiramagan Traore (cf Jan Jansen, Esger Duintjer, and Boubacar Tamboura, eds , *L'Epopee de Sunjara, d apres Lansine Diabate de Kela* (Leiden Research School CNWS publishers, 1995) I suggest that Jigifagajigi and Jigimakanjigi (which features as "Jigin from Mekka" in Nfa Jigin stories) are the same figure, who happened to become pronounced differently because of the context Cissé's comparaison of Jigin with a sacred ram (cf Moraes Farias "Pilgrimages," 163–64) is interesting, but equally speculative

19 For the moment, I don't see a relationship with the term *mansa jigin,* the "local" term for the Sunjata epic in the region of Kela *Mansa* = king, and the term *mansa jigin* is explained as "the event the kings come together" or "the dispute of the kings" or (most acceptable to me) "the genealogy of the kings" (cf also Bailleul, *Dictionnaire,* 162 and 270) The term for the Nfa Jigin story—*nfa jigin* as a general genealogical account of the deeds of the ancestor(s)—might have become the name of the story's antagonist, but this is mere speculation

20 Conference, "Transcript of the Sunjata Epic Conference" (Chicago, 13–15 November 1991)

21 I agree with reading "Makantaajigin" as "Jigin who went to Mecca " However, one should not always translate "Makan" into Mecca (I disagree here with Brett-Smith, *Artfulness,* 40), Magan/Makan is a word that features in many names of Mande kings and heroes It probably is an old word for ruler, of Soninke origin (see Viacheslav Misiugin and Valentin F Vydrin, "Some Archaic Elements in the Manden Epic Tradition The 'Sunjata Epic' Case," *Saint Petersburg Journal of African Studies* 2 [1993] 105), but certainly is a Maninka man's name

22 See Brett-Smith, *Artfulness,* 3 ' M'Fa Jigi and Early Mande History " Brett-Smith applies an argument similar to the one applied to Nfa Jigin and also to Jitumu Bala and the origin of sand divination

23 See Ralph A Austen and Jan Jansen, "History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers," *History in Africa* 23 (1996) 17–28

24 Ralph A Austen, "The Historical Transformation of Genres Sunjata as Panegyric, Folktale, Epic and Novel' in *In Search of Sunjata—The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance,* ed Ralph A Austen (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1999), 69–87

25 Jan Jansen, "Masking Sunjata—A Hermeneutical Critique," *History in Africa* 27 (2000) 131–41

26 I disagree here with Conrad, who wrote "Evidence from all available oral sources indicates that the major characters of the Sunjata epic can be composites of any number of mythological, legendary, and historical figures from virtual any period prior to the sixteenth century " (Conrad, "Searching for History," 149) In my opinion, this general statement is self-evident, with the exception of the "prior to the sixteenth century," which cannot be proven, due to lack of sources

27 D H Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies—Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York Harper Perennial, 1970), 153–54

28 Here, I might pay not enough attention to Moraes Farias ("Pilgrimages"), who proposed seeing similarities between Nfa Jigin's trip and the initiation to the Komo society Moraes Farias avoids in this article a historical claim in for the time depth of the Nfa Jigin narrative, but does not seem to have had the intention of searching the methodological debate which I seek in this article

29 Cf Yves Person, "Nyaani Mansa Mamadu et la fin de l'empire du Mali," in *Le Sol, la parole et l'ecrit 2000 ans de l'histoire africaine melanges en hommage a Raymond Mauny* (Paris Societe française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1981), 630, Person seems to hint at researchers such as Niane, who embellished West African history by mixing twentieth-century oral tradition with medieval written sources

30 Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies,* 51–53

31 David Robinson, *Paths of Accomodation—Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens, Oxford Ohio University Press/ James Currey, 2000), 80

32 Told by Modibo Keita (born circa 1957) from the village of Farabako (arrondissement de Siby) on August 25, 1999 Modibo is a devote Muslim who does not drink alcohol and who is not practicing sand divination He was surprised that I had not heard the story before This recording was the first recording/interview Modibo Keita ever did Hence the introduction to the other people in his room and the deliberate end For my translation, I heavily lean on the transcription and translation into French by Ouana Faran Camara (DNAFLA, Bamako)

33 For El Haji Umar, see David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1985) and John H Hanson, *Migration, 'Jihad," and Muslim Authority in West Africa—The Futanke Colonies in Karta* (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1996)

34 The part about the five korans is difficult to translate I am grateful to Geert Mommersteeg (see also his "Allah's Words as Amulet" *Etnofoor* 3, 1 [1990] 63–76) for comments that improved the translation that Ouna Faran Camara had made for me Mommersteeg told me that the theme of Five Holy Books is well known in Islamic magical traditions, it represents the idea that the Bible has hidden knowledge that has never arrived into Islam "Lanyini" (in Camara's transcription) is the verb 'to investigate' in Bailleul, *Dictionnaire,* but must be pronounced as a word derived from "injil," the Arab word for the Bible "Tuwereta" is the Torah "Jaburu" is the Book of Psalms The fifth book is the book of the secrets of the West I also had difficulties in understanding Camara's translation of the divine proposal on iron, but hearing the story, Boubacar Tamboura, a friend of mine with whom I translated the Sunjata epic (Jansen et al , *L'Epopee*), interpreted it as a reference to the use of steel in the construction of buildings and railways The Farabako blacksmiths often expressed to me their admiration for trains and railways, and this supports Tamboura's interpretation

35 For a fine article on the alleged secrets of the white people, see Molly D Roth, "The 'Secret' in Malian Historical Consciousness Re-narrating the West," *Mande Studies* 2 (2000) 41–54 Mommersteeg suggested also a book by H Turner, titled *The Secrets of the West* I have not been able to locate this book

36 For a recording of this song by the griots from Kela *Bonya/Respect—Griot Music from Mali II* (Leiden PAN Records, CD 2059, 1997)

37 Mamadi Kaba, *Anthologie de chants mandingues* (Paris L Harmattan, 1995) In a note Kaba adds 'Aux premieres heures du regime colonial, un riche marchand fut le pre-

mier a se construire une maison en dur On l'a surnomme 'Mamadi Bitiki' ou 'Mamadi en maison dur' On lui dédia ce morceau qui fut fredonné partout Mais malheureusement, Mamadi Bitiki par un revers de fortune, devint tres pauvre et se mit a vendre du bois de chauffe Quand il surprit une riche cliente fredonnant cette chanson, il lui déclina son identité et son passé en concluant que ce qui compte pour tout homme, ce n'est pas le depart, mais l'arrivée, c'est-à-dire la fin Le mot bitiki est une déformation de boutique qui désigne la maison en dur Ce morceau est un diagba " Ibid , 8 describes a "diagba" as a popular dance with jembe music

38 On June 18, 2002, I presented a paper on the Mamadi Bitiki narrative (recorded in 1999 with Bala Kante from Farabako) at the 5th International Conference on Mande Studies (held in Leiden, The Netherlands, June 17–21)

39 See, for instance, Clemens Zobel, "Les génies du Koma Identités locales, logiques religieuses et enjeux socio-politiques dans les monts Manding du Mali," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 144 (1996) 625–58

40 See, for instance Jan Jansen, "The Younger Brother and the Stranger-in Search of a Status Discourse for Mande," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 144 (1996) 659–88

41 I disagree here with Conrad, who says that these stories "viewed in isolation seem more relevant to the history of Mande oral art than to the thirteenth century" ("Searching for History," 161) Here Conrad delimits his body of evidence to the Sunjata corpus (cf the title of Conrad "Searching for History"), if he had incorporated a wider range of products of "oral art," these sources would have come "out of the isolation" and should be interpreted as meaningful in a nineteenth- or twentieth-century context

42 The first reference to a Komo ceremony stems from 1881, as far as I know (Vallière's account in Joseph S Gallieni, *Voyage au Soudan français (Haut-Niger et pays de Segou), 1879–1881, par le Commandant Gallieni* (Paris La Hachette, 1885) Thus, corresponding ethnographic data for a possible earlier date of the Nfa Jigin narrative is also absent

43 Brett-Smith's choice to present Nfa Jigin as the "prototypical artist" (in *Artfulness)* embodies, in my opinion, the aesthetic fallacy by making him an artist