13. An Ethnography of the Epic of *Sunjata* in Kela

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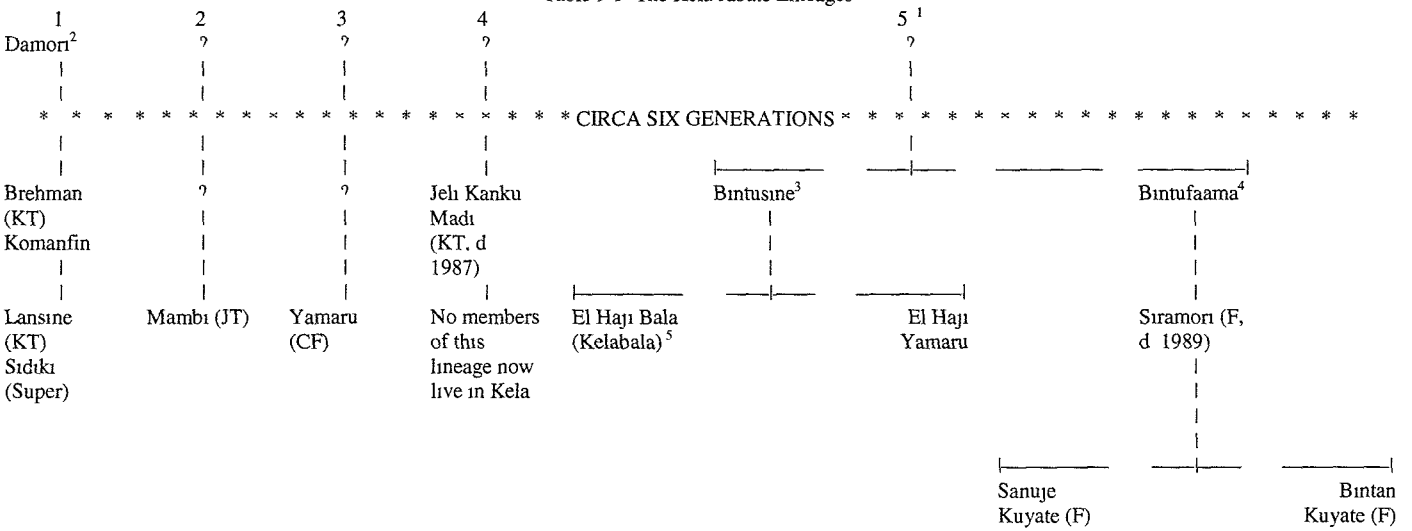
The town of Kangaba and its neighboring village of Kela (100 kilometers southwest of Bamako, on the banks of the Niger) are often referred to as the best place for learning the entire *Sunjata* narrative tradition. Every seventh year in Kangaba the Kamabolon (a sacred hut) is reroofed, a ceremony during which the whole epic is said to be recited. However, no one has ever been permitted to make any kind of recording during the ceremony, which is why up until now we have only reports by observers of the ceremony.

During the last night of the ceremony the Jabate jeliw of Kela (five kilometers from Kangaba) are responsible for the "definitive" version of the epic. Given the importance that researchers ascribe to this little group of griots in Mande culture, it is remarkable how little information is available about them. In this chapter I want to make a contribution to the study of the Jabate griots by focusing on the ethnographic aspects of their epic performance. After a short discussion of my fieldwork, I will describe what information from the epic is available to whom in Kela. Next, I will elaborate on the transmission of the epic by showing who acquires this information and/or knowledge. Finally, I will address the question of what is recited inside the Kamabolon, the "Secrets of Mande." This article is somewhat preliminary and decidedly untheoretical since it was formulated while I was still in the field.

Research Methods and Fieldwork Setting

Among the approximatley1500 inhabitants of Kela, 15 to 20 percent are Jabate griots or members of their families, living within a section of the village consisting of a public square surrounded by six walled compounds. Within these compounds live five "lineages," or "*bondaw duuru*" (see table 9.1). The only *bonda* that occupies two compounds is number five on the table headed by El Haji Bala (often referred to as Kelabala). El Haji Bala's younger brother El Haji

Table 9 1 The Kela Jabate Lineages



KT = Kumatigi (Master of the Word), see text JT = Jelikuntigi (Chief of the Griots) = eldest male Jabate in Kela CF = Classificatory father, i e takes role of Mambi, although slightly younger than he, because Mambi is incapacitated F = Female

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[1] The relationship between well-known members of this lineage is too complex to be indicated on the table Omitted here is a collateral branch of this lineage which includes two contemporary singers who have performed and been recorded internationally, Kase Mady and Lanfia

[2] The Kela Jabate refer to themselves collectively as "Damorila" (descendants of Damori) because Damori was the first Jabate to settle in this place, although only one of the five patrilineages claims him as a biological ancestor

[3] Informant of Leynaud and Cissé (1978) in 1960s

[4] A legendary ngoni player

[5] Kelabala (c 1915-1997) was 80 years old at the time of fieldwork and thus the chronological elder of all the Kela Jabate but socially classified as a son of Mambi (lineage 2) and Yamuru (lineage 3)

Yamuru is the central person in the other compound of the family. The division into two compounds appears to be the result of the large size of this family, which is primarily due to their wealth. Kelebala is a very famous marabout, and El Haji Yamuru was a popular artist in the 1950s and 1960s, when he formed a duo with Bremajan Kamisoko, whose family lives next to the five Jabate families. The Jabate and the Kamisoko (another well-known jeli lineage) consider themselves a unit in Kela.

The other populous lineage (number one on the table), is headed by Lansine Jabate. Lansine is the current *kumatigi*, or "master of the word," responsible for reciting the epic during the Kamabolon ceremonies. I asked him to find me a place to stay in Kela and he brought me to a hut about five meters from his front door; thus we were in close contact during the entire time of my fieldwork. Without Lansine's hospitality and his constant willingness to allow me to accompany him, my research would have been impossible. Altogether, he permitted me to live on his compound from October 1991 to March 1992, from October to Christmas 1992, and, finally, in March 1993.[6]

Most of the research on *Sunjata* focuses on the content of the epic. However, I did not master the Maninke language well enough to enter into profound discussions with the griots. I chose to rely instead upon observations of their practices supported by simple questions about what people do and why they do it. The success of this "low profile" approach was for the most part dependent on my fieldwork setting and the friendliness of the Jabate in Kela.

I know that there is a fine line between observation and voyeurism, especially when one does research within a small group, such as the Kela jeliw. I found that in the community almost all matters were subject to open discussion with the exception of *Sunjata*. I never introduced this topic myself but rather let the griots take the initiative and choose what they thought would be interesting to me when they took me to particular events or invited me for tea. I made a few recordings on my own; most of the performances were recorded without payment, and only after having asked permission. Therefore I can present data about the griots of Kela without fear of embarrassment. My descriptions reflect the unexceptional events of their everyday life.

Available Information about the Epic

There are not very many occasions when the people of Kela can hear the *mansa jigin* ("that which is recited after the death of a king"), as they call the epic of *Sunjata*. Only in the week before the reroofing ceremony, when there are dozens of other griots visiting Kela, do some rehearsals take place (Jansen 1995). It was my observation that in other years a rehearsal can take place after the rainy season. The people themselves say that these rehearsals take place two

[6] Funding for this research was provided by WOTRO, The Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research, Grant W 52-533.

or three times from early September to late November, but I witnessed only one in 1991 and none in 1992. Everyone gave me the same practical explanation for this timing: at the end of the rainy season many young Jabate are present in Kela to work on the fields, thus guaranteeing a large audience.

For the rest of the year information relevant to *Sunjata* can be obtained at certain formal events and in fireside chats. The last category is, of course, hard for an observer to understand, but I got the impression that themes from the epic were not often a subject of discussion. During formal occasions, however, much information is available, but it is almost always the same: the *fasaw* (praise-names/genealogies) of the named lineages that live in the Kangaba region. Even little children already know these oral texts. Sometimes the old men spoke about the past and referred to the great heroes from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and Sunjata. Actually, it is remarkable that only three old men told these stories in public: El Haji Bala, El Haji Yamuru, and Lansine (another Yamuru, the classificatory father of the three other men [see table 9.1], often seemed to be present to confirm what was said).

Thus it is not easy to catch the griots of Kela in a major performance during which a long part of the epic is recited; during my fieldwork I witnessed only a few such occasions. These performances, however, give us much insight into the role of the epic in Mande society, and that is why I have chosen to present fairly extensive ethnographic descriptions of all six.

Performance One:
A Rehearsal of the Kamabolon Ceremony, April 1989

I was not actually at this performance; however, it was partially recorded by the Belgian photographer Erik Sacré, who sent me the text on a C-90 cassette. On the tape Lansine speaks and Mamaduba Kamisoko, the son of the late Bremajan, says "*naamu*."[7] The rhythm is that of the "Sunjata" fasa. The performance starts with all the people present singing an a capella refrain. Lansine is sometimes interrupted by El Haji Bala, and at one moment there is a short discussion, with many people involved. The stories that are told are about Sumaoro Kante, including his confrontation with the griot, Bala Fasake Kuyate.

Performance Two:
In the Public Square between the Jabate Compounds

"You are lucky that you've arrived today." That is what everyone told me when I visited Kela for the first time on October 24, 1991. That night after dinner everyone assembled in the public square, which was lighted by a lamp. At one side of the square is a big wooden platform, upon which Lansine and Ma-

[7] See Conrad (infra) for a discussion of this verbal accompaniment to epic recital ("naamu," probably derived from Arabic, means "yes").

maduba took their places with their classificatory father Yamuru next to them. El Haji Bala sat on a chair (because of his hip problems, I assume). In front of Lansine sat two ngoni-players from Bamako. The rest of the platform was occupied by male Jabate and Kamisoko. The audience consisted of women and children and the many visitors from other villages who were at the Jabates' at that time.

All of a sudden, the men started to sing an a capella refrain (Jansen 1995). It was the start of a session that lasted more than three hours and that had the Sunjata fasa as its rhythm. The pattern of the first two hours was as follows: Lansine talked and Mamaduba said "naamu." Sometimes a person gave a gift to El Haji Bala (some coins or a banknote—the total revenue that night was about 4,000 CFA francs, or $16 U.S. in 1993). After a short time El Haji Bala interrupted the performance, said something and gave his blessings, which were answered by the crowd with "*Amina.*" A few times someone shouted a benediction to El Haji Bala.

Lansine told the stories of many well-known heroes: Tiramagan, Sunjata, Fakoli, Sumaoro, Bala Fasake, and Sita Fata (the ancestor of the Jawara griots in Kela). Many times I heard him reciting the praise-names for their descendants. Then things seemed slowly to come to an end, which was the moment for which the guests had been waiting. One after another they stood up to praise El Haji Bala and Kela in an almost aggressive way. A few times they were interrupted by Sidiki Jabate, or "Super," Lansine's classificatory younger brother. Sidiki welcomed everyone present and said things that made the audience laugh.

Performance Three: The Inauguration of the President of the Mali Griots

A great ceremony to celebrate this figure took place at Bamako on October 13–15, 1992, and attracted griots from all over Mali and Guinea. The griots from Kela had been invited to legitimize the true successor of Jemusa Sumano.[8] The Kela delegation consisted of a dozen men and one woman, Bintan Kuyate.

On the first night the Kela griots provided a general welcome; different fasaw were played, and families were praised. El Haji Bala's son later stated that "toute l'épopée" was performed, although this did not appear to be literally the case. The second day started with a celebration of the deceased, followed in the afternoon by a celebration of his successors, his "sons." That night, the official inauguration took place. This was a big media event: all the famous griots of Mali sang for the new president and El Haji Bala installed him in his position before the cameras of Radio Télévison du Mali.

But the third night was the most interesting as far as the epic was concerned. That evening after dinner Lansine changed clothes while I happened by

[8] President of the Union Nationale des Griots du Mali, a kind of guild or labor union for bards.

coincidence to be in the room. Among the articles donned by Lansine on this occasion was an old leather bracelet placed on the upper arm, which he told me he also wears in the Kamabolon!

The small compound of the late Jemusa Sumano was filled with about 100 people. That evening words were spoken for more than four hours. The first hour Lansine performed to the rhythm of the "Sunjata" fasa and later to that of the "Tiramagan" fasa. Mamaduba said "naamu," and sometimes Super took over for him. Lansine dedicated the greater part of his performance to the exile of Sunjata; he also spoke extensively about Bala Fasake Kuyate. Sometimes Lansine paused to allow Bintan to sing the texts associated with the fasaw melodies ("I bara kala ta" for the "Sunjata" fasa and "Tiramagan muru" for the "Tiramagan" fasa).

After having been in almost complete silence for two and a half hours, the audience relaxed when other people took over the floor, although these also addressed serious topics. One of the new performers was a Fina Camara, who recited what he claimed were 1,000 names for the Prophet Muhammad.

Performance Four: The "Real" Epic

In February 1992 Lansine promised me a recording of "two music-cassettes" on the condition that no one would ever hear them in Mali. Super played the "Sunjata" fasa on the ngoni, together with his son Brehman, and acted as the "naamu"-sayer for Lansine. I had previously asked him to tell the same stories as Jeli Kanku Madi had recited in 1979 (Ly-Tall et al. 1987). Lansine remembered that performance very well because he had participated in it as the naamu-sayer.

To my surprise Lansine more or less replicated Kanku Madi's 1979 recording; he began at the same point, and used the same themes in the same sequence. However, on a more detailed level (character descriptions, for instance) he often deviated, just as his style of performing is completely different from that of Kanku Madi.[9]

Lansine stopped at the moment when Sunjata leaves Nema (Mema in other versions) to return to Mande. At that moment he had talked for almost three hours nonstop, filling two C-90 cassettes. He looked exhausted and complained of a headache. However, within a few minutes he recovered and expressed pride in what he had achieved.

The next morning Lansine said that he had checked the cassettes (as usual I had given him copies) and found that every word was true. Later that day he proposed to record two cassettes again next year. A few days later, laying his hands on his belly he said that there were enough words "inside" to continue for another ten years.

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[9] For the text of this session see Jansen et al. 1995, lines 1-462.

Performance Five: "Next Year"[10]

In December 1992, during the week before the "Next Year" version was to be recorded, Lansine repeatedly asked me to visit him so that we could discuss what he might recite. Every day I told him to tell "the rest" and pointed out that last year we broke off at Sunjata's return to Mande. Of course, I expected the rest of the copy of the 1979 recording, but I restrained myself from suggesting that he himself had the cassettes of performance (hereafter "P") four.

Two nights before the recording, while I was drinking tea with Lansine's sons and their friends, he told the story of the decapitation of Jolofinmansa (see below). The next morning he asked me if that was what I was looking for, and I said that it would be wonderful to hear that story once again.

During the session Super and Brehman were again the instrumentalists, and again they played "Sunjata" fasa. Lansine started and in one minute he had finished Sunjata's return to Mande and his battle with Sumaoro Kante. Then he gave a long and beautiful version of the decapitation of Jolofinmansa. Having finished this, he then told about Fakoli and some kings after Sunjata. At this time one side of the C-90 was completed, and as I turned the cassette over Lansine asked me what he should talk about now. I suggested that a more extensive description of the battle between Sunjata and Sumaoro would please me greatly. He agreed and proceeded to tell a long story about this event. When two-thirds of the second side was recorded he stopped and said that it was finished. I did not protest, and we went home. Lansine was proud of his stories, which were indeed beautiful, and said that all the words of Africa were "inside."

That evening, I took Lansine aside and told him that I had promised my "chef de bureau" two cassettes, but I had only one. What was I to do? Lansine, friendly as always, told me that this was no problem at all, for we would record a second cassette as soon as possible. I thanked him and said that I would take a C-60 this time.

Performance Six: A "Sudden Death"

The session eventually took place one day before my departure, on December 16, 1992. Lansine started with a long story about Mecca and then seemed to slip automatically into the first passage of the recording of "last year" (P4). I asked him to stop and tell another story instead. Lansine obliged, and after some time he slipped again into a story that I had recorded before.

Then, after forty-five minutes, Yamuru (the classificatory father) entered the room. Lansine immediately switched the subject to well-known praise-lines. We finished after another five minutes, and I never heard a word about what happened or the reason for it (see below for further discussion of this event).

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[10] This performance is published in Jansen et al. 1995, lines 463-664.

The Epic of *Sunjata*: Text and Comparative Observations

The six performances described above give us insight into the nature of the epic of *Sunjata*. It is clear that Johnson's theses about the African epic are not undermined by the ethnographic data that I collected. In Kela the epic is "open-ended" and "open-starting," as performances four, five, and six demonstrate. Moreover, there is a clear sequence of events for the griot: in P6 we saw that Lansine slipped into another theme known from P4. Thus, the griot is able to pass over some themes without creating a fuzzy version, but he cannot mix themes excessively. However, at the end of the epic the griot seems to have many possibilities. In fact, I was under the impression that P5 contained at least four stories that could be credible conclusions to the P4 recording: the battle; the decapitation; Fakoli's adventures; and the history of Sunjata's successors. But to put these four "endings" together into one story is a more complicated matter.

As far as I know, no one (other than Charles Bird, infra) has previously provided us with a sense of the epic as experienced in "live" performances before local audiences. In the first place, we have seen that a "live" epic is less complete than the best-known written versions. Completeness, however, does not seem important because everyone knows what the story is about; the audience is mainly interested in the way it is recited. It seems to me that the theatrical aspects of the story are just as important as the words themselves.

Completeness is also impossible because there is never enough time. The "live" epic has "extras": interruptions to praise an individual (P2) or song performances by a second griot to give the principal narrator a break (P3). It would take very many hours to give a complete version of the epic because in serious performance the griot elaborates on particular themes, which themselves become real *pièces du théatre*. For example P3, which dealt only with Sunjata's exile, itself lasted several hours.

Therefore, the people of Kela are accustomed to more vivid performances of a less complete epic than we might find in books, a fact that may explain why I never heard a term for "epic" in Kela. People talked about "*kumaw*" (words), "fasaw" (praise-songs), "*gundow*" ("des choses qui restent entre nous," often translated as "secrets"). Lansine usually described what he did as "*kuma*" and sometimes referred to "*gundo*." I did, on few occasions, hear the word "*tariku*," the term for "epic" reported by other researchers, but it was used in Kela only with reference to "a story that belongs to a certain family." Of course, the term "mansa jigin" (see above) is known in Kela, but I seldom heard it, not even when Lansine told me about his activities during the Kamabolon ceremony. Thus Kela people do not categorize epic narratives very strictly; their genre terms are highly context bound.

The Acquisition of the Right to Speak

Up until now I have shown that access to the epic is possible for anyone in Kela. In the following section I will set forth the idea that, although knowledge is widespread, the right to speak is not.

At the end of P6 we saw Lansine switching to another subject when "Fa-

ther" Yamuru entered the room. I do not think the issue here was whether I was allowed to know the story, but rather Lansine's doubts concerning the appropriateness of the situation for the use of this information. This point is reinforced by another experience.

Everyone in Kela, even the little children, know the praise-lines for the Kuyate, which begin "Kukunba ani Bantanba"; one finds them in any published text of the *Sunjata* epic. As I worked under the name of Sidiki Kuyate in Kela, people often shouted these praise-lines when I entered their compound or when I strolled through the village. However, when Lansine allowed me to write down the praise-lines in my notebook, he said that I was never to show them to anyone. A few months later, the female singer Bintan Kuyate taught me the praise-lines during a chat about everyday events. She warned me, however, to avoid pronouncing these words in public. In addition, she said that I must tell no one that I had received this information from her.

Through this example I want to indicate that a proper use of epic knowledge is more important than the knowledge itself. This connects the epic with education: the epic can be recited only if you have "savoir faire." Thus the epic remains the domain of the old men in Kela. Before I go on to describe the process by which one acquires the right to participate in the epic discourse, I will cite a case in which the old men use the epic to educate their juniors.

One evening I was drinking tea with some young men, along with Lansine and "Father" Yamuru, when all of a sudden Yamuru said something to which Lansine reacted visibly. Lansine then told three stories.

The first story was about Sita Fata Jawara, who had hunted Jolofinmansa with Tiramagan. Tiramagan had already conquered all the cities of Jolofinmansa, but he had not yet captured the king himself. During his flight the king decided to hide in a hole in the ground. Pursuing Jolofinmansa Sita Fata and Tiramagan arrived at the king's hiding place. There the two men saw a foot sticking out of a hole. They proceeded to pull out the foot only to discover that it belonged to Jolofinmansa, the person for whom they had been looking. Jolofinmansa offered them his weight in gold in exchange for his life, but Sita Fata advised Tiramagan instead to kill the king and take the gold, saying "Why take one, if you can have both of them?" And so Tiramagan decapitated Jolofinmansa and took all of his gold.

Lansine continued with a narrative about an "older brother" of Bremajan Kamisoko, the late partner of El Haji Yamuru Jabate. This older brother served in the Guinean army during the colonial era. According to Lansine, in those days the people of Kela suffered from obligatory rubber taxes. Each year, every adult had to bring a certain quantity of rubber to a collection point on the banks of the Niger. If a person did not provide enough rubber he was severely beaten with a whip, thrown into the river, and rolled through the sand. One year, on the day of the rubber-collection, Bremajan's older brother offered to go in his place, to which Bremajan agreed. When it was his turn, the French commander asked, "Where is your rubber?" Bremajan's brother replied, "I don't have any." The French commander ordered him to undress in preparation for a beating. Brema-

jan's brother then said, "I will not undress for anyone ever!" And since that day the inhabitants of Kela were exempted from taxes.

This account was followed by a story, very popular in Kela, about Komanfin Jabate. In 1968 Modibo Keita, the socialist first President of Mali, delivered a speech in Kangaba during which he denounced the conservatism of the local population and threatened to destroy the Kamabolon. At this Komanfin protested, declaring that it would never happen. Modibo was outraged by this response and threw Komanfin into prison. A few days later the Mali regime was overthrown by the coup d'etat of Musa Traore, which the people in Kela say was the result of Modibo's attack upon the Kamabolon.

I cite these three stories as examples of the educational function of griot narrative. What are they trying to teach? I believe that the stories inspire the griot to dare to speak in public: "a griot should never be afraid" is a statement that the researcher will often hear in Kela. The stories and accompanying claims that the griots from Kela (the Jawara, the Kamisoko, and the Jabate) fear no one are explained by the belief that the griots know the truth.

As in the case of the epic, all these stories were already known to the young men who had joined me that night for tea. What made them interesting, however, was the way in which they were articulated in order to provide a "deeper" message. It is in this articulation and application of knowledge that the power of the griot lies. On the one hand, the jeliw liked to tell me everything, but on the other they were very afraid that I would express the data inaccurately or, even worse, that I would apply the stories to situations in which they ought not to be used. That is why I was not allowed to say "Kukunba ani Bantamba."

What then seem to be the general rules about who is allowed to speak, and when may he do so? First, if one wishes to speak, one has to have the necessary knowledge. Among the youth of Kela I saw major differences in both interest and knowledge about Sunjata. Some seemed to know next to nothing, while others had an almost complete factual knowledge about the deeds of the great Mande hero and his companions. A similar situation occurs when jeliw try to master the ngoni, the little lute by which formal recitations are always accompanied in Kela. Some young men play the ngoni, but many quit as early as the age of ten after having tried for some months. Those who knew the narratives particularly well did not usually master the ngoni.

Thus, at about the age of thirty only the most verbally gifted young people are competent to participate in the *Sunjata* discourse. However, even they are not allowed to do so because speaking about *Sunjata* is a tricky business. Since the epic is related to the organization of society (Jansen 1995), one can easily insult families by stressing the wrong accents or making dubious statements. This is the main reason why a thirty-year-old must wait another decade or two to become a "homo politicus" and discover the true meaning of the epic. In the meantime he can develop proficiency in the art of speaking during his travels around the Mande world.

It is from these itinerant individuals that westerners derive their image of the griot: an aggressive person who wants money all the time. In my own field-

work, however, I got the impression that such men become calmer and more "distinguished" by the age of fifty; they are preparing themselves for the highest stage in their society, that of an elder.

After the age of fifty one is gradually admitted to the top level. If the Jabate from Kela have to send an official delegation to another town or village, they generally choose three old men and two "boys over fifty years old." Sometimes I witnessed a delegation in action, but the "boys" never spoke in public. It seemed that they were responsible for the organizational part of the delegation's visit.

Thus one really has the right to talk at major events only after the age of fifty. Even Lansine participated in training sessions with El Haji Yamuru before the 1989 Kamabolon rehearsals,[11] although he always denied that anyone had taught him anything. He told me once that his knowledge came from a spirit that had entered his body when he was young.

The image that I have given of the epic of *Sunjata* in Kela is that of a performance genre embedded in daily life; it is linked to the status of the aged in Mande society. This contrasts with the picture presented by Seydou Camara (1990: 73ff.; infra) in which he describes a kind of Quranic school with Lansine acting as the master; the pupils learn the epic by heart through listening two times a week to Lansine's words. According to Camara the classes are attended by Jabate and other young griots who come to Kela from the entire Manden.

Camara's descriptions (based on what griots and other informants told him) are not confirmed by my own observations of practices in Kela. Although I lived in the house of Lansine for about one year, only a few times did I witness the performance of the epic (P1-3). Moreover, I believe that Camara exaggerates the role of the pupils from other places. Between 1987 when he became Kumatigi (speaker at the Kamabolon) and 1994 Lansine had five long-term pupils, including myself (other griots came only for short visits). As everyone told me, even Lansine's long-term pupils had come to work in the fields of Kela, and after a few months they left with the benedictions of the older Jabate. On this occasion they are required to recite "all the genealogies that Lansine had taught them," which means that they summarize the praise-names of the families of the Manden. This is not a difficult task for, as we have seen above, even little children have already mastered these lines.

The Status of the Spoken Word in Kela

Up to this point I have shown that performing the epic and using its textual content in political life is a skill that is linked to age. However, this does not explain why the epic is so popular among the Jabate, or why everyone is still so interested in the work. This interest is reflected by the status of the spoken word in Kela.

The Jabate are very proud of what they know, and take special pride in the

[11] Personal information from Erik Sacré; see also Camara 1990.

manner by which they retain their knowledge, as illustrated by the following anecdote All the griots of Kela liked my idea of producing a book about their village, but they were often amused by my dependence on writing in order to achieve my goal One day Lansine told me some praise-lines, which I then proceeded to write down When "Father" Yamuru asked me to repeat them, I simply read what I had written Then Yamuru took the notebook out of my hand and asked me to repeat the lines again, I replied that it was impossible The two old men laughed, and Yamuru said that his memory was better than mine

The griots in Kela have an absolute belief in their memories When I suggested once to my neighbor Mamadi that it would be interesting to write down the epic for future generations he replied, "Why? We are in Kela "

The old Jabate in Kela can all be described as functionally illiterate When they were young, they were trained for a while in the local Quranic schools, but at the present they are not able to read Arabic quickly According to everyone, El Haji Bala is the sole exception, because he received a long and intensive Islamic training in his youth However, when I observed him making amulets he was writing Arabic very slowly, as if it were a sacred art It reminded me of the practices of the marabouts in Djenne, described so vividly by Mommersteeg (1991) In such contexts of "restricted literacy," the written language is not a medium for general communication, but used only to represent the word of God and His Prophet

My assessment of the status of the spoken word in Kela once again brings me into dispute with the thesis of Camara, who claims that the *Sunjata* epic also exists there in written form [12] The first argument against this thesis is the fact that the older Kela men are functionally illiterate Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the senior griots are so proud of their memories that they would refuse to accept the aid of written sources Third, I think that Camara is committing an error common among students of the epic he has forgotten that an oral work of this kind can exist only on the basis of its function in society As I have shown, the data within the epic is often well known, and it is only through use in special contexts that such data acquire a sacred meaning According to the impressions from my fieldwork, this relationship of the epic to the sociopolitical arena is a very delicate affair, in which the griots of Kela have proven to be masters It is only through such mastery that they have acquired their unique present day status

My final argument against the hypothetical presence of manuscripts in Kela is based on a comparison of sources [13] At the end of the nineteenth century,

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[12] Again, Camara's information is mainly based on hearsay his only cited source is the thesis of Namankoumba Kouyate, a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure who claims to have seen Arabic manuscripts in Kela in 1967, but who reveals nothing about the content of these documents Camara does not specify the basis for his further assertions that the *Sunjata* manuscript was completed at the end of the nineteeth century, is written in Maninke using the Arabic alphabet, and is read by Lansine before he teaches his pupils

[13] I am grateful to Walter Van Beek, University of Utrecht, for suggesting this argument

marabouts in various parts of the Sudan wrote down local history (Bulman, infra). Some of these manuscripts contain versions of the *Sunjata* epic, but these texts are rather short and incomplete. If there was a text in Kela, this is the kind that it would be. Camara suggests that the kumatigi embellishes the written text in order to give his public the impression that he is performing in an oral tradition. However, the length, consistency, and personal variation in the Kela performances, one of which Camara himself helped record (Ly-Tall et al. 1987; Jansen et al. 1995), suggest that they are in no way influenced by any local manuscript which may exist (and I do not believe that one does).

The Final Question: What is Recited in the Kamabolon?

Having now provided some sense of who the Kela Jabate are and how they deal with the Sunjata epic and its ancillary fasaw, we can return to their performances during the septennial Kamabolon ceremony. As already noted, these recitations cannot be recorded electronically nor are outsiders even allowed into the sacred hut to hear them clearly. Instead, observers such as the informants of Germaine Dieterlen and Marcel Griaule in 1954, Claude Meillassoux in 1968, Seydou Camara in 1982, and myself in 1997 have had to spend a long night seated outside and at some distance from the Kamabolon, relying on memory and subsequent writing to gain some idea of what was being recited inside the building. Despite these handicaps, I could hear some parts of the text quite easily (Jansen 1999) and, by comparing them with new information on the 1954 Dieterlen-Griaule project, can claim to have a reasonably good idea of what is actually said.

In order to make sense of what information we have, it is first necessary to consider the critical function of the Kamabolon reroofing ceremony as an ideological statement of the way society should be ordered. At the center of this whole process is the link between the Jabaté and the political leadership of the Keita from Kangaba, another topic, on which more research still must be done. During the rehearsals (see P1) and the ceremony itself, which lasts from circa from 10 p.m. to sunrise, the griots spend most of their time on Sunjata and his companions, preceded by stories about the Mande ancestors in Mecca. The last element was absent in the performances P1-3 that I witnessed and/or recorded, but were important in P4 and P5. One of the reasons that the ceremony lasts so much longer than the performances that have been recorded (by Ly-Tall and myself) is that the griot often pauses, gives the word to another person or adds fasaw to the narration. We see such practices in P1-3, and I observed them in those portions of the 1997 Kamabolon which I could hear clearly.

The most controversial argument made by Camara along with Dieterlen (1955) and Meillassoux (1968), is their insistence that one of the major items recited during the Kamabolon ceremony is the Mande creation myth. Even before I had any direct information on this matter, it seemed impossible to me for Kela Jabate griots to perform such a narrative. I never heard them discuss it, presumably because it is not part of a political discourse like the epic of Sunjata. Ganay's publication (1995: 137–65) of the text actually recorded (however im-

perfectly) at Kangaba in 1954, as well as my own observations in 1997 confirm this inference. The "creation story" recited in these cases is much like the opening of Kele Monson Diabatés Radio Mali version reported by Bird (infra), i.e., it is based on the Book of Genesis via the Quran and deals with Adam and Eve et al. rather than the ur-Mande ancestors of Dieterlen's account (1955).

The Dieterlen text, with its discourse of reproduction rather than political power and the central role of Faro, the water spirit who is known to many groups in and around Kangaba, might be expected to have another local base, under the sponsorship of the autochthonous Camara lineages. In the classical Mande manner, these latter are given the designation of "dugukolotigiw" ("earth chiefs") in contrast to the politically dominant Keita who are "dugutigiw" ("village chiefs"). However, the preliminary research of Ralph Austen (1996) suggests that this is not the case, implying that Dieterlen's entire construction of a Mande creation myth is based, at best, upon Dogon rather than Kangaba research (van Beek and Jansen 1999).

I also disagree with Camara's further assertion (infra) that the Kamabolon recitations normally conclude with the history of the Manden after the time of Sunjata. Of course this is a subject about which the Jabate enjoy talking, but such information does not have the special status of the Sunjata epic. Kanku Madi did use such material at the end of one of the recorded performances witnessed by Camara (Ly-Tall et al. 1987; see also Austen, infra). I also heard such material in the last rehearsal before the 1997 Kamabolon ceremony, but it was absent from the performance at the actual ceremony. Again, my argument is that these stories do not form part of the same political discourse as the epic.

The arguments in the present section deal mainly with what is *not* recited inside the Kamabolon rather than what is actually stated. However I do believe that the recordings by Ly-Tall et al. (1987) and myself (Jansen et al. 1995 and supra) as well as my 1997 observations (Jansen 1999) also give a good indication of what *is* said. My major point is that any convincing account of Kela Jabate griot performance must be firmly grounded in the kind of direct observation of their social context that I have attempted to provide.

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