MASKING SUNJATA: A HERMENEUTICAL CRITIQUE*

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I

Among the rich legacy of African oral traditions, the Sunjata epic is still one of the most complex phenonema, because it undoubtedly goes back to the times of Ibn Battuta, because of the limited variety between the available text editions, and because of its present-day popularity in sub-Saharan West Africa among people of all kinds of social background. In scholarly discussion, the epic has challenged many academics since Delafosse used the Sunjata epic as evidence for his reconstruction of the Mali empire as a thirteenth-century vast centralized polity. Although his views have been criticized since then, they have become part of history lessons at primary schools in Mali, the Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea. All these countries belong to the so called "Mande," an area inhabited by various ethnic groups that have close similarities in language, oral tradition, and social organization.[1]

In the last decade *History in Africa* has given room to discuss the Sunjata epic, in particular in order to explore how data from the epic can be used as historical sources, and as what history for whom. Articles by David Conrad, Tim Geysbeek, Stephan Buhnen, Stephen Bulman, Kathryn Green, George Brooks, Ralph Austen, and myself come my mind. All these authors have treated the Sunjata epic as a text. This seems to be a logical and inevitable choice for the historian

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[1] In this context the following anecdote is illustrative for the Sunjata epic's status in Mali. In 1991, I was at the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, looking for colleagues who worked on the Sunjata epic. I presented myself to the librarian, and he showed me the door of the Department of History. I asked him if he did not make a mistake, and proposed the next door: Department of Oral Tradition. No, you make a mistake, the librarian replied, Sunjata is history, not oral tradition.

However, this approach implies a choice that limits the range of interpretations which can be made about the Sunjata traditions as a source for African history

In this paper I will argue that several clues in the epic refer to masks and mask dances, and that this dimension challenges historians to rethink their ideas about the origin, content, and function of the Sunjata epic The existing range of interpretatations have "masked" these ideas Hence the title "Masking Sunjata " The gerund "masking" refers to both scholars who have masked the range of possible interpretations, as well as to my hypothesis linking the Sunjata epic to a ritual complex in which masks performed This argument will be supported by ethnographic material on a mask dance related to the Sunjata epic

After this, the geographical unity of the area in which Sunjata traditions are told, will be placed in an ecological perspective, thus proposing an alternative to the political unity of the Mali empire as an explanation for the spread and stability of the Sunjata epic The necessity of profound ethnographic research for the interpretation of a particular Sunjata text will be illustrated by some remarkable "anomalies" in the prestigious Kela version, demonstrating some pitfalls of a comparative approach, as well as the necessity to study each Sunjata text as a socio political statement The conclusion aims to demonstrate that literary approaches have received much attention in the last decades, although they limited, or even narrowed, discussions on Sunjata too much to the esthetic and textual dimensions of the Sunjata texts I labeled my critique as "hermeneutical," since I aim to "submerge" myself in the data as a method to come to new questions and to open roads to new insights

II

The Sunjata epic—or at least a performance in which the king was praised by griots as a descendant of Sunjata—was performed as early as the fourteenth century in the presence of Ibn Battuta [1] He described how griots sing praise songs while using masks Levtzion and Hopkins give the following translation under the title "An amusing story about the poets' reciting to the sultan "

> On the feast day, when Dugha has finished his performance, the poets come They are called jula [spelled out], of which the singular is jali Each of them has enclosed himself within an effigy made of feathers, resembling a [bird called] shaqshaq, on which is fixed a head made of wood with a red beak as though it were the head of a

[1] Cf R A Austen, R A , *In Search of Sunjata the Mande Epic as History Literature and Performance* (Bloomington, 1999)

shaqshaq They stand in front of the sultan in this comical shape and recite their poems I was told that their poetry was a kind of exhortation in which they say to the sultan "This banbi on which you are sitting was sat upon by such-and-such a king and of his good deeds were so-and-so, and such-and-such a king, and of his good deeds were so-and-so, so you do good deeds which will be remembered after you" Then the chief of the poet mounts the steps of the banbi and places his head in the lap of the sultan Then he mounts to the top of the banbi and places his head on the sultan's right shoulder, then upon his left shoulder, talking in their language Then he descends I was informed that this act was already old before Islam, and they continued with it [3]

The simultaneity of a praise song with a mask is remarkable, and should have challenged researchers much earlier to explore the relations between masks and royal oral traditions, in particular, the Sunjata epic Several authors have, indeed, already mentioned the relationship between the Komo mask and his *alter ego*, the hero Fakoli, one of Sunjata's most famous helpers The Komo is a socio religious society in which the blacksmith plays a central role, Fakoli is considered to be the ancestor of the five Bila blacksmith families McNaughton writes that Fakoli is represented as the carrier of several bundles of arrows (*binyew*) "Fakoli is imagined as having had a huge head (a *komo* mask, perhaps) covered with more than 300 *binyew*" [4] Dieterlen also gives a description of a Komo mask that resembles strongly the one described by McNaughton

La tête du masque est le plus souvent confectionnee en os (crene humain ou crâne d'hyene, ou en bois Sur le crâne, sont fichees des fleches de cuivre (*kun bye*) et attachees des amulettes (*kun kanana*) les yeux du masque sonts grands La bouche est tordue [5]

The connection between Komo mask and society as it is represented in oral tradition is unquestionable in the *fasa* (traditional standardized praise song) for the Bila, the blacksmith families that trace descent from Fakoli In the Kangaba region—the region called in Mande studies the "Mande heartland"—Fakoli is praised in the following way [6]

[3] Nehemia Levtzion and J F P Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981), 293
[4] Patrick R McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths* (Bloomington, 1986), 136 37
[5] G Dieterlen, G , *Essai sur la religion Bambara* (Bruxelles, 1988), 171 72
[6] Jan Jansen, J , I Duintjer, and B Timbouri, *I epopee de Sunjara d apres I ansine Diabate de Kela* (Leiden, 1995), 117 18

Les cinq familles royales Bila,
Fakoli à la grosse tête, Fakoli à la grande bouche,
Jerelin Koma, Koma te jegema, Jegema te jegema y'o tè.
Les Bila de Solon, descendants de Fakoli.
Les Bila de Baya, descendants de Fakoli.
Les Bila de Danyoko, descendants de Fakoli.
Les Bila de Balimala, descendants de Fakoli.
Les Bila de Domanyogo, descendants de Fakoli
Les cinq familles royales Bila.
Trois cent fétiches des fauves et treize,
sont sur le casque, sur la tête de Fakoli.
Ils brillent tous.
Trois cent fétiches de panthère et treize
sont sur le casque, sur la tête de Fakoli.
Ils brillent tous
Vingt flèches en cuivre et trente sont sur son arc.
Cet arc est à la main droite de Fakoli.
Vingt flèches en cuivre et trente sont sur son arc.
Cet arc est à la main gauche de Fakoli.
Si Fakoli passe au-dessus de ta tête, la grosse tête te tuera
Fo woyinoyi kiyama, Jumaju, Juma Kandia.

Although a relationship between Komo and Fakoli is easy to make,[7] as far as I know the relationship between other heroes from the epic and masks has never been investigated. Yet there are several. The clearest comes from The Gambia. Peter Weil has done extensive research on a mask (probably) representing the transition of youth into adolescence. The mask has characteristics attributed to Sogolon Kèjugu, Sunjata's mother, in Mande oral tradition: the mask dances crippledly, and it has the form of a hunchback.[8]

From Kouroussa, in northeastern Guinea, comes the description of a lion's mask. A lion mask—"Diara" or "Jara"—is an interesting phenonemon, since the segment "Jata" or "Jara'" in Sunjata's name means "lion." The Guinean writer Camara Laye describes this mask in Chapter 7 of his famous autobiographical novel *L'Enfant Noir* (1954), from which I take the following quotes:

Je grandissais. Le temps était venu pour moi d'entrer dans l'association des non-initiées. Cette société . . . rassemblait tous les enfants,

[7] In the Sobara region traditional healers a(*somaw*) form the most active participants of Komo ceremonies. Their traditional headgear with dozens of amulets they sometimes call *Fakollifugula*, Fakoli's hat

[8] P. Weil, P., "Masks of Mande Musulu, the Creation and Performance of Masks by Women in Wuli Kingdom, Senegambia" (1994 version of a paper presented at the Second International Conference on Mande Studies, March 1993. I talked with Peter Weil on the topic in Bamako, in March 1993. In 1997 this paper was being prepared for publication in *African Arts*.)

> tous les incirconcis de douze, treize ou quatorze ans, et elle était dirigée par nos aînés, que nous appelions les grands [Kondén]
> Or, j'ignorais pas qui était Konden Diara, ma mère souvent, mes oncles parfois ou quiconque au vrai dans mon entourage avait autorité sur moi, ne m'avaient que trop parlé, que trop menacé de Kondén Diara—mais était-il homme? était-il bête? n'était-il pas plutôt mi-homme et mi-bête?

The author's father says

> Rien que tu doives vraiment craindre, rien que tu ne puisses surmonter en toi Rappelle-toi tu dois mater ta peur, te mater toi-même! Kondén Diara ne t'enlevera pas, il se contente de rugir

Then, the author continues

> Une troupe des gens, parmi eux des joueurs de tam-tam, visitent le jeune homme dans sa concession et l'accompagnent jusqu'en brousse, les femmes et jeunes filles se hâtaient maintenant de regagner leurs demeures
> mais il nous surprend Et puis, ce n'est pas un lion seulement, c'est dix, c'est vingt, c'est trente lions peut-être qui, à sa suite, lancent leur terrible cri et cernent la clairiere Non, personne parmi nous ne songerait a risquer un oeil, personne!

The young man has the following impression of Kondén Diara

> Lui seul, me dis-je, lui seul peut ainsi commander aux lions [9]

To conclude the list of masks, next to the Fakoli, Sogolon, and Sunjata, I mention the buffalo mask. This mask is still performed among many ethnic groups in the West African Sudan It also is an important being in puppet performance in the Segu area [10] Although I do not have direct evidence of a buffalo mask performed in relation to the Sunjata tradition, it is worth mentioning that the buffalo is the key character in the Sunjata epic, he is necessary to start the cycle of events

The origin, history, and functions of these masks will remain unknown forever, since masks and masks performances have disappeared almost everywhere in Mande, in particular in the Mande heartland It is generally accepted that Islam is the cause of this

[9] At the end of the chapter Camara "demystifies" the happening by claiming that the noise was made by the older young men themselves

[10] M J Arnoldi, *Playing with Time Art and Performance in Central Mali* (Bloomington, 1995), PAN records 4010 KCD Bamana and Bozo songs from Kirango, Mali (The Music Collection of the Royal Tropical Institute) gives a picture of "Sigi," the bush buffalo mask

change Nevertheless, the relation between the Sunjata epic and the masks is so striking that it is worth mentioning At least it confronts us with the fact that in the discussions about the historicity of Sunjata, his human character has never been questioned Even those who claim the epic is pure fiction, analyze Sunjata as a (super-)human being, for instance, a king or a hunter Apparently Sunjata's human character is part of the conventions among researchers, part of the paradigm of Mande studies

III

When I once suggested to Ralph Austen that the Sunjata epic as we know it might be a remnant of a ritual complex in which the lion featured and in which his mask was danced, together with many others, he replied that these masks could also be marginal and separate coincidences inspired by the narratives about Sunjata I then realized that I had to find more evidence to make my point I was helped by a remarkable performance of a lion's dance during a performance of a praise song for Sunjata

On 24 February 1997, I happened to be in the village of Massakoroma, on my way from Siby to the Bakama region, straight through the Mande mountains—the shortest way for people like me who travel on a bicycle Massakoroma is part of the Sobara region, and is generally considered by the Malians to be a very "traditional" and "underdeveloped" region, in particular compared to the adjoining regions along the banks of the river Niger Up to 1995 the Sobara region was barely accessible by car [11]

When I arrived in Massakoroma, people were just celebrating the fourtieth day ritual for the deceased Tinyeba Keita, one of the spouses of the village chief As a Keita, this woman had the status of being a descendant of Sunjata From my room I heard women outside starting to sing a Sunjata *fasa*, the traditional standardized praise song for the Keita, the royal branch among the Mande people

I went outside and observed two old women dancing, surrounded by singing women Lead vocals were sung by a local griotte called Fanta Kouyate The women replied to her texts or repeated them The dance was called Waraba ("Lion") according a young man in the audience—women formed the closest circle, the young men and children form the outer circle There were no old men standing in the audience The two old women both held a piece of raw meat in their

[11] For the Sobara region see C Zobel, 'Les genies du Komo Identites locales, logiques religieuses et enjeux socio politiques dans les monts Minding, du Mali,' *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 36(1996), 630 58 There are no bridges in the entire region In August this mountainous region is often isolated from the rest of the world by deep brooks that are formed after heavy and long lasting rains

mouth One of them prowled like a wild animal on the ground, and, somewhat later, laid down on her back, with her arms and legs in the air The other one observed her, and slowly walked around her

After about five minutes, the woman in lying position rose to her feet and started to dance wildly The women kept on singing the well-known lines (*I bara kala ta* etc from the *Sunjata fasa*, but also *Ayi bo, ayi bo, Mande musow* (to be translated as "Come and see, come and see, women of Mande, come and see"), etc , another well-known song in Mande, describing the joy of Sunjata's mother when her lame son starts to walk) The two old women kept the raw meat in their mouth all the time

The similarities between the Sunjata epic and the lion dance in Masakoroma are striking, because they are performed in combination I asked the man in the audience who the "Waraba" was, and he replied that this was of course (!) Sunjata himself Indeed, just as Sunjata, who was lame for the first seven years of his life and then transformed into an active warrior, the lion lay on the ground and later rose up and moved actively

As far as I know, this dance is the first description of Sunjata performance in which the text is not the main focus, since Ibn Battuta's description of griots at the court of the Mali king More data of this nature and from this perspective should be collected, since they may broaden, or even change, our interpretations of the Sunjata epic Yet the few data presented here give me enough reason to relate the Sunjata epic to a mask complex

Moreover, it must be kept in mind in the discussion of the origin of the Sunjata epic, that the most prestigious version is the one from Kela (near Kangaba), and that this version derives its prestige precisely from its "secret" performance during the the five-day Kamabolon ceremony in Kangaba This highly complex ceremony, which undoubtly goes back to precolonial times, has been studied by, among others, Dieterlen, De Ganay, and Meillassoux The Kamabolon ceremony demonstrates the natural link between Sunjata, ritual, and the representation of political power

IV

I know that ecological arguments are difficult to use as evidence for the reconstruction of historical processes They can usually only serve to falsify hypotheses Yet I will use here an ecological argument to explain the remarkable spread of the Sunjata epic without having to refer to a political unity, i e , the medieval Mali empire If a ritual complex was at the origin of the Sunjata traditions, it is necessary to make an argument to demonstrate that a political unity is not an inevitable prerequisite to explain the spread and limited variety of the Sunjata texts

If "Sunjata" was not only a narrative, but also a ritual, it is necessary to search for the people who practiced the rituals The Sunjata epic has always been connected to the "Mali empire," and discussions have focused on the organization of this empire and the power of its rulers If Sunjata is not related anymore to a human being, a founder king, then why the popularity of Sunjata all over the Sudan? The answer I try to find in ecological aspects Seen from the perspective of climatological zones, it is remarkable that the Sunjata epic is still transmitted in the southern half of the area that has been attributed to the medieval Mali empire, the area generally considered to be governed by Sunjata and his descendants [12] From an ecological point of view, the Mali empire zone covers an area inhabited by agriculturalists who left the northern half at the end of the Middle Ages In the period 1500-1800 agriculturalists in the West African Sudan moved southward due to a structural drought, after a period of relative humidity in the period 1100-1500 Therefore, the mask rituals in which Sunjata featured may have been a way of life, and connected to an agricultural mode of production in a semi-arid zone This zone decreased after 1500, thus leaving us with the current Sunjata belt

Of course, this is not much evidence Yet, it is useful to realize that we have a lot of evidence about medieval civilizations in the Sudan, but that our image of the "Mali empire" is also based on scant evidence two Arab authors, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Battuta

V

In studies of the epic, two—almost contradicting—dimensions have received much attention Firstly, the fact that from a formalist point of view, the versions of the epic are similar over a wide area The most in-depth analyses of this point have been made by Stephen Bulman This fact is generally stressed by those who read history into the Sunjata epic Secondly, the opinion is often expressed that griots are great performers and producers of literary texts, and that versions of the Sunjata epic must be appreciated as literary constructions Both dimensions have been important in the "emancipation" of African (oral) literature since the 1960s since they demonstrated that Africa had a rich cultural heritage as well as skilled literary specialists

Both approaches are one-sided the first is too general and thus the principles that produce variation are overlooked The second is too specific, and the result of an exclusion with comparable texts In an earlier publication I argued that genealogies of Sunjata contain politi-

[12] J L A Webb, *Desert Frontier Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel 1600 1850* (Madison, 1995)

cal claims that remain stable in time in one place, but that transform according to fixed principles along geographical lines [13]

Thus a version of the Sunjata epic must be analyzed diachronically as a function of its place of origin, and be mirrored synchronically to versions from elsewhere I will explain this point by mentioning some remarkable aspects of the prestigious Kela version of the Sunjata epic In Kela the epic has been recorded three times in the early 1920s, in 1979, and in 1992 [14] The last two of these contain non-abridged transcriptions and translations The three versions are rather similar in content, but contain striking differences with non Kela versions For instance, the plot of Sunjata's victory over Sumaoro Kante, 'deviates' from what people generally tell in the Sudan Most versions tell about Sunjata's sister or niece who seduces Sumaoro Kante and then "steals" the secret of his totem the spur of a white cock She flees home and reveals the secret to Sunjata, who then is able to beat Sumaoro

In the Kela version Sunjata's niece (his half-brother's daughter) is married to Sumaoro, but then libirated by Kalajula Sangoy, the ancestor of the Diabate Sunjata is able to beat Sumaoro because he is helped by marabouts who fill a partridge with sacred water and send the bird to Sumaoro

These 'deviations' seem at first sight to be coincidental literary fantasies However, the contrary is true they nicely portray the Kela perspective Firstly, the famous Kela griots bear the patronymic Diabate An (archaic) praise line and salutation for the Diabate is "Kalajula Sangoy," it is well known all over the Sudan In Kela this term nowadays represents a human being Kalajula Sangoy becomes the story's protagonist, thus decreasing the importance of the Kouyate's ancestor, who is the person who accompanies Sunjata's niece to Sumaoro, and whose heels are cut by Sumaoro, thus forcing him to stay in Sumaoro's palace At the same time, the Diabate increase their own prestige by introducing their ancestor as the hero of the story

The drop in activity by Sunjata's niece is remarkable, in particular in combination with the role attributed to Islamic scholars Again the local situation demonstrates the logic of this narrative Nowadays the entire region has converted to Islam, but at the beginning of this century most people were "fetichists " However, the sole exception was Kela In 1932 the entire "*cercle* de Bamako" had only ten koranic schools, but four of them (with 45 of the total amount of 85 pupils)

[13] Jan Jansen, Politics and Political Discourse Was Mande Already a Segmentary Society in the Middle Ages *HA* 23 (1996) 121 28

[14] J Vidal, La legende officielle de Soundiata, fondateur de l empire Manding, *Bulletin du Comite d Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l Afrique Occidentale Française* 7(1924), 317 28 M Ly Tall, S Camara and B Diouara, *L histoire du Mande d apres Jeli Kanfu Madi Jabate de Kela* (Paris, 1987), Jansen et al , *Epopee*

were in the village of Kela [15] Kela clearly was a center of Islamic education Nowadays there still are four koranic schools in Kela, and they all are supervised by teachers of the Haidara family that forms half of the village's population Moreover, the informants Vidal talked to in order to record his version of the Sunjata epic all had the patronymic Haidara

Thus in the 1930s the Haidara held an important position in the transmission and reproduction of the Sunjata epic, they were at that time considered to be the 'court chaplains' of the Kangaba kings [16] It might be a quite superficial and easy explanation, but the decreased prestige of the female actor combines well with the increased prestige of the Islamic actors, and the narrative solution expressed in the Kela version of the epic nicely illustrates the way Islam is dealt with in ideological issues in Kela

This example illustrates how much a version of the Sunjata epic is colored by the local perspective, not only by its political claims, but also by its content However, it stressed —although Kela is one of the few places from which we have material over a longer period—that the version hardly changes over time on one place This is a point that, in my opinion, has to be taken more into account in studies that use the Sunjata epic as a source to demonstrate something, since this local stability demonstrates the political function of the epic

VI

The discussion of the relation between masks and the Sunjata epic is not on the lines of "who was first, the chicken or the egg?" Since our oldest description of griots' praise singing for a Keita already mentions a mask, it is self-evident that the issue must fully investigated Although masks have become marginal phenomena in public life in the "Mande heartland" under conditions where certain forms of Islam have spread, it is generally accepted that they still perform an important social role in communities, as well as in several highly-Islamized communities

Therefore, after having submerged myself into the data related to the Sunjata epic, I come to the conclusion that there is much about it which makes it necessary to study it as a multidimensional social phenomenon The epic gives not only clues to history, literature, and philosophy, but also to regional and local politics, and mask performance Thus, the Sunjata epic has to be studied as a representation of

[15] Archives Nationales du Mali à Koulouba, FRI I 70 Rapports Politiques et Rapports de Tournee, Cercle de Bamako, 1921 1944

[16] See my Hot Issues The 1997 Kamabolon Ceremony in Kangaba (Mali) *HAHS* 31 (1998) 253–78

a way of life, as a "total social fact" in Mauss' words, and not as a text

David Conrad described how people in Mali and Guinea chose different versions of the epic in order to demonstrate that Mali's capital was on the territory of their nation the Malians chose Dakajala, the Guineans Niani [17] Conrad's study implicitly illustrates how West African elites have narrowed the debate on Sunjata and the Mali empire by selecting their favorite version of the Sunjata epic Actually, they seem to opt for a form of "close reading" that closes any debate on the content of that reading They narrow them to a narrow range of interpretations that were elaborated in discussions in colonial times in reaction to Delafosse's work Professional scholars should not be gulled too much by these kind of discussions, because then they may tend to restrict their sources for their research to the checklist of published versions of the Sunjata epic that was recently published [18] However, there is so much more to do about Sunjata An open eye for the social complexities in which the epic has been embedded as well as produced is a necessary prerequisite to "unmask" Sunjata

[17] D C Conrad, A Town Called Dakajalan the Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital, *JAH* 35(1994), 355 77

[18] S P D Bulman, A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic, *HA* 24(1997), 71 94