

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Whose Hero? Reinventing Epic in French West African Literature

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6vz9618c>

### Author

Repinecz, Jonathon

### Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Whose Hero? Reinventing Epic in French West African Literature

by

Jonathon Repinecz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

French

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Karl Brito  
Professor Soraya Tlatli  
Professor Charles Briggs

Fall 2013

Whose Hero? Reinventing Epic in French West African Literature

Copyright 2013

by

Jonathon Repinecz

## Abstract

## Whose Hero? Reinventing Epic in French West African Literature

by

Jonathon Repinecz

Doctor of Philosophy in French

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Karl Britto, Chair

This dissertation explores the relationship between oral and written literature through the lens of epic. Springing from an engagement with scholarship that has defined and defended the notion of an African epic, it seeks to reevaluate the relevance of this category in the case of West African literature in French. While some critics have argued that the concept of epic is too Eurocentric to be relevant to African narrative traditions, most believe that to renounce the idea of an “African epic” is to stifle comparative literature, and possibly even to reproduce the trope of a Dark Continent too primitive to produce anything great. At the same time, scholars of francophone literature regularly rely on the notion of an “epic” dimension in some contemporary texts. However, such studies too frequently conform to Mikhail Bakhtin’s vision of this dimension as a grandiose but flat world of ancient heroes, utterly removed from the evolving concerns of the present—which belong to the realm of the novel.

This study both draws on and challenges scholarship within these conversations in order to propose a more innovative reading of West African oral traditional narratives that we call epic, as well as their place in francophone writing. The inherently oral and performance-specific element of West African heroic narrative is a crucial motivating factor for its contemporary reincarnations in French-language literature. Rather than “flattening” the genre of epic, as Bakhtin and other critics have done, by framing it in terms of European points of reference, conservative group identities, or a navitist return to authenticity, African literature in French channels the critical reflexivity of oral heroic narrative: traditional material constantly reinvents itself in ways that are self-reflexive, adaptable to “modern” concerns, and indeed capable of offering social criticism in the present. For this reason, major African writers—specifically Amadou Hampâté Bâ of Mali, Ahmadou Kourouma of Ivory Coast, and Boubacar Boris Diop of Senegal—weave these traditions into their writing as a way of reimagining the relevance of precolonial discourse genres in the postcolonial world. A recurring goal of their novels is, for example, to challenge received interpretations of oral heroic narrative and to draw new inspiration from them regarding issues like contemporary politics, gender roles, and intergenerational relations. They also open up important theoretical questions, such as what it means to criticize the very category of “tradition” from within a “traditional” space. This strategy of rewriting allows us to think the epic-novel paradigm as depending not just on rupture, as much literary theory has emphasized, but also on continuity.

The first two chapters of this study explore the category of West African epic from the point of view of colonial and postcolonial literary history and anthropology, while the final two

as well as the conclusion examine how this category is mobilized in the literary work of the individual writers mentioned above: Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin* (1973) and posthumous memoirs *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul* (1991) and *Oui mon commandant!* (1994) in Chapter Three; Ahmadou Kourouma's political-historical novelistic trilogy, consisting of *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968), *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990), and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) in Chapter Four; and Boubacar Boris Diop's Wolof-language novel *Doomi Goolo* (2003), adapted into French as *Les Petits de la Guenon* (2009), in the conclusion. In general, the discursive shift that is traced over time leads away from epic as "usable past"—that is, as an interpretation of history that serves political ends—to a critical consciousness of this usability. The authors in question specifically try to reorient heroic narrative away from its generally understood function of legitimating existing power structures and transmitting dominant ideology, using it instead to articulate critiques and alternatives to these. They also draw attention to the often dangerous mobilizations of epic discourse, which involve notions of authenticity and heroism, made by political elites.

*Contents*

Acknowledgements		ii
Introduction	<i>How can we Read African Epic?</i>	1
Chapter One	<i>“This Half-Black Iliad”: Epic and the Politics of Comparison</i>	10
Chapter Two	<i>Uncertain Heroisms: The Politics of Performance and Interpretation</i>	33
Chapter Three	<i>Fetishes of Empire: Complex Historicities in the Writings of Amadou Hampâté Bâ</i>	53
Chapter Four	<i>“A Hero is Not Welcome”: Imagined Traditionalities in Ahmadou Kourouma’s Political-Historical Trilogy</i>	76
Conclusion	<i>“The Tales of Tomorrow”: Toward a Futurist Vision of Tradition</i>	93
References		103

## Acknowledgements

It would be impossible to name everyone who is deserving of my thanks. Throughout my years at Berkeley and my time abroad, a great many people have contributed in a multitude of ways to the completion of this dissertation. My apologies to anyone I may have missed here.

I am grateful above all to the committee that has accompanied me on each step in the completion of this task: Karl Britto, my advisor, for his extremely insightful readings, attention to detail, and unwavering reliability; Soraya Tlatli, for her thoughtful feedback, especially on all matters theoretical; and Charles Briggs, whose seminar on “Postcolonial Practices of Folklore” largely inspired this project in the first place, and who has never stopped encouraging me to expand my intellectual horizons.

Many colleagues have contributed comments, readings, rebuttals, and discussions as my writing unfolded. The faculty of the UC Berkeley French department have my eternal gratitude. I have been endlessly fortunate to count on friends there and elsewhere for intellectual stimulation and collaboration, as well as support of all kinds, both big and small: Livi Yoshioka-Maxwell, Tobias Warner, Maria Vendetti, Ivy Mills, Fatoumata Seck, Celine Piser, Caitlin Scholl, Juan Caballero, Anna Skrzypczynska, Maya Smith, Sarah Zimmerman, Matthew Smith, and Matthew Evans, among others. I thank Justin Ward for his help with translation from German.

This study owes a great deal to my Wolof teachers, especially Paap Alsaan Sow and Assane Diallo, whose linguistic expertise and patience as educators enabled me not only to read *Doomi Goolo* in the original, but also to survive in Senegal. My analysis of this novel also benefitted from the razor-sharp feedback of the Wolof Literature Working Group. *Jërë ngeen jëf.*

I must also express thankfulness to professors from farther afield who have sharpened my thought by generously giving of their time: David Conrad of SUNY Ogdensburg, Mathieu Hilgers of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, and Bassirou Dieng, Samba Dieng, and Amadou Ly of the *Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar*.

The hospitality of many friends during my peregrinations throughout the U.S., Europe, and Africa deserves special thanks. I am grateful to Brian Balingit, Maureen Orda, and Julien Lafrance-Vanasse in the Bay Area; Julien Marciliac and Christopher Whitehead in Paris; Amath Sy and his family, Anta Fall, Christophe Mbodj, Jacqueline Manga, Amadou Diallo, and the Samb family in Senegal; and Anushka Ratnayake in Mali.

Thanks are due to the French Department, Center for African Studies, and Townsend Center for the Humanities at UC Berkeley, which have graciously and consistently supported my research abroad. The French Department at Reed College is also deserving of gratitude for the moral support it offered during the final stages of this enterprise.

The assistance in research and documentation provided by a number of institutions warrants acknowledgment. These include the *Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar*, the *Institut Fondamental de l’Afrique Noire*, the Senegalese National Archives, and the West African Resource Center in Senegal; and the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, *Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer*, *Institut National de l’Audiovisuel*, and *Bibliothèque de Recherches Africaines* in France.

Finally, I have no words to thank my parents, Martin and Yolanda Repinecz, and my brother, Martin, for being there for me, through everything.

## Introduction

### *How can we Read African Epic?*

Any historical look at modern African literature has a dilemma to confront. Do we assign it a principally European genealogy, considering writing in French or English as it moves through an arc of colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial intellectual contexts? Do we indulge in the “*bien pensant* platitudes” of connecting it “to some generalized roots in ‘the oral tradition’” (Austin 1999b: 82)? Or is there a road less traveled, one that would allow us to account for the intersections between oral tradition and specific intellectual and literary uses of it? While this problem is hardly the only one we face when studying African writing, or even really as simple as I have just posed it,<sup>1</sup> it is an inevitable one. Eileen Julien’s analysis of “the question of orality” (1992) laid out the ideological stakes and pitfalls of leaning too far in the direction either of African orality or European writing: we risk rehashing old stereotypes of diffusionism and primitivism if we understand literature as a Western export, but we also risk essentialism and nativism if we declare that the oral tradition is the “real” source, conscious or not, of literary inspiration in Africa. Julien argued for an approach between what Andrew Apter has called “the Scylla of tradition and the Charybdis of empire” (Apter 2007: 2) based on a more or less explicit textual choice: some works written by African authors choose to engage with oral forms, and some do not. Individual cases should be treated as such, not as fodder for conclusions about the “specificity” of African literature as a whole.

This dissertation project has two overarching goals. The first, undertaken in Chapter One, is to respond to Julien’s approach by proposing a literary history of a single genre of the oral tradition, epic, as it has come to be understood in Africa today—specifically in francophone West Africa, whose national territories, by chance, largely coincide with a zone or “belt” identified as rich in historical epic narrative.<sup>2</sup> While the totality of local genres, narratives, and performances considered to be part of “the African epic”—an invented genre—is limited neither to the western part of the continent, nor to French-speaking countries, nor to historical subject matter, I nevertheless propose that this set of general limitations is a useful one. It demarcates a historically coherent area which has produced an abundant set of discourses on what the nature and significance of epic narrative might be.

Interest in the existence of an oral African epic has been, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inextricably linked to wider questions of historiography and anthropology whose political repercussions continue to be felt in the present. By tracing this interest from colonial ethnographers to postcolonial novelists, I hope to surpass the binary with which I began. The

---

<sup>1</sup> A number of authors have pointed out that the border between written and oral literature is far from clear or stable, and various parts of Africa have their own practices of writing that owe nothing to European colonialism (see for example Ricard 1995). But because the particular dichotomy of “European writing vs. African orality” has been so influential in shaping perceptions of the continent’s literary culture, this study will address it directly.

<sup>2</sup> For theories on the existence of one or more “epic belts” in Africa, see Johnson (1980: 321-2) and Kesteloot and Dieng (1997: 15). Madelénat classifies epics as having subject matter that is either mostly historical—that is, based on real-life figures and events—or mostly mythological (1986). Derive follows this general distinction, noting that West African epics tend to be of the mostly historical variety, with the exception of what Kesteloot and Dieng call “corporative” epics, that is, narratives specifically related to activities such as hunting or fishing, and which may or may not refer to historical events (Derive 2002b: 82; Kesteloot and Dieng 1997: 39-50; see also my discussion of Ahmadou Kourouma’s use of hunting epic in ch. 4).



knowledge of an African epic is itself mediated through European intervention, and the use of this genre, whether by Europeans or Africans or others, is always tied up with political and ideological agendas. Perhaps most importantly, as I argue in Chapter Two, the genre generally referred to as oral African epic, along with its adaptations in writing, provides ways to understand and criticize political realities, including colonialism and its aftermath. When viewed alongside the African novel, these living oral traditions offer a way to bridge, even undermine, the chasm that is classically seen as separating epic and novel. Such a view, theorized first by critics like Georg Lukács (1968 [1920]) and Mikhail Bakhtin (2002 [1981]), has been very influential, and is too often left unquestioned by students of African literature. More recent literary scholarship has tried to theorize epic dimensions in the novel (Moretti 1996, Dimock 2006, Fusillo 2006), but its authors always frame epic as a genre of antiquity on which the novel acts, rather than a living tradition which can work with the novel by reflecting critically on recent history and contemporary events. This last point brings me to the second goal of this project: to add a small contribution to the debate about how to understand indigenous traditions of critical thought—a debate which has included such well-known interlocutors as Wole Soyinka (1990), the ethnophilosophers, and their detractors (Mudimbe 1988, Appiah 1992: ch. 5). More recently, Andrew Apter’s 2007 book *Beyond Words* brings multiple older lines of research together in order to examine at length the capacity of various African ritual and performance genres to exercise critical agency, without labeling such potential “ethnophilosophy.” I seek to carry Apter’s insights into dialogue with written literature: rather than directly heeding his call for further explorations of critical agency through studies in ethnopracticals, I hope to understand how writers working in French choose to explore the critical potential of West African heroic narrative, which has a hybrid history involving many centuries of oral transmission on the ground, shifting ideological paradigms, and multicultural practices of collection, writing, and rewriting. My approach, which emphasizes a literary-historical and functionalist approach to the use of oral genres in writing, differs from previous research on the formal (Kane 1982, Julien 1993) and linguistic (Zabus 2007 [1991]) uses of orality in African literature.

Given the complex literary history of the idea of an African epic, I use the words “epic,” “epic narrative,” and “heroic narrative” synonymously and in a generally inclusive sense throughout this study. While I discuss in Chapter One a number of ways in which scholars have sought to delineate what ought to be included and excluded in the term “African epic,” it is not my goal to offer a rigorous generic definition of this term myself. Rather, I describe how the genre concept of epic was imported into Africa, how it has been put to use in discussions about Africa’s place in world literature, and what is at stake in those discussions. For me, African epic refers to oral traditional narratives of heroic subject matter; the narratives I discuss here generally claim to recount historical events, that is, things that really happened. In analyzing the relationship between epic and novel, I refer to novels’ use of or reliance on these kinds of oral narratives through a variety of literary strategies. In a similar way, my use of the term “tradition,” which I discuss at some length in Chapter Two, also focuses on the constructedness of this category as an ambiguous and contested act of interpretation rather than as an intrinsic and undisputed quality of cultural objects. Here I follow the lines of scholarship that have developed on invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and performance poetics (Bauman and Briggs 1990). My reflections on the inseparability of transmission and innovation

in traditional discourse, a theme which recurs in every chapter of this study, is indebted to Karin Barber's anthropological approach to text and genre (2007).<sup>3</sup>

My intervention aims to conduct a more innovative reading of the West African oral narratives that we call epic, as well as their place in francophone writing, than has previously been done. As I argue in Chapter Two, literary criticism all too often deploys the category of epic in a way that flattens it as the novel's other. By putting my readings in dialogue with studies of oral heroic narrative from anthropology and folklore studies, I hope, in a gesture echoing Christopher Miller's in *Theories of Africans* (1990), to clarify the work that these narratives perform both as items of oral tradition and when they are called upon in francophone writing. Miller has already identified the problematic nature of using anthropology to understand African literature, given the former's long history of attempting to produce a knowable, colonizable other. To read African literary texts in a way informed by ethnography is to risk putting them in "a ghetto, a jail of difference, a relegation to quaintness" (Miller 1990: 24). While recognizing this risk, my own turn to ethnographic thought is, on one hand, constantly aware of that discipline's historical complicity in colonial governance and in the invention of politically useful categories—like "epic," which allowed administrators to understand African cultures in terms of a hierarchy of civilizations at which Europe was always located at the top (*infra* ch. 1), and even "tradition," which colonial thought imagined as static and in opposition to the light of its own modernity (Dirks 1990, Briggs and Naithani 2012). At the same time, my recourse to anthropology is intended precisely to remedy overly simplistic accounts of the epic-novel divide in literary studies. It is not just that the novel draws on a memory of ancient heroes in order to incorporate them into its all-encompassing heteroglossia (Bakhtin 2002 [1981]), but that it channels the critical reflexivity which is already present and continues to be transmitted in living oral genres, including traditional epic. As such, anthropology need not serve only to objectify an exoticized other—to look at Africans "like insects," as the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène suggested in his well-known objection to Jean Rouch's ethnographic cinema (Busch and Annas 2008: 5). Instead, I draw on scholarship from anthropology in order to question and complicate literary understandings of how oral and written genres interact with each other.

Nevertheless, the engagement with oral tradition which I have undertaken in the context of a broader study of written literature is limited by its dependence on documentation—transcriptions and translations—as opposed to fieldwork and direct observation. Such an approach may seem, at first glance, to presume that a single strategy of reading could account for both oral and written texts in spite of their very different contexts of communication and consumption; that has long been a major objection to the term "oral literature" (Rosenberg 1987: 74-5), which, it should be mentioned, is itself a colonial invention (Kavwahireri 2004). Far from conflating or flattening written and oral narratives into a single kind of literary object for reasons of expediency, I have elected to focus on ways in which such narratives align, overlap, and work together, while acknowledging their differences. If anything, an explicit methodology of "reading" oral and written literary forms together is needed, since the specificity of the oral has not only been studied at great length (Diagne 2005), but overemphasized. Christopher Miller's critique of Jack Goody, perhaps the best-known theorist of orality, is worth recalling here: no matter how much Goody tries to escape the ethnocentric "Grand Dichotomy" of primitive and modern, he reproduces that dichotomy through sweeping claims regarding intrinsic

---

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I approach the particular genre of African epic as an invented construct, whereas Barber is content to summarize the criteria that have been proposed as conventions of this genre (2007: 48-58).

differences between oral and writing cultures (Miller 1990: 105-6, Goody 1977). What Goody calls “the consequences of literacy” (Goody and Watt 1968), one of which is supposedly fiction itself (Goody 2006: 15-16)<sup>4</sup>, distinguishes the complexity of writing cultures from the limited scope of oral ones: “Goody sees literacy as the factor that, almost unaided, made possible science, philosophy, and empire” (Barber 2007: 68).

Rather than further expounding the consequences of literacy, I follow other scholars in contending that oral narratives, like written ones, deserve to be studied from an aesthetic—that is, literary—point of view (Herskovits 1946, Camara 1978, Okpewho 1979 and 1992, Finnegan 1988: ch. 4). The fact that writers often espouse a literate relationship to both orality and tradition supports this approach. The Malian Amadou Hampâté Bâ, though his interest in oral tradition sprang from listening to the stories of his elders as a child, spent much of his career collecting, translating, and publishing oral narratives of different kinds. While it is well known that Camara Laye of Guinea wrote a “novelized” version of the *Sunjata* epic in his book *Maître de la parole* (1978), it is little remembered that he undertook an academically rigorous collection and translation of a performance of that epic as part of a doctoral dissertation in the 1960s (Camara 1971). The Ivorian Ahmadou Kourouma said in one interview that, before writing each of his novels, he imbued himself with Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s strategies for writing the sounds of oral French by rereading *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Calmettes 2003); in the same interview, as well as in another, he alluded to his reliance on “livres de proverbes africains” (Chemla 1999: 29). Finally, to end this far from exhaustive list, Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop’s Wolof-language novel *Doomi Goolo* (2003), adapted into French as *Les Petits de la Guenon* (2009), attempts to construct, and intervene in, a Wolof literary canon that is simultaneously written and oral, inclusive both of Moussa Ka’s Wolofal poetry<sup>5</sup> and of many oral legends and heroic episodes, a number of which are documented in Bassirou Dieng’s bilingual *L’Épopée du Kajoor* (1993). Moving in the other direction, Diop has recently made the original Wolof version of his novel available in a downloadable audio format in hopes of reaching the rather large Senegalese public who cannot read it in a book.

The fact is that the oral, the traditional, and the written move in and out of each other. Though they are not the same thing, we must ask not only how oral tradition and written literature are different, but how they can overlap as literary objects. Oral and written texts may be analyzed alongside each other as texts—that is, units of discourse marked as detachable from their context:

Paul Ricoeur spoke of textual “autonomy”—the establishment of textual forms that in some sense have an independent existence—as being above all the achievement of writing [Ricoeur 1976]. [...] A study of the entextualisation of oral genres, however, suggests that writing is only an extension of processes already well established and flourishing without it. Fixing words, attaching them to material objects, making them object-like in themselves, making a mark, constructing vast networks of linked and mutually-suggestive formulations, creating forms that others can recognize, appropriate and inhabit, are what “oral cultures” do. (Barber 2007: 100-1)

<sup>4</sup> Goody (2006), drawing on Finnegan (1970) as an authority while ignoring the decades of disagreeing scholarship that that particular source provoked (*infra* ch. 1), claims that oral forms of fiction and epic narrative only exist in Africa thanks to the influence of written Islamic culture. However, he offers no evidence to support this conjecture. My description of research on the shift *from* pre-Islamic *to* Islamic themes in West African heroic narrative (*infra* ch. 2; see especially B. Dieng 2003), an area which Goody also ignores, should be sufficient to seriously question his assignment of epic and fiction to the sole influence of writing.

<sup>5</sup> Wolofal refers to Wolof written in Arabic characters. See Warner (2012: 98 n. 4).

Barber's articulation of the entextualization argument (Urban and Silverstein 1996) builds on the older paradigm of performance poetics in folklore studies, which had sought as early as the 1970s to shift the focus in that field away from abstract corpuses or typologies of material to specific performances which contextualize such material in a particular event (Bauman 1971 and 1986). In fact, in a way, the change of emphasis heralded by performance poetics widened the gap between folklore and written literature by deemphasizing transposable approaches like structuralism or psychoanalysis. Barber's use of entextualization theory makes possible a different kind of bridge between oral and written. The ability to study oral performances not only as events, in which an extremely variable set of dynamic, emergent processes are unfolding in time, but also as fixed, marked texts, suggests a common space of textuality that is shared by written and oral forms, thereby opening the door to a practice of reading written and documented oral texts side by side. It is true that studying an oral performance as text, especially in the goal of comparing it to other texts, may not take into account every aspect of the total performance event or, for that matter, the entire range of possible iterations of a given tradition. And yet, a text-focused methodology is appropriate here, since I am not trying to make wide claims about entire corpuses of oral narrative or about total performance events, but rather, about the single issue of how critical reflexivity is exercised in performance, and how that function is taken up in written literature. Critical reflexivity is articulated in individual performances of a traditional narrative, often depending on nuances in a performer's use of a known episode that help it reflect problems in society—just as an author's nuances of word choice help a written narrative refer critically to the outside social world in complex ways. This concurrent study of oral and written forms necessarily uses the referential dimension of language—and therefore, text—as its primary object of study, highlighting, for example, such moments as when a performer is criticizing a ruler while seeming to praise him, or moments in an epic narrative that work to problematize gender or religious norms. Even so, this approach need not neglect context, including relevant aspects of the performance event, when necessary to understand a text. In the case of oral texts, I take into account the embeddedness of the performance in the social world: the status and roles of the performer and audience, local genre concepts, ideological function, transmission over time, and narrative variability. More than this, the practice of collecting oral texts in order to write them down is itself imbued with ideological and political interests, as the colonial period made eminently clear. Thus, two separate acts of entextualization—first at the moment of the performance, and second in the act of collection—must often be taken into account. Yet another act of entextualization happens when an author like Boubacar Boris Diop rewrites an oral legend in order to make it mean something new in the context of *Doomi Golo*, or when Ahmadou Kourouma stages a subversive performance event in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. In the case of written or published texts, I attend as well to the circulation of documents among a reading public, particularly in Chapters One and Two.

This methodology of contextually informed side-by-side reading does not aim to produce an in-depth study of a particular oral tradition, which would have required recording, transcribing, and analyzing one or more performances.<sup>6</sup> Many such works of excellent quality

---

<sup>6</sup> Hale (1990) offers an unusual study not only of a single oral tradition which he collected and translated, namely the epic of Askia Mohammed, but also its written adaptations through Arabic-language chronicles and Yambo Oulougem's novel *Le Devoir de violence* (1968). I draw inspiration from his methodology of side-by-side reading, but my focus is wider, so as to grasp a diversity of narratives from several different (but related) West African cultural contexts.

have been and continue to be published; my indebtedness to them and admiration of their importance is, I hope, evident. Indeed, I first became interested in the idea of an African epic through the work of scholars in Dakar,<sup>7</sup> who have produced numerous books and theses documenting particular Senegalese oral narrative traditions. From there I became acquainted with the wider field of studies in West African oral traditions, particularly the field of Mande studies, from which the *Sunjata* epic is never absent. Often hovering between anthropological and literary emphases, a voluminous scholarship has examined issues of genre, the changing status of griots<sup>8</sup> and other performers, and the social function of oral literature.<sup>9</sup> Rather than plunging into one of those currents directly, my goal has been precisely to open up my home field of francophone literature by putting it into dialogue with these lines of scholarship, in order to better grasp the ways in which the written literary text may rely on and draw inspiration from oral narrative genres.

The first two chapters of this study explore the category of West African epic from the point of view of colonial and postcolonial literary history and anthropology, while the final two as well as the conclusion examine how this category is mobilized in the literary work of individual writers: Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Boubacar Boris Diop. In general, the discursive shift that I trace over time leads away from epic as “usable past”—that is, as an interpretation of history that serves political ends—to a critical consciousness of this usability. The authors in question specifically try to reorient heroic narrative away from its generally understood function of legitimating existing power structures and transmitting dominant ideology (Seydou 1982 and 1988), using it instead to articulate critiques and alternatives to these. They also draw attention to the often dangerous mobilizations of epic discourse, which involve notions of authenticity and heroism, made by political elites.

Chapter One traces the history of the idea of an African epic from French colonial writing through contemporary academic discourse. Rather than being introduced by Djibril Tamsir Niane’s *Soundjata* in 1960, as is commonly assumed, the concept of an African epic has a long history in colonial and anticolonial writing. Amateur ethnologists and folklore collectors in French West Africa, many of whom were also colonial administrators, often discussed heroic narratives that they collected or read about in Africa, comparing them to European *chansons de geste* or the Homeric poems, in order to locate African populations on an evolutionist scale ranging from primitive to civilized. From the 1930s on, these discussions both informed and, to some degree, inspired militant black intellectuals to appropriate the category of epic as a heroicization of anticolonial resistance. The crucial question of the epic genre changed from, “How can we classify and govern primitive peoples?” to, “What models can we hold up for a

---

<sup>7</sup> I am thinking specifically of the work of Bassirou Dieng, Samba Dieng, Amadou Ly, Lilyan Kesteloot, and their students, all of whom have been associated with the department of *Lettres Modernes* at the University of Dakar. The Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf, who emphasizes the problematic nature of classifying African heroic genres as “epic,” identifies these scholars as constituting a “Dakar school” of literary studies (Diouf 1991: 30).

<sup>8</sup> A griot is a bard, charged in many West African societies with remembering and performing oral tradition, whose profession and social status are inherited. Many Africanist scholars have distanced themselves from the word *griot* because of its traceability to European travel writing, preferring designations used in particular African languages, such as the Wolof *gewel* or the Bamana *jeli* (see, for example, Conrad and Frank 1995). However, since my study is transethnic in its scope, I use the word *griot* freely, for lack of a better alternative.

<sup>9</sup> See ch. 1 for a review of this scholarship.

new Africa?” On the other hand, some writers rejected this use of heroic narrative, seeing it as always serving an ideal of oppression rather than liberation.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter Two identifies and analyzes one important function of West African oral epic as social criticism. Rather than merely serving as a monument to a fossilized, conservative past which “modern” literature can reinvent or play with, the living oral epic tradition is itself adaptable to concerns of today’s world. Specific performances of heroic narrative are full of ideological complexity and possess a certain freedom of interpretation through which a particular performer can offer critical insights about culture and politics in the present. This analysis examines the ambiguity of issues like gender and religious conflict in specific narratives (the Mande *Sunjata* and the Fulani narratives *Boubou Ardo* and *Omar Tall*), as well as the politics of applying epic discourse to 20th-century national politics in the cases of Mali and Guinea. I finally look at the particular case of a Malian epic performer named Wâa Kamissoko, who regularly intertwined critiques of oral tradition into his performances of it (Morales Farias 1993). This analysis enables a redefinition of the relationship between the genres of epic and novel as based not just on rupture, but on a common function: both have a strong interest in social criticism in the present.

Chapters Three and Four pursue the exploration of this continuity, each one focusing on a single author who mobilizes oral heroic narrative in his writing. More than placing such traditions in the service of ideals of authenticity or nativism, Amadou Hampâté Bâ and Ahmadou Kourouma weave traditional epic narrative into their writing in French as a way of questioning and adapting the relevance of tradition in the postcolonial world. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from an oral heroic narrative as a point of departure into the author in question—taken respectively, from the Bamana narrative of Segu (Kesteloot 1993) and a Malinke hunter’s hero song entitled *Bilali of Faransekila* (Conrad 1989).

Although Amadou Hampâté Bâ is generally seen as a conservative defender of dying precolonial ways of life, Chapter Three argues that this writer actually offers a complex and at times ambivalent study of these. His best-known text, *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1973), especially when read alongside his posthumous memoirs (*Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* [1991] and *Oui mon commandant!* [1994]), offers a detailed examination of the changeability of traditions and their susceptibility to political manipulation, that is, their ability to mean what a speaker wants them to mean in the present. This malleability of meaning is embodied in the character of Wangrin, a cunning black colonial interpreter who alone can shuttle in and out of several competing cultural codes. The possibility for such a person, who is characterized in the text according to the folkloric stock figures of trickster and epic hero, to use culture as a means of deceit enables Bâ to formulate a critique of the systemic corruption of French West Africa. Wangrin’s epic-ness is one “regime of historicity,” or way of experiencing time (Hartog 2012 [2003]), that intertwines and clashes with the other regimes at work in French West Africa, which together produce the text’s vision of a thickened present (Harootunian 2007).

Chapter Four studies how Ahmadou Kourouma’s political-historical novelistic trilogy (*Monnè, outrages et défis* [1990], *Les Soleils des Indépendances* [1968], and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* [1998]), which spans the history of West Africa from anticolonial resistance to postcolonial dictatorships, looks to traditional heroic narrative as a genre from within which to

---

<sup>10</sup> Here I include Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le Devoir de violence* (1968), for although it “has borrowed the content and the form” of an epic tradition, its goal is to “attack the values” that the author sees as stemming from that tradition (Hale 1990: 135), rather than channeling a socially critical perspective from the tradition on which it relies. I develop this point in chapter 1, but do not analyze this novel in depth as part of my broader argument.

condemn postcolonial violence and to satirize nostalgic, backwards-looking attachment to a traditionality seen as truly authentic. These novels' criticism of failed or despotic heroes alternates between a call to leave the past behind altogether, including the authoritarian power structures associated with stagnant or closed forms of tradition, and imaginations of a new, more open traditionality which is neither rigid nor incompatible with progressive thought and historical change.

Finally, by way of conclusion, I offer a preliminary study of Boubacar Boris Diop that seeks to extend the itinerary traced through previous chapters by looking toward the future. While the whole of this study problematizes the reification of tradition as demanding a slavish attachment to the past, Diop elaborates what I see as a specifically futurist aesthetic of traditionality. His novel *Doomi Golo/Les Petits de la guenon*, which I examine in both Wolof and French, strongly thematizes the inventedness of Senegalese oral traditions and calls for their reinvention in order to help imagine a more democratic society in the future, liberated from forms of domination that depend on gender and age. In this, Diop's novel reflects directly on the embeddedness of traditional narrative within structures of power—a theme that unites all other chapters in this study—and indeed imagines a separation of what we might call tradition-as-narrative from tradition-as-power.

While Diop is the most explicit author on the inventedness of tradition, this theme runs like a thread throughout the dissertation. The question “Whose hero?” is crucial, for the epic hero, like the narratives about him (or, occasionally, her), is always a contested product of collective memory. Rather than claiming epic heroes as symbols of African authenticity, I study how such claims to authenticity have been formulated, questioned, and rethought. Jean-Louis Triaud, also working in a West African context, describes collective memory as “autant de recours et d’invocations à des passés à la fois hérités, reconstruits, imaginés, fabriqués, sacralisés” (1999: 10). The processes of excavating memory must be carried out with careful attention to that which is invented:

Contrairement à une lecture trop simple, ces noeuds de la mémoire<sup>11</sup> ne sont pas de simples résurgences d’un passé occulté par la colonisation, des concrétions d’une histoire “nativiste,” des “bulles de passé” qui ressurgiraient brusquement à l’air libre après de longs temps de discrétion obligée. La part d’invention y est manifeste, et la réappropriation d’inventions européennes n’est pas la moindre. (Triaud 1999: 10)

“La part d’invention” includes, but is not limited to, the classic scenario of indigenous traditions being invented and codified by the colonial imaginary (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983): because change and innovation are at the heart of the transmission of traditional narratives, a certain inventedness is always inscribed in traditions themselves. While practitioners of traditional narrative may claim strict accuracy and authenticity for their performance, as the griot Wa Kamissoko did when interrogated by scholars about details of his *Sunjata* that they thought might be particular to him (*infra* ch. 2), the ability that performers have to critically readapt traditions to new situations blurs, over time, the line between innovation and invention. This

---

<sup>11</sup> Triaud is alluding explicitly here to Pierre Nora’s concept of “lieux de mémoire” (Nora 1984), which he finds both inspiring and limited in its nostalgic orientation, for it glorified French nationhood and elided colonial memory as much as possible (Triaud 1999: 10). The term “noeuds de mémoire” more recently became the key to another critique of Nora, this time focusing on memory as functioning through multidirectional networks rather than isolated sites (Rothberg 2010).

fundamental creativity, this openness to the new, is to an even greater degree the motor of written literature. It is captured as a key theme by the African novels I study here, which lay out in detail what is at stake in the act of inventing and reinventing heroes and traditions. My study of this interaction between the written, the oral, and the traditional therefore looks both backward to the colonial invention of an African epic and forward to the futurist reinvention of it signaled by Boubacar Boris Diop.



## Chapter One

*“This Half-Black Iliad”: Epic and the Politics of Comparison*

The idea of an epic in Africa has been generating controversy for decades. When we look back at the debate from today’s vantage point—a debate which has engaged historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and literary scholars, not to mention literary writers—a few key moments are usually remembered: Africans used to be considered too primitive to produce great poetry that could be compared to European masterpieces; D.T. Niane’s publication of *Soundiata, ou l’épopée mandingue* in 1960 marked a major discursive shift by popularizing that text as an epic in the same right as the *Iliad* or *Gilgamesh*; Ruth Finnegan, a scholar of African oral literature, famously argued in 1970 that “epic hardly seems to exist in sub-Saharan Africa” (Finnegan 1970: 108), triggering a wave of rebuttals that has made her original position all but impossible to hold today. Nevertheless, the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf argued in 1991 that literary scholars at the University of Dakar—a prolific source of scholarship on West African epic—had constructed, even invented, this genre as an object of study by relentlessly highlighting its perceived proximity to the poems of Homer (Diouf 1991). In spite of this objection, a generation’s worth of scholarly work has proposed lists of criteria to define the African epic on its own terms, including universalizing lists of rules for the epic worldwide, or the “hero,”<sup>12</sup> or lists of features that are limited to specifically African data without reference to Greek models.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, increasing attention has been paid not only to the textual but also to the cognitive, musicological, and performance aspects of epic in Africa.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that the conversation has not yet ended: a very lively debate arose as recently as 2011 over Jan Jansen’s claim that some academics apply the term “epic” too liberally in the goal of publishing marketable narratives and furthering their own careers.<sup>15</sup>

Jansen may have overstated his case, but he is right that there is more at stake in the idea of “epic” than disinterested commentary on literary forms. Scholars of oral tradition who work with living heroic narrative in various parts of the world—such as West Africa, which has been identified as particularly rich in such material—have had to confront, and often repudiate, the great amount of European literary baggage associated with the term “epic” as they apply it to other texts and other continents. But in an important way, such scholarship treads on sensitive ground. For a major piece of this baggage is the notion that the epic genre represents a monument to a people’s greatness from which we moderns can continue to draw inspiration. Thus, to reject the word “epic” in the context of Africa, when it is taken for granted in other parts of the world, risks implying that Africa’s history and heroes are somehow not as admirable as those of other places.

---

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Raglan (1936), Campbell (1949), Dumézil (1968), and Madelénat (1986).

<sup>13</sup> See Okpewho (1979), Johnson (1980 and 1992 [1986]), Seydou (1982 and 1988), Boyer (1982), Kesteloot and Dieng (1997), Johnson et al. (1997), and Belcher (1999a). Karin Barber provides a brief summary of these arguments (2007: 48-58).

<sup>14</sup> See Lord (1960), Boyer (1984 and 1990), and Seydou (1998).

<sup>15</sup> Jansen argues that many fragments presented in anthologies of epic are likely not part of standardized epic traditions at all (2002 and 2004). See the point-by-point refutation of this argument in Conrad (2008, from an issue of *Mande Studies* whose actual appearance was delayed until 2011).

And yet, the concept of an epic genre is, at its origin, a European one. Jean Derive points out that until the nineteenth century, the words *épopée* and *épique* were only applied to the Homeric poems and sometimes other European texts thought to be modeled on them; but with the discovery of comparable genres elsewhere in the world, some of which predate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, European literary critics hypothesized that disparate genres of heroic narrative poetry had originated independently of each other, yet might have some fundamental traits in common (Derive 2002a: 5-7). As such, today's commonly understood notion of "the" epic as a worldwide genre marked by universal rules and found in a great many countries is a product of comparative literature. It was propelled by a desire to explain the perceived proximity of texts from Mesopotamia—and eventually, Japan, India, Central Asia, and various parts of Europe—to the long-known Greek points of reference. The burning question that would evolve over the course of the twentieth century is, "Does Africa have anything to contribute to this transworld genre?"

That question is, of course, itself problematic. It imposes a category theorized by Western scholarship going back to Aristotle's *Poetics* on peoples and practitioners who do not themselves identify with it. David Conrad highlights this non-equivalence between Western and local genre concepts: in the case of terminologies for the *Sunjata* narrative, "it is to the Arabic derivative *tarik* (Ar. *tarikh*)"—which Conrad translates as "the book, the chronicle, the story of the Manden"—"and not to the French *épopée* that has, for the Mande people, accrued the mystery and power conveyed by the indigenous phrase *kuma koro* (ancient speech)" (1999: 189). This overlap, which causes different audiences to prefer either the Western label "epic" or the locally familiar labels *tarik* and *kuma koro* to refer to the same performance object, is all the more noteworthy since other theorists of epic explicitly try to define it in opposition to the genre of the "chronicle"—a possible equivalent of *tarik* (Seydou 1982: 87). Lilyan Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng, who themselves propose a distinction between epic and chronicle, are nonetheless aware of the difficulty of such a gesture:

Plusieurs langues africaines où fleurissent des épopées ne séparent pas ces textes des autres genres narratifs historiques: c'est le cas du peul, du manding, du wolof, du songhaï-zerma, etc., où les chroniques, voire les mythes, seront rangés sous le même vocable: *jaloore, cosaan, daarol, fasa, maana, masalia*. [...] Il y a quelque chose d'artificiel à vouloir "plaquer" sur les civilisations étrangères, les concepts européens, et singulièrement la taxinomie. En fonction de ce principe, on ne devrait parler des genres qu'en utilisant la taxinomie locale propre à l'ethnie concernée... mais ce serait l'arrêt de mort de la littérature comparée! (Kesteloot and Dieng 1997: 29)

On one hand, this discrepancy between universalizing and particularist terminology might seem trivial, given that oral genres have always been studied from a transcultural point of view—one has only to think of the folktale, which is assumed to be everywhere, in spite of the fact that both the notion and the word have a history rooted in 18th-century German romanticism. But the case of epic is more vexed, since it comes with different, and contradictory, connotations. It is the noble genre of Aristotle; for centuries, the Homeric texts have been canonized as the founding texts of Western literature, and, as though in imitation, romantic movements in various European nation-states have also consecrated epic poems as the founding texts of their national literatures—even though, in the case of France, the *Song of Roland* was only discovered by scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In effect, while it may be somewhat artificial to debate the applicability of the word “epic” outside of European literary history, to reject the question altogether on particularist grounds is to exclude Africa from comparative literature and, by extension, to deny it the symbolic capital associated with the heroic feats, relatively advanced civilization, and general prestige associated with the genre for many centuries, now taken for granted in a number of other parts of the world. Because Africa’s historiography is replete with denials of its historicity, or even of its full humanity,<sup>16</sup> and because the epic genre is always tied up in issues of comparability between different civilizations, the question of its existence in Africa has necessarily become entangled with larger struggles over what Kesteloot elsewhere calls “the dignity of the African” (Kesteloot and Mitsch 1993: 11). Dan Ben-Amos’s take on the subject illustrates this thorny problem:

Consequently, the possession of epic poetry had a value in itself, as it testified to the antiquity of both literary creativity and ethnic self-definition of a nation and, thus, enabled a society to take its place as an equal member in the literary-political round table of nations. From such a romantic perspective it is possible to appreciate the severity of the wound that Ruth Finnegan inflicted upon proud Africans and Africanists. Fortunately, like the body cells that rush to heal, scholars have been fast to correct the damaged image, and the research that has followed her remarks has proved her wrong. (1983: 278)

Even in the realm of modern social science, what is at stake is not merely disinterested commentary on literary forms, but a desire to prove the cultural equality of Africa with other parts of the world.

To be fair to Finnegan, she herself intended her doubt of the African epic’s existence “to stimulate debate and not cut it off” (Johnson 1980: 308). Decades later, she addressed the controversy she had ignited in a second edition of her book, *Oral Literature in Africa*:

One of the most famous passages in my original work was its short two-page note, extending from pages 108 to 110, on what turned out to be the uncontrollably emotive subject of epic. This, incredibly, has attracted more debate, criticism, and, dare I say it, misunderstanding than the rest of the book put together [...]. Much has happened since then. Multiple epics have been collected—or at least lengthy poetic texts<sup>17</sup> that can be so described—from many places in Africa, most notably ex-French West Africa. Collections, anthologies, translations and annotated texts abound. Epic now has its place in the corpus of recognized African literature [...] (Finnegan 2012 [1970]: xxxi-ii)

A well-known demonstration of Finnegan’s last point, that the African epic came to be accepted as a canonical genre, is that of René Etiemble, whose 1968 article “Epopée” in *Encyclopaedia Universalis* made no mention of the continent, yet whose 1984 revision did (Bisanswa 2007: 83).

---

<sup>16</sup> Two authors are commonly cited for making this assertion. Around 1830 Hegel claimed that Africa “is no historical part of the world” (2007 [1899]: 99). For Hugh Trevor-Roper, African history is a subject of the future: “But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness” (1963: 871).

<sup>17</sup> This mention of the poetic nature of epic is itself significant, since Finnegan’s original argument had disqualified texts published as “epics” because “these works turn out to be in prose, not verse” (1970: 108). The prose-verse distinction, while itself a culture-bound criterion which is problematic for determining what belongs to an invented worldwide genre, was addressed directly by Johnson, who argued that performances of the *Sunjata* epic are indeed poetic because they contain lines determined by musical accompaniment, rather than the more familiar European concept of meter (1992 [1986]: 7-8).

But the discursive shift which such changes of position signal is politically tinged: for Ben-Amos's "proud Africans and Africanists," the subject is, as Finnegan puts it, "uncontrollably emotive." This politicized aspect of the genre, which makes its existence *necessary* to a certain audience, invites us to repose the question of what an epic is. We can return to the fundamental question of genre studies: is a genre something "in here" or "out there"? That is, is it a set of innate criteria that structure a literary or performance object and allow it to exist, located "in authorial intention, in the work's historical or literary context, [or] in the text itself," or rather something that "readers [or audiences] and their conventions assign to texts" (Beebee 1994: 3)?

One answer to this question may simply be that epic-ness is something an audience *feels*; it engages a subjective sense of intuition which we try to explain in terms of objective certainty. Kesteloot and Dieng point out that specialists of Swahili, Fulani, and even the French *chansons de geste* express having the same gut feeling that they are in the presence of epic in all three cases: put simply, they know it when they hear it (1997: 33-4). From that gut feeling scholars search for an internal logic of commonalities that unite such disparate literary objects. Christiane Seydou describes this reaction most succinctly:

S'il nous est aisé de reconnaître parmi d'autres un texte épique, de façon quasi spontanée, en revanche, définir le genre épique ne semble jamais simple; c'est que cette reconnaissance spontanée se fait surtout à une certaine qualité d'émotion qui sourd de l'épopée; si bien que, lorsqu'on veut tenter de donner une définition de celle-ci, on se trouve assailli par des souvenirs d'émotions éthiques et esthétiques, par des impressions plus affectives qu'intellectuelles [...] Nous verrons par la suite que, loin de chercher à nous libérer de cet effet de l'épopée, nous devons au contraire y reconnaître un signe; car c'est peut-être là ce qui en révèle la fonction et en justifie toute la mise en forme. (1982: 84)

As such, the desire to discover the rules that govern the form and function of epic across distant cultures springs from an emotional reaction which one needs to account for in a meaningful way. The approach of Seydou and others is, under the premise that something in the text triggers the reaction, to figure out what elements constitute an epic—sung vs. spoken, written vs. oral, "the epic" (*l'épopée*) vs. "the epic-like" (*l'épique*), ideological content, exultant tone, social function and setting, type of performer, etc.—giving rise to a rich and voluminous scholarly discussion.

But, returning to Beebee's question, if we consider "audiences" for now to mean not so much people attending a performance as the commentators trying to define epic in the case of Africa, we can see how the meaning of this term has changed over time in scholarly discourse, as well as the role it has played in African literature more widely. In theoretical terms, we might look at genre in this case less as a set of formal conventions generated by historical causes, as has often been done in Marxist terms for the novel, but rather, as a series of readings and reinterpretations over time in which different social actors attempt to label and mobilize a (more or less stable) set of known narratives as members of a single whole for the sake of advancing different kinds of interests. In the colonial era and its immediate aftermath, genre in this sense became an object of dispute as parties disagreed over whether Africa could, or ought, to be compared to Europe in "epic" terms, and what the consequences of such a comparison might be. A sense of the need to preserve an African authenticity thanks to the oral tradition, especially epic, has persisted to this day. To look at this change historically, some questions are necessary. What conditions enabled such a discussion in the first place? How have participants in scholarly debate shaped this object whose existence we can no longer doubt today? A study of how the idea of epic changed among observers of Africa will allow us to see how the politics of genre

have been appropriated, questioned, and put to use in colonial and postcolonial contexts over time.

### *I. The “Civilizational Calculus”*<sup>18</sup>

A few Western scholars denied outright the existence of an African epic in the decades before the independence era—most famously, Hector Munro Chadwick, Nora Chadwick, and Cecil Maurice Bowra.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Chadwicks are straightforward enough in their denial (1940: v. 3 p. 501), Bowra presents a more contradictory case. While enumerating known examples of heroic poetry from around the world, he recognizes that “in Africa it seems to be much less common, though there are traces of it in the Sudan” (1952: 3); he goes on to explain that he is aware of “an epic poem which celebrates a battle between the fetishists and the Moslems among the Bambara of the French Sudan,”—none other, as it turns out, than the *Sunjata* narrative.<sup>20</sup> However, only a few pages later, he declares summarily that “African tribes have in general no heroic poetry” (1952: 11), admitting that while Zulu panegyric may have some kind of “heroic ideal,” it is “simple and primitive,” the “expression of an immediate, violent excitement.” For Bowra, this must be distinguished from true heroic poetry, which is historically oriented. He believes that the Zulu performer’s “outlook is limited to the actual present [...] The present so absorbs and occupies [African tribes] that they feel no need to traffic with the past and the imaginary” (1952: 11-12). The *Sunjata* example, which Bowra had in any case only read about second-hand, is by now forgotten, and the supposed absence of a truly heroic literary genre is here explicitly linked to primitiveness, a sense that Africans are trapped in the present with no real ability or interest in representing history. Bowra’s claim is framed in a way that rehearses the older colonial trope of African ahistoricity; even more revealingly, he frames the production of such “advanced” or “structurally complex” genres within a scheme of evolutionism, according to which the presence of a heroic genre indicates a more advanced degree of civilization from which relatively primitive peoples are excluded.

Evolutionist anthropological theories were, of course, ubiquitous in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and were mobilized to justify colonial projects around the world. It is interesting here to see how they were specifically articulated around literary production: heroic poetry was cast as a recognizable sign along the path of human evolution, and societies possessing it were placed above those thought to be without it.<sup>21</sup> In an earlier work, *The Heroic Age*, Hector Munro Chadwick compares savages to children, and people of “Heroic Ages” (i.e., possessing heroic poetry, which this work studies exclusively in Europe) to adolescents, since the “characteristic feature” of Heroic Ages is the “emancipation, social, political and religious, from the bonds of tribal law” (1967 [1912]: 441-443). Biebuyck and Mongo-Mboussa (2004) note the similarity of Chadwick’s particular use of the evolutionist paradigm to the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, for whom civilized status begins with the possession of writing; before that are ‘lower,’ ‘middle,’ and ‘upper’ levels of savagery and barbarism. For Morgan, the era described

<sup>18</sup> I borrow this expression from Amitav Ghosh (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002: 153).

<sup>19</sup> See Ben-Amos (1983 and 1999), and Biebuyck and Mongo-Mboussa (2004) for brief discussions of scholars who denied the possibility of an African epic.

<sup>20</sup> See Bowra (1952: 3 n. 1 and 369). Alfred Lord, a specialist of Yugoslavian epics, had brought Bowra’s attention to a description of the *Sunjata* narrative by Serbian writer Rastko Petrović (see Petrović 1955 [1930]: 190-3).

<sup>21</sup> Johnson (1982) provides an overview of theories of the “heroic age.” For Johnson, the evolutionist schemes of Bowra and the Chadwicks are the most complex of these theories.

in the Homeric poems represents the most advanced level of barbarism; the age of epic is “the threshold of civilization” (2000 [1877]: 45). The link between epic and evolutionism is one that would stick: from the beginning, any discussion of epic in Africa was meant to help locate Africans, or other peoples, within an evolutionist framework, to determine their level of civilization by comparing them to known points of reference, and ultimately to Homeric Greece. Of course different commentators would disagree on how to interpret such comparisons, but a common intellectual framework guides their speculations.

Curiously, when the words “*épopée africaine*” appear in French colonial discourse, they often refer not to oral performances of any sort, but to the heroic exploits of the French conquest of Africa. On one hand this merely reflects the word *epic*’s endless capacity for hyperbole in any context whatsoever, a usage which continues today; but at another level it allows us to envisage the position of “hero” as a contested space in colonial French Africa, with conquerors and resisters both imagining themselves in that role. Indeed, when we remember Charles-André Julien’s observation that “l’histoire coloniale est le triomphe de la biographie” (1946: 5), it is easy to realize how the image of the fearless (white) adventurer, explorer, and conqueror came to be crowned with a heroic aura.<sup>22</sup> Thus we find a booklet entitled *L’épopée africaine* meant to accompany *Fachoda*, “diorama de la mission Marchand,” an exhibition on display at the *Société Générale française de dioramas et panoramas* (Fontalirant 1900). The choice of labeling this mission of 1896-1899 an “epic” sounds jingoistic since it failed to achieve its objective, namely extending the territory of the French Congo to the Nile; but the participants were welcomed home as heroes anyway, and a diorama was made in Paris to commemorate their valiant efforts. Even more striking is Albert Corbie’s 1908 collection of poems *L’Epopée africaine*, which describes in classical alexandrines a romantic vision of the French presence in place after place, from Napoleon’s landing in Egypt onward. As the expression “*épopée coloniale*” became commonplace, it was used regularly in all kinds of propaganda; suffice it to cite, as a last impressive reference, Léon Poirier’s film *Brazza ou l’épopée du Congo* (1939).

But beyond this self-aggrandizing cliché, European discussions of African epic grew from interest in collecting oral narratives, which can be traced back at least to the 18th century (Masonen 2000: 436). From the early 19th century, collections of tales (*contes*) were published and circulated in Europe. Kesteloot and Dieng suggest that the interest in *contes*, and especially the ability to frame them as naïve, childish, and ultimately primitive, prevented the earliest collectors from recognizing epic (1997: 10). However, we should not exaggerate the colonial era’s ignorance or rejection of the possibility of an epic in Africa. The existence of narratives we now call epics was well known among the mostly amateur French ethnologists and linguists who labored in Africa on a day-to-day basis—unlike the Chadwicks or Bowra, whose knowledge of Africa came only from whatever published sources happened to fall into their hands. Administrators and military personnel often collected oral traditions in their spare time, sometimes even as a matter of official policy (Conrad 1984: 37), and the educational system encouraged African pupils and teachers to collect and analyze their own traditions (Kelly 1984, Bulman 2004). These efforts would become instrumental in shaping the colonial historiography of Africa. Contributors debated how such venerable narratives as the *Sunjata* of the Mande and the *Samba Gueladio* of the Fulani were to be classified and, perhaps more importantly, what

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the popular series *Grandes figures coloniales*, published by Plon from 1930 to 1932, of which each edition covers a different star of French colonization; Faïdherbe, Gallieni, and Brazza each have a book dedicated to them. Jacques Mériaud’s *Les pionniers du Soudan, avant, avec et après Archinard* (1931) is written in the same vein.

their significance could be for understanding African history and cultural accomplishments. Joseph Miller describes the “perplexed respect” of colonial invaders for “African military power, political leadership, and even monumental architecture, the litmus tests of progress” (1999: 4). We can add here the litmus test of literature: not only the existence of writing, which is a well-known and ancient criterion for assigning civilized status to a cultural other, but also the existence of recognizable oral genres like epic. Epic in particular would come to be intimately associated with a more advanced level of political organization and intelligence, and, by extension, overall civilization.

Colonial historiography was fascinated with the formation of complex states in Africa; hence the liberal use of the word “empire” in historiographical writing and the detailed description (or invention) of great historical states as objects of study. These, along with other cultural accomplishments found to be impressive, were typically attributed to foreign, especially white, influence. In the case of West Africa, the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay became the source of endless inquiries and speculation during the colonial period. Epic was the point at which this interest in empire intersected with the interest in oral tradition. *Sunjata* is the most visible example of this intersection, since its subject is the founding of the Mali empire in the 13th century. But it was far from the only narrative discussed in epic terms. Other heroic narratives were judged as evidence of the superiority of a given ethnic group, or, alternatively, of its inability to separate historical fact from myth. But the connection between epic and empire, and the corresponding connection to racialized hierarchies of primitivism and civilization, runs like a thread through these discussions. The idea of an oral literature with a strong, recognizable heroic element that could be described according to more or less universal generic and political terms became one signpost among many along the path to civilization. And colonial interpretations about the natives’ location on the scale of evolution helped shape theories of colonialism itself.

In any case, rather than claiming that epic was suddenly recognized in Africa in 1960 thanks to D.T. Niane, we can examine how his generation’s knowledge and understanding of the genre was mediated through older colonial debates. These debates, whose details seem obscure today, are known to contemporary specialists of African heroic narratives who have attempted to document the earliest written versions of specific texts like the *Sunjata*.<sup>23</sup> Even so, their content will seem unsurprising to anyone familiar with colonial historiography, for they rehash many of the stereotypes and attitudes that are the staples of colonial discourse. They merit nevertheless a second look, so that we can gauge the extent to which the epic genre which we study today is derived from those stereotypes, and how it continued to take shape in their aftermath. By highlighting the relationship between epic and colonial thought, I hope to fill a gap that has remained nearly empty so far in studies of this genre in Africa.<sup>24</sup>

### *Genre and Race: Delafosse and Equilbecq*

<sup>23</sup> See for example Conrad (1984), Austen (1990), Belcher (1994), Bulman (1997 and 1999), and Masonen (2000).

<sup>24</sup> Bulman provides an interesting discussion on European motives for collecting the *Sunjata*, and on the specific role of the Ecole William Ponty in encouraging written versions of it, but does not reflect on other narratives, or on views of epic itself as genre (1999: 237-40; 2004). A number of other studies discuss colonial efforts at collecting epic narratives. Ben-Amos, discussing the epic genre, mentions some British collectors in Africa but believes that “heroic narratives eluded them” (1983: 277). Most studies that present an analysis of the African epic as a genre do so independently of colonial discourse.

The towering figure in French colonial efforts at understanding and codifying African history is Maurice Delafosse, who produced many ethnographic and linguistic studies while holding different posts in the colonial administration between 1894 and 1918, as well as teaching posts in Paris after his return to France. His three-volume *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1912), while not the first serious European attempt at reconstituting precolonial African history, was considered definitive by many, and long remained influential thanks to its coherent, confident, date-filled narrative of nearly two thousand years of events leading up to the French conquest. Delafosse's choice to focus the history of the Sudan colony<sup>25</sup> around a neatly organized succession of empires and periods of domination, among which his fascination with the great states of Ghana (Wagadu) and Mali (Manden) stand out, had two important consequences. It contributed in no small way to what Pekka Masonen has called the "invention of the Sudanese Middle Ages" (2000); that is, it packaged the history of Africa in terms familiar to the study of medieval Europe, so well that some readers have seen through Delafosse's work a grand entry of Africa into world history. Jean-Louis Triaud argues, for example, that "*Haut-Sénégal-Niger* est [...] placé sous le signe de l'histoire, d'une histoire qui confère au Soudan un privilège sur toutes les autres colonies subsahariennes et place cette terre, même en position périphérique, au sein de l'oecumène civilisé" (1998: 213). Oral tradition holds a special place for Delafosse not only in understanding this historical depth, but also for the "extraordinaire richesse" of the literary production that it represents (Delafosse 1912: v. 3 p. 380). Specifically regarding epic, in addition to providing a summary of the *Sunjata* narrative itself in the second volume of *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (p. 162-84), he refers to the genre of the "épopée" with a certain, albeit limited admiration:

Cette littérature [orale] n'est pas seulement riche; elle est variée et aborde tous les sujets. L'histoire et l'épopée y sont représentées par de très curieuses traditions relatives à l'origine des peuples et des tribus, aux faits et gestes des héros ou des guerriers célèbres: les légendes reproduites ou simplement résumées dans la seconde partie du présent ouvrage peuvent donner une idée du genre et de la large part qui y est faite au symbolisme et au merveilleux. (v. 3 p. 380-1)

At one level, this promotion of an elevated view of African history and culture makes Delafosse an ambiguous character among his contemporaries, whose notions of primitivism often precluded such enthusiasm. He is known, for example, to have been a proponent of associationist rather than assimilationist policy, believing that Sudanese political systems were worthy of respect and should be incorporated into French rule (Bulman 1999: 239).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the progressivism attributed to him only goes so far: the second interesting consequence of his work is that his packaging of precolonial African history seems to point not toward questioning but toward justifying French colonialism. Since the greatness of

<sup>25</sup> With several reorganizations, this colony, whose territory generally corresponded to today's nation of Mali, was known officially as the *Soudan français* for most of its existence starting in 1890 until independence. Between 1904 and 1920 the colony's name was *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*. However, the term *Soudan* generally stuck when referring to this area even when the official name was different.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Bulman also recounts that during Delafosse's teaching career in Paris, he braved the opinion of his colleagues by insisting that Africans were adults with their own historic nations, and had governed themselves in the past.



African “empires”—a word he favored<sup>27</sup>—is generally framed as arising from conquest, the overarching narrative he produced of Sudanese history can be read as a succession of episodes in which one group dominates another, giving rise to an evolutionist scheme of increasingly complex state forms from the *case* to the *empire* (Delafosse 1912: v. 3 p. 125-143).<sup>28</sup> The French conquest fits neatly into this narrative, superseding the African empire thanks to its inevitable superiority, and crowning all previous conquests with itself.

A telling example of Delafosse’s racialized theory of conquest is his argument in favor of a version of the so-called Hamitic hypothesis. According to this theory, the descendants of an ancient migration of light-skinned peoples from the Middle East formed at some point in history a superior race among the primitive blacks of Africa. In Delafosse’s version, the light-skinned race is the *Judéo-Syriens*, whose white kings in West Africa were eventually conquered by black ones, and their mixed-race descendants are the Peuls or Fulani (v. 2 p. 24)<sup>29</sup>—an ethnic category reputed even today in West Africa to have a lighter skin color than other groups. The invented memory of a past, salutary influence of whiteness among blacks hints at the French claim to legitimacy in its colonies, and would be made perfectly explicit by one of Delafosse’s most eager readers.

This disciple was François Equilbecq, a fellow, though far less known, administrator and amateur Africanist. The importance of the aspects of *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* I have highlighted—particularly the links between race, conquest, comparability to medieval Europe, and colonial politics—becomes clear when we turn to Equilbecq’s work. Remembered mainly for his three-volume collection of folktales *Contes Indigènes de l’Ouest-Africain* (1913-16), Equilbecq was the first French commentator to discuss the African epic at significant length.<sup>30</sup> *Contes Indigènes* glosses quickly over the idea at various moments, discussing a specifically Fulani “mentalité chevaleresque, analogue à celle de notre moyen âge” and even referring to the *Samba Gueladio* narrative as a “chanson de geste véritable” and a “chanson épique comme on les concevait au Moyen Age” (Equilbecq 1972: 60, 160-1). While these labels already make clear Equilbecq’s interest in comparing the Fulani of his day to medieval Europe, a far more developed discussion of the topic can be found in a different work of his, *La Légende de Samba Guélâdio Diègui, Prince du Foûta* (Equilbecq 1974).<sup>31</sup> Most relevant is Equilbecq’s study of

<sup>27</sup> For Triaud, “Le concept d’empire soudanais est [...] le plus remarquable et le plus durable parmi ceux issus de l’oeuvre de Delafosse” (1998: 218).

<sup>28</sup> See also Amselle (1990: 72) and Triaud (1998: 218-19) for discussions of this.

<sup>29</sup> Delafosse bases this claim on his reading of the *Tarikh es-Sudan*, a 17th-century Arabic manuscript which purports that the empire of Ghana had a series of white princes whose origins were unknown; Delafosse calculates that his supposed Judeo-Syrian dynasty is what the manuscript was referring to, and that it ruled Ghana from the 4th to 8th centuries (v. 2 p. 23-5). For background on the Hamitic hypothesis, which still survives in various forms to this day, see Amadi 1989.

<sup>30</sup> *Contes Indigènes* was republished in a single volume in 1972 by Robert Cornevin as *Contes populaires d’Afrique occidentale*, together with a set of previously unpublished manuscripts originally intended to be a 4th tome. These extra materials were given to Cornevin, who was himself a colonial historian and enthusiastic reader of Equilbecq, by the latter’s daughter in 1966 (Equilbecq 1972:15). I use page numbers from Cornevin’s reprint.

<sup>31</sup> The 1914 manuscript of *Samba Guélâdio* was also given in 1966 by Equilbecq’s daughter to Cornevin, who painstakingly edited it and had it published in 1974 (Equilbecq 1974: 7). This work was written in 1914 but remained unpublished until 1974, long after the author’s death and certainly too late to have any sort of impact on his contemporaries. Even so, the length at which Equilbecq discusses and explains what he believes to be a true African epic makes this text of key interest. Cornevin, having also published an article on the African epic that drew on Equilbecq’s ideas, portrays him as having had unprecedented insight into oral literature (see Cornevin 1966 and 1967).

various written versions of the Fulani heroic narrative of Samba as recorded by a series of European collectors, mainly travelers. Equilbecq first expresses surprise at the presence of an epic form in Africa that is recognizable to him, a Frenchman, and comparable to European heroic narrative, by wondering if these kinds of narratives actually come from European authorship and are merely repeated by African copycats.

But after reassuring us that there are too many sources of the narrative for copycatting to actually be the case, Equilbecq recognizes the need to explain such a surprising discovery. The explanation he gives is taken directly from Delafosse's version of the Hamitic hypothesis:

Les traits chevaleresques y abondent et l'on jurerait d'autant de pastiches—heureux d'ailleurs—des faits de notre histoire nationale ou de celle d'autres pays européens. [...] D'ailleurs il ne faut s'étonner qu'à demi de la parenté de la légende indigène avec nos épopées médiévales. Les premiers auteurs de cette légende, les Déniankôbé, étaient des Foulbé, c'est-à-dire des Sémites à peine métissés. Quant aux Tôrobé, qui l'ont adoptée en la modifiant légèrement, ils ont une forte dose de sang maure ou poular dans les veines. Ce sont encore des métis et non des nègres au sens absolu du mot. (Equilbecq 1974: 15)

With the exception of “Maure” and “Sémité,” all the ethnic terms here refer in some way to the same large umbrella group, the Fulani, with which Equilbecq was best acquainted in comparison to others, and which Delafosse had labeled as descendants of a white Judeo-Syrian migration.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the presence of epic as noble genre, as well as the ability to compare Africa with Europe, is explainable because the genre's inventors are not really black: they have white Semitic blood through which the high sentiments necessary for epic were made known and transmitted to them. Hence his telling choice of epithet for the *Samba* epic which encapsulates the rest of his commentary: “cette Iliade demi-nègre” (1974: 132). This white ancestry, for Equilbecq, was a first contribution toward civilizational advancement, thus making explicit the racist component to his evolutionist-diffusionist theory:

La proportion relativement forte de sang de Blancs dans les veines des Tôrobé et la supériorité intellectuelle manifeste de cette race sur les autres races dites noires nous est un précieux enseignement quant aux moyens d'assurer et même de précipiter l'évolution de ces races. [...] le progrès mental des races africaines est lié, non à leur métisation proprement dite, mais à leur éthiopianisation, c'est-à-dire—qu'on me permette cette expression de viticulteur—au mouillage de leur sang par un certain mélange du sang des races plus claires avec retour, subséquent mais incomplet, vers le type noir. Il va de soi que, lorsque je parle de progrès, j'envisage tout d'abord le progrès intellectuel. Pour le moral, ce sera l'affaire du gendarme et du pouvoir fortement constitué. (1974: 86)

We can now see the political agenda that Equilbecq has spelled out as he reads Delafosse alongside the Fulani narrative of Samba: from his initial surprise at finding a sign of high culture among primitives, he has moved to justifying French colonialism by claiming that white influence, as exemplified in epic, will help their evolution along its path. This assertion is carefully nuanced in such a way as to avoid encouraging officially sanctioned *métissage* in the

---

<sup>32</sup> The Deniyanke were a Fulani dynasty that ruled the Futa Toro, a region in what is today northern Senegal and southern Mauritania, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; they were succeeded by the Kingdom of Futa Toro, of which the Torobe were the ruling class, and which remained in power until the French conquest in 1861 (Belcher 1994: 76). Fulbe is a synonym for the Fulani language or culture across the wide area where its dialects are spoken.

colonies, which would no doubt have stirred up a commotion. For Equilbecq, the biological contribution of whiteness has already been made; now it is up to a muscular French domination, particularly including the ability to punish, to do the rest of the civilizing mission's work. It is worth noting the complementarity between this theory and that of Hector Munro Chadwick (1967 [1912]) discussed above: while Chadwick claimed that a having a Heroic Age in history would move a given society up the ladder of evolution, Equilbecq adds a striking racial dynamic according to which contact with whites not only gave Africa its heroic age, but will help it advance beyond that stage by means of colonial domination.

### *Frobenian Fantasies*

Leo Frobenius is something of a unique case among the colonial-era commentators studied here. For one, he was German, not French; and, unlike his fellow collectors he was not directly involved in any colonial administration. A self-taught ethnologist who eventually held teaching and curating posts in Germany in the 1920s and -30s, he remains a figure of special importance in the history of black literature, given his well-known influence on the Negritude generation. Beyond that, a number of Frobenius's prolific writings, though nowhere near all of them, were translated into French and well placed to have an effect on, or at least provoke a reaction from, French colonial ethnography. For example, Charles Monteil, a more typical example of the French administrator-ethnographer type, blasted Frobenius for having written no less than eighteen books on Africa before setting foot there for the first time in 1904, as well as for his farfetched theories and failure to learn a single African language (Monteil 1953: 367-8). Later views of Frobenius, while occasionally more generous, are in agreement on his shortcomings: his extreme beliefs are seen not only as unscientific, but as fawning and sentimentalist. Jahnheinz Jahn suggests that he tried to compensate for his intellectual shallowness by overcollecting (1975: 12), an effort that found its culmination in an untranslated 12-volume collection of African stories, *Atlantis* (1921-1928).

The title of that collection captures the heart of Frobenius's intellectual quest. Frobenius believed in and spent his numerous expeditions across Africa searching for "Atlantis," the legendary lost civilization described by Plato. Certain that this country had been historically located in Africa and inhabited by whites, Frobenius hoped to prove a link between Africa and the "high" cultures of the Mediterranean, especially ancient Greece, and, in a gesture similar to the Hamitic hypothesis, to attribute the memory of African greatness to white influence. The idea of epic plays an interesting role in this grandiose vision. Recounting a performance of a narrative now known as the Wagadu tradition, he describes a fantasy world that is strikingly similar to the European medieval imaginary:

Dazu Korongo—wie er dies vortrug! Die Stimme modulierte, die Gesichtszüge mimten in zierlichen Nuancen einzelne Worte und Gesten, der Vortrag, zögerte oder schnellte, senkte sich und schwoll. Wahrlich ein gewaltiges Heldentum, eine lebendige Epik, und ein naturgeborner Künstler, dieser Korongo! [...] Jetzt spricht er mit voller Stimme, erzählt von Burgen und Helden, von Kämpfen und Minne, von edlen Frauen und kunstfähigen Barden. Ein Leben warm und voller Blut, an Stil klar und rein wie Quellwasser; Formate und Dimensionen. Und nichts von

dichterischer Flausenmacherei, sentimentalem Schwindel und schmierigen  
Überschwenglichkeiten! (1924: 63-4)<sup>33</sup>

This account of the epic performance reveals more than a fascination with heroic feats and tropes; it represents an idealization of these, hinting at an exoticized, nostalgic escape from the less lively routine of everyday European life. Epic, a “living” genre, is associated with life itself, particularly a mythologized past when life was more “warm and full-blooded” than in modern times. Perhaps even more tellingly, Frobenius explicitly racializes the noble genre according to one of his own peculiar theories. After listening to a performance of an unspecified Fulani narrative in Mopti, a city in present-day Mali, he first exclaims, “Mopti! Ritterleben! Königspracht!” (“Mopti! Life of chivalry! Royal splendor!”) (1911: 220). He goes on to tackle the apparent similarity between the African and European ages of chivalry in these terms:

Und wie kann jemand, der nur den landläufigen typus des heutigen Negers kennt, es ohne weiteres verstehen, dass in meinen Akten ebensoviel von Mannheit, Turnierkunst, Waffenklirren, Knappentreue und Frauenschönheit verzeichnet ist, wie in jedem Werke über Rittersagen unseres eigenen Altertumes! [...] Gelbe und rote Leute wohnten hier, und ihre Art hatte nichts Negerhaftes am Körper und im Wesen. Über nach Süden hin wohnten die Neger in Ländern, die reich waren an Korn und Gold. [...] Mischvolk entstand. Immer mehr schlug das Negerblut durch. Der Sudan vernigerte, immer Schwärzer ward das Volk. Nur wenige “reinerer” Familien hoben sich allerorts vom vorherrschenden Gesamttypus ab, und die waren dann nicht nur dem Namen nach, sondern auch in der Tat die Vornehmen, die Adligen (1911: 220-1).<sup>34</sup>

Once again, we get a sense of Frobenius’s idealization of kings, knights, and beautiful maidens that cannot but remind him of European medieval literature. But in order to make such a comparison thinkable, or palatable, he must cast the link he fantasizes between high culture (courtly and chivalric themes) and high class (aristocracy) in Africa as a racial vestige from less dark-skinned peoples. This particular detail of his overall theory is not as developed as Equilbecq’s comparative discussions of genre and race, but it certainly reminds us of them. For both men, genre must be racialized in a way to accommodate the apparent cultural sophistication of primitive blacks. Nonetheless, Frobenius goes farther than either Equilbecq or Delafosse in his implications for everyday black-skinned people, making clear the contrast between the “popular” type, which he disdains, and the rarefied, less-black nobility celebrated in his romantic view of epic.

---

<sup>33</sup> In English: “And so Korongo—how he sang it! His voice modulated, his facial features mimed with delicate nuances individual words and gestures; his speech, paused or hastened, sank and rose. Truly a tremendous heroism, a living epic, and a natural-born artist, this Korongo! [...] Now he speaks in full voice, tells of castles and heroes, of battles and love, of noble women and artful bards. A warm and full-blooded life, a style clear and pure as spring water; with its forms and dimensions. And no trace of poetic nonsense-making, sentimental humbug, or greasy mawkishness!” Translations from German are my responsibility alone, though I was graciously helped by Justin Ward.

<sup>34</sup> In English: “And how can someone who knows only the common type of the modern Negro easily understand that in my files are recorded just as many examples of virility, the art of the tournament, the clangor of arms, squirely fealty and feminine beauty, as in every work about the chivalric legends of our own antiquity! [...] Yellow and red people lived here, and their kind had nothing Negro-like in body or in character. To the south, the Negroes lived in countries that were rich in grain and gold. [...] A mixed race was born. Negro blood penetrated ever deeper. The Sudan blackened, the people became ever blacker. Only a few ‘purer’ families set themselves apart from the predominant type everywhere, and were then not only in name, but in fact, the high class, the nobles.”

Lanrezac's "Certificate of Humanity"<sup>35</sup>

As has become clear, colonial comments on the literary potential of African cultures were inevitably tied up not only with the issue of how to represent Africans, but of how to treat them. In the case of Equilbecq, epic became a specific means of answering the question of how to shape colonial governance; and Delafosse based his view on that subject at least in part on his respect for African political complexity. Another rich discussion of epic and governability comes from the pen of Henri Lanrezac, a military lieutenant whose series of articles from 1907 on "Légendes soudanaises"—a source for both Equilbecq and Delafosse—oscillates conspicuously between describing oral genres and prescribing policy for colonial government.<sup>36</sup> On one hand, like Equilbecq, Lanrezac is a devotee of comparing Sudanese and European oral forms with the intention of showing that they are more similar than different. He argues, for example, that Perrault, Grimm, and Andersen, all famous publishers of European folktales, can each be found in Africa by way of their themes and motifs, yet African tales remain authentically African (1907a: 163-4). Recognizable genres such as "chants épiques"—of which the "Chanson de Samba-Galdji," the same narrative that would fascinate Equilbecq, is an example (1907c: 430)—ought to be classified at the top of the hierarchy of oral genres, above, for example, improvised war songs, which he disdains (1907b: 215). The prestige of epic in particular enables intercultural generic comparisons which often lead Lanrezac to sound like a universalist and a humanist. Specifically, the *Samba* narrative moves him to declare that

On y sent palpiter l'âme héroïque d'un peuple qui aime les combats et honore les mâles vertus de l'homme de guerre. Cette poésie nationale valait bien la peine d'être connue, puisque grâce à elle l'âme soudanaise nous révèle ses beautés, ses grandeurs. [...] J'espère seulement avoir démontré, en parlant de ces peuplades soudanaises, que nous n'avons pas affaire à de véritables sauvages, mais à des êtres humains ayant véritablement une âme vibrant sous les mêmes joies, sous les mêmes douleurs que celles qui émeuvent notre coeur. (1907d: 618-9)

The recognizability of epic has provoked this dramatic declaration of humanism. In addition to the cliché of revealing the native soul, the idea that a "poésie nationale" could exist in precolonial Africa is itself indicative of the effort to dress African culture up in European political terms, and by doing so, to facilitate its entrance into world history. But the vague idea of a "nation," with its potential connotations of autonomy, is left incomplete here, as though to avoid letting the favorable comparison to Europe go too far.

Among the paradoxes that this balancing act generates, the most interesting is perhaps Lanrezac's interpretation of the epic value of "energy" as evidence of Africans' laziness. While "la littérature orale populaire" is full of "haute moralité" and "leçons d'énergie," he nevertheless claims that an "état d'indolence et de paresse" have reigned in the Sudan "depuis la disparition des grands Empires (Songhai, Mali, Berbère) jusqu'à nos jours" (1907c: 430). Thus, the

<sup>35</sup> I borrow this expression from Paulin Hountondji, who criticizes defenses of African cultural accomplishments that "try to win certificates of humanity from whites or to display the splendours of African civilization to them" (1996 [1977]: 204 n. 3).

<sup>36</sup> I am counting these writings as four different articles (1907a, -b, -c, and -d), although the boundaries between them are somewhat unclear because of Lanrezac's habit of publishing serially, as was a common practice in colonial journals. Some of these writings were republished separately as an "Essai sur le folk-lore au Soudan," an offprint of the *Revue Indigène*, in 1908.

discourse of epic and empire is mobilized to prefigure, rather than to contest, French hegemony, implying that colonial rule has merely occupied the space formerly held, and long left vacant, by imperial greatness. Carefully eliminated is the case of Omar Tall, the Muslim theocratic warrior who declared jihad against the French encroachment in the mid-19th century, and whose “empire” and “légendes historiques” Lanrezac had been discussing only a few pages earlier (1907c: 423-4). Epics and empires can only be signs of “energy” when they are too distant in the past to be explicitly anti-French. Lanrezac’s notion of human equality, made manifest through the universal sentiments expressed in epics from different cultures, is calibrated in just the right way to defend French colonialism while giving it a veneer of enlightenment. One particular digression away from the subject of oral literature is especially revealing in this regard:

[...] pendant un temps, les coloniaux se sont partagés en deux écoles: les amis des noirs, qui prétendaient que les Africains devaient un jour profiter de nos droits, être soumis aux mêmes lois (particulièrement au point de vue électoral et judiciaire) et les ennemis des nègres, qui les considéraient comme des animaux à peine supérieurs aux singes. Les uns soutenaient l’assimilation complète, les autres le principe de la domination sous un joug inflexible. Entre ces deux théories extrêmes il y en a une troisième bien française: celle qui consiste à juger les Soudanais tels qu’ils sont, en les considérant comme des auxiliaires dont on peut faciliter l’évolution morale sans chercher néanmoins à effacer les différences essentielles qui existent entre eux et nous, différences, qui, il ne faut pas l’oublier, ne tiennent nullement à la valeur morale des individus, mais seulement aux agents extérieurs qui, autant que l’ancestralité, modèlent l’homme. (1907c: 426-7)

Like Delafosse and Equilbecq, Lanrezac has let his admiration for historical African accomplishments shape his theory of colonialism, though his opinion seems closer to the former than to the latter. Rather than leaving the natives’ moral evolution to the “gendarme” and to colonial institutions of “pouvoir fortement constitué” (Equilbecq 1974: 86), he suggests that historical circumstances require both a mission to “facilitate” civilization in Africa and a respect of cultural difference, echoing Delafosse’s rejection of assimilation in favor of association. The interpretation of literary forms, and the comparability implied by epic in particular, is brought directly to bear on the nature of the civilizing mission.

### *A Genre of Uncertain Worth*

Besides the collectors mentioned so far, a number of other colonial administrators in French West Africa dealt with epic material and tried to classify its genre. Most, especially those interested in historical reliability, were less enthusiastic about the significance or worth of oral literary forms than Frobenius or Lanrezac. The above-mentioned Charles Monteil, known for his study *Les Empires du Mali* (1968 [1929]) which was seen by some as updating Delafosse’s *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, begrudgingly acknowledged the importance of oral tradition for historical research in West Africa. Though he recognized the “caractère épique” of some material and presented summaries of narratives that are still used by scholars today, he generally considered oral literature to be ephemeral, fragmented, contradictory, and incoherent, and always remained

convinced of its very limited historical usefulness.<sup>37</sup> Jean Vidal, in a summary of “La Légende officielle de Soundiata,” describes the “prouesses épiques” of the “héros national des Malinkés (1924: 317), but nevertheless takes a condescending tone toward the narrative before him, removing “certains détails par trop puériles et enfantins qui ne pourraient qu’allonger inutilement le récit sans rien ajouter à sa clarté” (1924: 318). Notice here that as soon as the epic narrative’s recognizability is obscured by details whose meaning is unclear to the collector, its comparability to the European Middle Ages is abandoned, and the genre is demoted from one of chivalry to one of childishness. Robert Arnaud also finds an infantile quality, commenting upon the *Wagadu* and *Sunjata* narratives that, in terms of their historical content, “le Noir bouscule avec naïveté les époques,” while he himself “prenai[t], à les entendre, le plaisir du gosset aux contes de nourrice” (1912: 144). The colonial historian Georges Hardy takes a somewhat more generous view of the historical value of oral tradition, arguing that in spite of the fact that “à force de se transmettre de génération en génération, [l’histoire indigène] se vide de réalité et se grossit d’invention, [et] prend tournure d’épopée,” nevertheless, “si c’est une grande joie de mettre la main sur une inscription romaine ou une lettre inédite de Henri IV, c’en est une bien plus vive encore d’amener au jour tout un empire, fût-il nègre ou indien” (1929: 95-6). For him the pleasure of studying such great African empires as Ghana is comparable to that of studying kingdoms and empires in Europe; even though epic narratives are inferior to historical fact, being full of invention and low on reality, they remain important tools for expanding historical research beyond the “rivages de la Méditerranée” (1929: 96). Gilbert Vieillard, a linguist and ethnologist of the Fulani, adds a dimension of nostalgia to the performance of epic: writing at a time when the French conquest was long complete, he presents his collection of four narratives on “héros païens” as part of “un véritable cycle épique, très abondant, que déclament, en s’accompagnant sur la guitare, chanteurs et musiciens peul, pour le plaisir mélancolique des chefs de guerre, devenus ‘chefs de canton’” (1931: 137). A tinge of Frobenius-like romanticization here colors the memory of glorious war-chiefs, now transformed into agents of the drab colonial bureaucracy.

But even in earlier generations of French colonial writing, there is evidence of the possibility of conceiving an African epic. Alfred Le Chatelier, a specialist of French policy toward Islam in North and West Africa, refers to Sunjata and his nemesis Sumaoro as “deux héros d’épopée” (1899: 86-7) in a discussion of the place of Islam in popular culture, his ultimate goal being to help craft the French response to this religion’s influence. And while Jean-Baptiste Raffanel, the explorer admired by Equilbecq, never quite uses the word “epic” in either of his two travel narratives on West Africa (1846 and 1856), he does compare the Fulani hero Samba to Ulysses (1856: v. 2. p. 329)—an allusion that the aforementioned Georges Hardy might have resisted, given his criticism of the common practice in colonial history of such confluences as “la Jeanne d’Arc du Soudan,” “le Louis XIV du Maroc,” or a Charlemagne in Africa (Hardy 1921: 30-31). For Hardy, such facile pre-packaged comparisons actually obscured historical study in the colonies; but his complaint remains a revealing indicator of the general tendency in colonial letters to *depend* on such comparisons in order to make Africa legible, and to locate it on the hierarchy of civilizations. In colonial thought, the idea of an African epic, an “Iliade demi-nègre,” fit right into that desire for comparability and legibility. But the comparison inevitably supported Europe’s assertion of its own superiority.

---

<sup>37</sup> See Monteil (1905: 3, 1968 [1929]: 2-3 and 54-5, and 1953: 366). *Les Empires du Mali* (1968 [1929]) includes a comparison of two *Sunjata* versions, and “La Légende du Ouagadou” (1953) presents a version of the *Wagadu* tradition that Monteil collected himself in 1898.

## II. *The Suns of Independence: Militant African Perspectives*

Colonial authors were not the only ones to imagine and define a glorious African past. During the period of European domination and its aftermath, African intellectuals interested in oral tradition maintained an ambiguous relationship to the body of colonial Africanist knowledge in which they had been educated. Beginning in the 1930s, and accelerating after World War 2, there was a significant effort to reclaim a sense of pride in African cultural accomplishments. Stephen Bulman traces one instance of this phenomenon in the popularization of *Sunjata* through the educational efforts of Senegal's *Ecole William Ponty*. This teacher-training school encouraged African students not only to document native life but to stage theatrical performances based on it (Bulman 2004). Ponty graduates published prose summaries and theatrical adaptations of *Sunjata* and may have paved the way for Niane's canonical prose version.<sup>38</sup> While some of these writers may have actually espoused the vision of a Franco-African culture that the administration hoped to foster (Bulman 2004: 36), it is certain that others had a more critical relationship to the French presence and intended to decolonize the terms within which the African past had been framed.<sup>39</sup> The historical empires and epic heroes of West Africa, once purged of the racist terms in which colonial writing had theorized them, were crucially symbolic in this goal. For they not only represented the greatness of an African past, but, with a bit of subversive interpretation, also came to glorify resistance to colonization itself. Indeed, while colonial writers were, with few exceptions, overwhelmingly interested in the idea of epic as a relic of Africa's distant history, a number of black writers held up anticolonial resisters like Omar Tall, Lat-Dior Diop, and especially Samori Touré, each of whom had become the subject of heroic narratives, alongside the older heroes like Sunjata and Samba Gueladio.<sup>40</sup> The crucial question of the epic genre changed from, "How can we classify and govern primitive peoples?" to, "What models can we hold up for a new Africa?" Often, this effort was connected to militant anticolonial activity. At the same time as a new canon of heroes was being constructed, comparison with Europe remained key to understanding the epic as a genre; it was not only necessary that these heroes be convincing within Africa, but that their legacy be recognizable to the rest of the world.

### *From Sunjata to Samori*

The entanglement of heroic discourse with state politics required that Africa name new heroes in its struggle against colonialism, especially as it approached independence. Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue* (1960) played a key role in this struggle. In a

<sup>38</sup> See for example "La Ruse de Diégué," a play written by Ponty students in 1937 (Anonymous 1949), Maximilien Quénum's "La légende de Fama-Soundjata" in *Légendes africaines* (Quénum 1946: 43-72), and Mamby Sidibé's discussion of Sunjata, written in 1937 but unpublished until 1959 (Sidibé 1959), which Bulman considers to be the most scholarly treatment of the subject by a Ponty graduate (2004: 41).

<sup>39</sup> See my discussion of Abdoulaye Sadjji below.

<sup>40</sup> Omar and Samori were Muslim warriors who built empires in their own right: Omar forged the theocratic Toucouleur empire in the mid-19th century, mostly in present-day Mali but extending to the surrounding regions, while Samori created a state in Mali and Guinea. Both conquered smaller communities and polities in order to mount large-scale oppositions to the French incursion into West Africa. Lat-Dior was the last independent king of Kajoor, today part of Senegal, who opposed the French penetration in that area until his death in 1886. All three have become heroic figures in the oral tradition—as well as in nationalist or religious politics.



way not unlike Delafosse's *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, its accessible packaging of a complex oral tradition reasserted a recognizable African contribution into universal world history, "answering the [...] Hegelian dismissal of the peoples of Africa as without history" (Belcher 1999b: 89).<sup>41</sup> Unlike Delafosse, however—for whom Niane has expressed great admiration<sup>42</sup>—Niane's most memorable work appeared right during the crises of early independence, when nationalist, anticolonial sentiment was at its height. The heroism of Sunjata was quickly identified, at least for a short while, by the political elite as a model for that of Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré (see ch. 2). But even more significant is the elevation of recent heroic figures like Samori to the rank of Sunjata himself. The controversy surrounding a simple schoolbook, the *Manuel d'histoire de l'Afrique occidentale* co-written by Niane and Jean Suret-Canale for the Guinean education ministry in October 1960, illustrates this discursive change. The *Manuel*, intended for elementary schools, highlights the precolonial empires of the distant past and the anticolonial resistance to the French conquest, suggesting a nationalist historical narrative that culminates with independence. This orientation earned the manual a nasty review from the Commandant Marc Chailley of the *Académie des sciences d'outre-mer*, who decried it as "une oeuvre nettement marxiste, nettement anti-colonialiste, nettement anti-française" (Chailley 1961: 135), objecting in particular to the positive portrayal and use of the word "résistants" for enemies of France like Samori Touré. Chailley, whose scathing review the *Académie* approved, noted in addition that Suret-Canal's previous historical work had already been "particulièrement engagée, haineuse notamment contre les officiers de la période héroïque" (1961: 135)—by which he does *not* mean the times of Sunjata, much less Samori, but of Faidherbe and Archinard, that is, of the French conquest of the 19th century. The conflict of competing "heroic periods" is striking: the African hero advanced by African intellectuals is not only a rewriting of older colonial debates over oral literature, but of colonialism's history of itself. While Niane's *Soundjata* draws on a fascination with epics and empires that was already old by 1960, it also participates in the effort to replace the most famous men of the colonial *épopée africaine*—the Faidherbes and Archinards—with a set of authentic African heroes, ancient and recent.

The specific effort to restore the image of Samori Touré becomes legible in this context. Because of his renown as a hero in the oral tradition across a wide swath of territory between Guinea and Mali, he became a useful figure by which both local performers and literate black intellectuals could link anticolonial political efforts to an ancient heroic past. Mamadou Dia, an activist who would become the first prime minister of Senegal, makes the link between Samori and political nationalism explicit. His memoirs describe the mid-1930s as a period of strong anticolonialism among his friends:

Nous revendiquions notre authenticité, l'identité nationale, l'identité africaine. Nous passions notre temps à écouter la kora, les hauts faits de Samory, de Sonndiata et les commentions avec [Abdoulaye] Sadjé. [...] [N]ous commençons par réhabiliter des hommes comme Samory, en disant que Samory n'était pas le tyran, l'esclavagiste qu'on nous avait décrit. C'était un patriote, un africain, qui défendait son pays contre l'envahisseur. (1985: 36)

<sup>41</sup> Niane emphasizes references to Alexander the Great and the history of Islam in his presentation of the narrative. While these are certainly part of the actual oral tradition, they also function as recognizable signposts for the Western reader that dispel the image of an ahistorical Africa.

<sup>42</sup> See Amselle and Sibeud (1998: 5-6).

Dia connects the rehabilitation of Samori to his friend Abdoulaye Sadj, a Senegalese writer and teacher best known today for his novel *Maimouna* (1953), and who graduated from the *Ecole William Ponty* in 1929 (Bulman 2004: 40). Like Dia, he had become a convinced nationalist and a partisan of the Negritude movement in Senegal by 1934.<sup>43</sup> His essay “Ce que dit la musique africaine” (1936), to which Dia alludes above, presents a collection of summarized heroic legends that includes not only *Sunjata* and *Samba*, but actually begins with *Samori*—the text of which, though short and probably destined for an audience of colonial schoolchildren, hides neither the carnage of Samori’s rule nor the conflict between him and the French.<sup>44</sup> The collection thus begins on a note of anticolonial violence, where the heroic figure is set in direct opposition to the French presence in Africa. Sadj sees no problem proposing a model of heroism that might be shocking to a colonial readership, explaining elsewhere in the collection, “Les héros, de nos contrées africaines, faisaient voisiner les actes les plus glorieux, les plus héroïques avec ceux que la morale moderne considère comme barbares. [...] La cruauté de Samory égala sa bravoure, et il fut surnommé le roi sanguinaire” (Sadj 1936: 159). The author does not shy away from a heroic tradition steeped in bloodshed. Might this simply be an effect of his “maximum de fidélité possible” to the words of his performer (1936: 120), or might we read into his approach a deliberate celebration of African power and action—elements that, as Samori shows, could be directed against the spectacle of European power? While this simultaneous emphasis on Samori’s cruelty and patriotism seems to square only halfway with Dia’s desire to “rehabilitate” the hero, it is clear that both Dia and Sadj intended to hold the feats of the distant heroic past alongside those of the 19th-century anticolonial resistance, and by extension, alongside the newer heroic movements of Negritude and nationalism in the decades preceding independence.

The problem of genre participates in this concern for the interpretation of heroic models. For Sadj, the legends in “Ce que dit la musique africaine” are not mere folktales, nor are they history *per se*. His foreword begins:

On a tort de classer parmi les contes africains l’histoire de Soundiata, de Samba-Galadiégui et tant d’autres. Ces personnages ont réellement existé [...] ce n’est pas la vérité historique toute nue qui pourrait éclairer la vérité psychologique de l’âme nègre, c’est plutôt l’action mystique de cette âme sur le canevas offert par la vie des héros. [...] Cette disposition de notre âme vous la retrouverez partout, mais surtout dans les récits du genre de ceux qui suivent, dans les mélopées que chantent les femmes noires, les aveugles et dans certains versets religieux déformés et adaptés suivant la conception que se fait le Noir du monde et de la vie. [...] je vais entreprendre de codifier chansons et mélopées, plus riches en sentiments et en vérités philosophiques relatives à l’âme nègre. (Sadj 1936: 119)

<sup>43</sup> Senghor credits him as a practitioner of Negritude within Senegal, far from where it was theorized in Paris: “Abdoulaye Sadj appartient, comme Birago Diop, au groupe des jeunes gens qui, dans les années 1930, lança le mouvement de la *Négritude*. [...] Il fut l’un des premiers jeunes Sénégalais, entre les deux guerres mondiales, à combattre la thèse de l’assimilation et la fausse élite des ‘évolués.’ (*Le Soleil*, 19 Feb. 1982. Quoted in Sadj 1997: 58.)

<sup>44</sup> The essay, originally published in the journal *L’Education africaine*, was reprinted in modified form as a children’s book by *Présence Africaine* in 1985. Even though the reprint is much easier to find today, I refer here to the pagination of the original because the reprint eliminates many interesting comments and details included by the author. *L’Education africaine* was a journal used by schoolteachers in French West Africa to exchange material, often collected orally from students, to be taught in classes on African culture for African children. See Bulman (2004) and Kelly (1984).

While the idea of revealing native psychology through folklore was itself a well-established colonial trope, the emphasis on doing so here is through heroic stories and popular songs, conceived as a source of art and imagination, and distinct from the common folktale or *conte*. The uniqueness of the genres presented here signifies the uniqueness of the African soul. While the “codification” that Sadji suggests would clarify the links between these genres (heroic narrative, women’s *mélopées*, religious verse) remains only partially theorized, the author’s special interest in heroes as the only figures who make it into the collection seems nevertheless to suggest a category very like epic. At the same time, the metaphor of heroic lives as a blank canvas for artists to fill in calls attention to the act of generic codification as one of (politically motivated?) audience interpretation, rather than as one of intrinsic literary traits. Whether or not an allusion to the European notion of epic is specifically intended here, Sadji is able to retain the usefulness of “the” genre he is presenting in this collection for his own political ends, couching it in terms of a Negritude-esque return to African authenticity and a barely veiled anticolonial fervor, while avoiding any explicit comparison to European literary models.

We find a different Negritude-esque interest in Samori in the work of Camara Laye, a Guinean author most famous for *L’Enfant noir* (1953)—a book which became canonical in African letters in no small part thanks to the French government’s promotion of it.<sup>45</sup> A somewhat less celebrated aspect of Camara’s work, however, is his profound interest in oral tradition: during the 1960s and -70s, he traveled through twelve countries all over West Africa collecting texts from traditional performers (Bulman 1999: 243-4). It seems that only one such text was made publicly available: a Mande epic performance that links the *Sunjata* narrative to a *Samori* narrative, transcribed, glossed, and translated in Camara’s thesis *Le Haut Niger vu à travers la tradition orale: Kuma Lafoloo Kuma, Kuma Koroo, Kuma Korootoola, Kuma* (1971), of which the introduction and *Sunjata* section were reworked into the comparatively well-known book *Le Maître de la parole: Kouma Lafôlô Kouma* (1978).<sup>46</sup> The introductory essay to these texts is remarkable because, a little more explicitly than Sadji, it casts epic as a source for postcolonial political liberation:

Quand un peuple vit depuis des années en peuple libre ou sous une influence, dans la féodalité ou sous la domination coloniale, et que le pays qui est le sien, bien qu’en définitive il soit désormais francophone comme l’est le pays ex-colonisateur lui-même, est, néanmoins différent de la France au point où l’Afrique l’est de l’Europe par les usages autant que par la nature et le climat, il est naturel que ce peuple se cherche, qu’il se reporte dans son passé, et que, creusant ce passé, il y recherche passionnément les traits des êtres et des choses qui ont guidé son destin. [...] Vivant d’abord libre et puis sous la domination coloniale, et y vivant depuis plus d’un demi-siècle au sein d’une politique d’assimilation quasi totale, le peuple malinké de Guinée, bien que dépendant, ne continuait pas moins, sous l’influence et par le truchement des griots, de revivre son passé, de se nourrir de sa civilisation traditionnelle. (Camara 1971: 1)

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed analysis of the involvement of the French colonial ministry and other issues of authorship in Camara Laye’s early novels, see King (2002) and Abiola Irele’s response (Irele 2006).

<sup>46</sup> The thesis presents an epic history of the Mande over time, spanning different eras that are defined by their respective heroes; this is also the model of Bassirou Dieng’s *L’Épopée du Kajoor* (1993), of which the life of Lat-Dior Diop is the last part. See Conrad 2008 for other published versions of the *Samori* epic. *Maître de la parole* recounts the *Sunjata* narrative like a novel, with psychologically developed characters; Austen supposes that either Camara or his performer has taken great liberties with the oral tradition in this work (1999:83), but does not compare it to the transcribed version found in the 1971 thesis.

Tradition is seen here as an alternative to colonialism, and a potential guide to the country's postcolonial future, significantly because the epic form represents the many phases and changes of history, from the beginning of the world up to the time of writing, the *Dépendan tele* ("times of Independence"<sup>47</sup>) (1971: 31). Indeed the entire historical narrative, which Camara refers to repeatedly as an *épopée*, is divided by the performer Babou Kondé—in his day, famous throughout Guinea—into four specific sections: *kuma lafoloo kuma* or "parole de la première parole," which recounts the creation of the world; *kuma koro* or "parole vieille," which covers the first descendants of Adam to the time of Sunjata; *kuma korootoola* or "parole vieillissante," from Sunjata to Samori; and *kuma* or "parole," from Samori to independence (Camara 1971: 112-114). Babou Kondé shapes his performance in such a way as to make the most ancient traditions readily applicable in the modern world, while Camara happily exploits the parallels that this framing offers. Samori, the anticolonial warlord, is explicitly cast as a new Sunjata,<sup>48</sup> and the times of independence form a piece of history alongside both major heroes—alluding to the question of who will be the next Sunjata, the hero of independence. To what extent do real-life African leaders embody, or fall short, of such an ideal?<sup>49</sup> The historical heroic narrative functions here as a story of the desire for liberation, including political liberation from the French—and, as we shall see, from the disappointments of independence.

### *Epic as Art*

The other important aspect of Camara Laye's treatment of epic is his insistence on its membership in the category of art, which he defines here as an "appel des profondeurs," a universal sense of beauty or essence that can be found across cultures. Camara seems to be channeling Senghor here; the father of Negritude seems also to have inspired the assertion that, while a European might feel an instant or vibration of communion with a work of art, the African mind experiences this communion constantly (1971: 5-6). However, rather than placing rational French thought in opposition to African aestheticism, Camara emphasizes that both French art and African oral tradition participate equally in this call from the depths of humanity: "Le griot, avant d'être historien [...] est avant tout, un artiste, et, en corollaire, ses épopées et ses légendes, des œuvres d'art. La tradition orale tient donc plus de l'art que de la science, elle relève de l'art plus que de la science" (1971: 9). The insistence on *art* seems to be appealing to the notion that African objects (or works of literature) should belong to the same world of museums and collections (or canons) as European masterpieces. In a sense, the inclusion of such objects in the realm of art had already long been possible, since a fascination with "art nègre" had flourished in the early 20th century, although museological practice continued to segregate African artifacts into ethnographic exhibits (Clifford 1988: ch. 4). Camara seems to be reiterating the call for Africa's rescue from anthropology, not through history, as some historians have tried to do, but through art, which he sees as operating on a higher plane. Moreover, he hints at a more

<sup>47</sup> The expression used here by Camara's performer, Babou Kondé, is famously the source of the title of Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (see ch. 4). The Malinke word *tele* signifies both "sun" and "era."

<sup>48</sup> This trope may date from the time of Samori himself. The Lieutenant Emile-Auguste-Léon Hourst, in an account of his mission to map the Niger River in 1895-6, comments that "Samori, Malinké lui-même, prétend à l'heure actuelle qu'il est Soundiata revenu sur terre" (1898: 52).

<sup>49</sup> The implied allusions to Sékou Touré, first president of Guinea, by Camara and Niane will be explored in chapter 2 as part of the more general connection between epic and problematic 20th-century political figures; this is also the central theme of Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), discussed in chapter 4.

authorial, less collectivist understanding of oral tradition. The performer's personal artistry outweighs correct recitation in its importance, and the act of communication is above all a private, aesthetic one, rather than a reaffirmation of community identity, as a functionalist anthropologist might contend. This emphatic interpretation of oral tradition as a one-on-one artistic communion appeals to a universal (really, Kantian and European) category of art that cannot resist a politically charged comparison to Europe:

Ce que la France a de plus haut et d'authentique et de profond, ce qui lui donne le rayonnement international que nul n'ignore, ce qui en fait la patrie de chacun des hommes des cinq continents, c'est son esprit, donc le message de ses chercheurs, de ses écrivains, de ses peintres, de ses architectes, de ses musiciens, de ses moralistes. C'est son appel des profondeurs cachées dans toute vie. (1971: 4)

The link between France's reputation, or self-perception, as the heart of artistic and intellectual life and its resulting symbolic capital in the world allows Camara to claim a similar benefit for Africa thanks to the continent's own artistic masterpiece, the epic. Tellingly, Isidore Okpewho, a Nigerian scholar whose book *The Epic in Africa* (1979) was published only one year after *Maître de la parole*, reiterates many of these concerns: complaining that the epics are too often studied ethnologically, and that African art in general is perceived as a "slave to ritual," he calls for a move away from "worldview" analyses toward increased attention to the "basic play interest of the artist"—that is, to authorial individuality and creativity (1979: 1-2). The civilizational calculus, now directed in Africa's favor, colors these studies' attempts to dispel the received ideas of primitiveness that seem to haunt Africanist scholarship.

### *Epic as Violence*

But the anticolonial attempt to rehabilitate African culture by valorizing epic is not the last word on the subject. Yambo Ouloguem's novel *Le Devoir de violence* (1968), sometimes referred to as an "anti-epic" (Austen 1999b: 84; Julien 1992: 42), radically rejects both colonial and anticolonial mobilizations of an African heroic past, portraying the story of the fictional Saïf dynasty as a "tableau d'horreurs" (Ouloguem 1968: 11). Though the novel takes inspiration from oral narratives and written chronicles of the Songhai Askia kings of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hale 1990: 139-48), it assigns the date 1202 to the beginning of the Saïfs, perhaps as an allusion or conflation with the era of Sunjata, the most famous of medieval African heroes. The main character, Saïf ben Isaac el Heït, is the last member of the dynasty; more of a sadistic villain than a hero of any kind, the French would-be colonizers and especially the *négraille* are victims of his manipulations and atrocities. As such, the interpretative schemes we have seen so far become inverted: rather than setting up great heroes as precursors either to the French conquest or to movements of African liberation, the major political events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are cast as merely one more manifestation of an ancient, never-ending history of violence. The novel saves special derision for Negritude's vision of precolonial Africa, mocking "Shrobénus" as an "écrevisse humaine frappée de la manie tâtonnante de vouloir ressusciter, sous couleur d'autonomie culturelle, un univers africain qui ne correspondait à plus rien de vivant" (1968: 103), and making explicit in a critical way the link between usable medieval histories and the politics of independence: "Véridique ou fabulée, la légende de Saïf Isaac El Héït hante de nos jours encore le romantisme nègre, et la politique des notables en maintes républiques. Car son souvenir frappe les imaginations populaires" (1968: 14). For this novel, any politically usable

hero, (anti-)colonial or otherwise, amounts to an inexcusable romanticization because it occludes innumerable histories of oppression. The *négraille* inevitably ends up as the defenseless victims of heroes', and society's, inescapable cycles of violence.

In this sense, *Le Devoir de violence* seems to provide an extreme illustration of Claude Meillassoux's skepticism over the potential of African epics to represent any liberation at all:

Dans la lutte maintenant séculaire que mènent les Africains pour leur libération, la tentation est grande de se tourner vers la geste épique pour y reconnaître les champions de cette croisade. Dans cette perspective cependant, les caractéristiques originales de ces héros sont moins souvent mises en évidence que leur conformité, plus supposée que réelle, avec les modèles éthiques de l'Occident chrétien qui sont proposés à travers l'enseignement "à la française" actuellement diffusé. [...] Cette démarche me paraît fautive et dangereuse, car si le héros soudanien est fondamentalement distinct du héros chrétien, comme lui, cependant, il est l'expression non pas du peuple mais de la classe ou d'une fraction de la classe au pouvoir. Il ne peut être l'inspirateur d'une libération radicale. (Meillassoux and Sylla 1978: 371-2)

More than an attempt to set a prototypical African hero in opposition to a European one, Meillassoux's warning is ultimately an expression of suspicion toward any political use of heroic discourses. Even the Western epic tradition has, for him, been buried under centuries of "interprétation bien pensante" (1978: 371), and the African epic risks becoming trapped in the same fate if people continue to blind themselves to its dependence on violence, its "procédés rigoureusement sociaux" (1978: 372). This comparative reading, rather than serving to calculate Africa's relative primitiveness, instead suggests that *both* continents' heroic discourses require a healthy critical distance because they are subject to infinite ideological appropriations, whether by bourgeois ethics or by political elites.

Meillassoux's caution seems aligned not only with Ouologuem's cynical radicalization of the epic hero as a figure of cruelty, but also with certain epic performances that have been identified as portraying their heroes in a "non-reproductive" or malevolent light (Austen 1986). Paradoxically, Ralph Austen sees this antisocial aspect of the hero in oral performances as helping to cement social unity, mainly because the hero "defends [his] society against still more dangerous threats from outside" (1986: 390). Significantly, for Austen, such performances play a role in political criticism, functioning to "call into question the more idealized post-colonial picture of African rulership, one which conforms to the historiography of a Delafosse or Monteil" and to "subvert the claims of any political domination, whether European or African, traditional or contemporary" (1990: 43). While the Saïf model of malevolent heroes in *Le Devoir de Violence* is cast as a scourge on the *négraille* rather than a dangerous yet protective force, the overall work of the novel seems entirely directed towards subverting political domination. For this reason, rather than dismissing the novel as "heartlessly satirizing the past" as Austen himself does (1999b: 84), one might choose to read it as participating, albeit in an extreme way, in the critique of rulership and society that Austen associates with other epic texts.

### *Conclusion: The Problem of World Masterpieces*

The shift that I have sketched here leads away from a "usable past" vision of epic to a critical consciousness of its usability. During the turbulent vicissitudes of West African history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of epic came to assume different ideological meanings for different political and intellectual actors. In the midst of these transformations, an awareness of the need

to render African history legible through comparison to European history has strongly animated literary and academic approaches to the genre. More recently, social-scientific studies have tried to counter this paradigm by restricting their analyses to locally significant data and criteria, rather than depending on resemblances to European or Homeric models, although they do still retain the Greek term “epic”—a usage which I do not contest.<sup>50</sup> Yet, academic studies of epic from the last few decades often remain colored by a desire, however self-conscious, to rehabilitate Africa in the eyes of the world. The impassioned reaction to Ruth Finnegan’s denial of an African epic illustrates this desire vividly. I do not go as far as Jan Jansen in suggesting that this inclination masks a sort of scholarly self-interest and causes some critics to “invent” epics where none exist, nor do I suppose that academics are unaware of the problematic place of the epic genre as an object of comparative humanistic study. Rather, their awareness of the problem encapsulates a necessary contradiction. To quote Ralph Austen a last time:

In a much-publicized response to demands for multicultural revision of college humanities programs, the Nobel prize novelist Saul Bellow rhetorically demanded that he be introduced to “the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?”. If students of Africa ever took up Bellow’s challenge, the most obvious candidate for such monumental status would have to be the *Sunjata* epic [...] Most specialists on African history or oral literature would, however, reject the very terms in which Bellow poses his question.<sup>51</sup>

This gesture manages deftly both to answer Bellow’s question on its own “great books” terms, echoing Camara Laye’s description of epic as aesthetic masterpiece, then to reject those terms as implying an unsuitable approach to literature. Epic, and the great imperial past that goes with it, continue to be counted as African contributions to the “oecumène civilisé” (Triaud 1998: 213) or “literary-political round table of nations” (Ben-Amos 1983: 278), even as we dismiss such notions as flawed and romantic.

---

<sup>50</sup> As early as 1980, Johnson expressed hope that “the rigid model of Greek epic will not continue to dominate scholarly thinking about this genre” (1980: 312); his complex list of criteria for an epic in Africa makes no reference to European models (1986: 30-57). Belcher points out that the Eurasian point of comparison is more a need felt by scholars to make their work valuable to others than an intrinsic quality of epic, and suggests that the preoccupation with equivalence between very different epic corpuses should be channeled into finding a “harmonious” scholarly approach that can be applied to all (1999a: xiii-xiv). Jansen argues that Johnson as well as Okpewho have “undermined the Homeric hegemony” in African epic studies (Jansen 2004: 73), a claim which Conrad rejects, maintaining that epic standards come from more scattered Eurasian sources (2008: 194). We may also remember with Okpewho’s critics that although this scholar claims to analyze African epic within the framework of oral performance, he sometimes makes direct comparisons to the Homeric poems to prove that African epics are indeed epics (see critiques in Ben Amos 1980 and Johnson 1980: 325 n. 18).

<sup>51</sup> Austen (1999a: 2), citing Saul Bellow in Atlas (1988: 31).

## Chapter Two

### *Uncertain Heroisms: The Politics of Performance and Interpretation*

At the core of West African historical narratives we call epic is an attempt to cast a link between the present and a heroic past. So far I have examined some of the politically charged attempts made to define this link by colonial and postcolonial commentators, suggesting that while we do not have to throw the word “epic” out completely, we cannot take it for granted as a transcultural fact. But the relationship between ideology, narrative form, and history runs deeper than the interests of ethnologists and literary critics. Heroic narrative is already marked by ideology at the moment of its performance in an oral setting. Many descriptions of the work of epic—most notably, in the case of West Africa, the studies of Christiane Seydou—adopt a functionalist orientation, emphasizing that the genre’s exultant tone serves to reinforce group identity and to legitimate the distribution of power and authority within the group.<sup>52</sup> As such, heroic narrative is readily seen as a conservative—or, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s celebrated word, monological—force in societies that possess it, favoring a dominant model of class and gender roles, and of ethnic or religious identity. But what happens when each performance of a genre is, contrary to Bakhtin’s notion of the epic’s “absolute past,” *precisely* about the crisscrossed processes of negotiation and reevaluation that must take place between the heroic models of the past and the cloudy conundrums of the present? Given the long history of politically tinged arguments for the inclusion of Africa in the category of “epic,” as I described in the last chapter, it makes sense, if only as a first step, to try to reexamine the impact of this category on novelistic writing from the perspective of West African literature. The crucial contribution of this particular heroic corpus to the domain of written literature is, I will argue, its present-ness—that is, its constant and complex engagement with the present. I propose in this chapter to highlight this complexity of West African heroic narrative, first by drawing on anthropological definitions of a West African epic genre, then through some examples of ideological ambiguity or contradiction in specific narratives, and finally through an analysis of the dialogical process of interpretation in which oral performances are embedded. This potential can then help us retheorize the relationship between oral epic and written literature in the West African context.

#### *A Flattened Genre*

In spite of newer research, literary critics continue to associate heroic narrative with a flat, bygone era of pre-modernity quite freely, especially in the case of African texts and traditions.<sup>53</sup> In particular, scholarship on written literature still relies on the vision of epic constructed by theorists of the European novel, especially Bakhtin, according to whom

tradition isolates the world of the epic from personal experience, from any new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new point of view and evaluations.

<sup>52</sup> See Johnson (1980 and 1992 [1986]), Seydou (1982 and 1988), and Kesteloot and Dieng (1997).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Julien (1992: 46-7 and 52-3), Gorman (2003: 18-21), and Bisanswa (2007: 82-84). Even though Julien provides a long refutation of Mohamadou Kane’s argument that the written novel complexifies the relatively simple schemes of the oral narrative (see Kane 1982), she still resorts to Bakhtin’s binary of epic and novel in her analysis of Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* [1973]). In a similar way, Gorman and Bisanswa also rely on Bakhtin’s paradigm to explain how the novel rewrites or uses epic.



[...] Thanks to this epic distance, which excludes any possibility of activity and change, the epic world achieves a radical degree of completedness not only in its content but in its meaning and its values as well. The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present. (2002 [1981]: 17)

Bakhtin's epic world is untouchable by the present, and functions only as an unreachable model of stable values and meaning which people in the present can gaze upon with awe; any critical reflexivity or reinterpretation of this world must come from outside it—from a “modern” perspective, embodied in the *always* re-thinking and re-evaluating genre of the novel. Other theorists echo Bakhtin's dichotomy between epic past and modern present.<sup>54</sup> When we consider this flattening in conjunction with a certain kind of anthropology's focus on group identity and ideology in the study of oral literary production, it becomes easy to understand why such production, especially in the case of Africa, is portrayed as one-dimensional, conservative, or monological, rehearsing the “worldview” approach which Isidore Okpewho had decried (1979: 1-2). The worldview approach to epic and folklore more generally has, to a large degree, stuck, at least among scholars of literature. For Diomaye Sene, the West African historical epic portrays

un monde où la parole tient lieu de magasin et de véhicule pour les valeurs indispensables à l'identification et au maintien de la communauté. Cette civilisation de l'oralité, en développant le rôle de la mémoire, a limité le sens de l'esprit critique et du libre examen au profit d'une collectivisation des mentalités et de leur annexion par un sacré sans visage qui exige respect et fidélité. Ainsi la presque impossibilité d'un regard éloigné entraîne une noyade collective dans une mare de discours qui favorise une sédentarité culturelle. (Sene 1995: 38-9)

Epic is easily seen as the ideological support of a fully elaborated system of meaning which it must render exciting and inspiring: an “idéo-moteur,” as Mamoussé Diagne puts it, a “provocation à être et à agir” according to the group's norms and values (2005: 291). In parallel ways, Sene and Bakhtin assert that collective worldviews or systems of meaning do not admit any sort of critical reflection or self-understanding. Critical reflection belongs to the analytical world of modernity, not to the flat world of ancient heroes, African or otherwise.

But do these paradigms of epic and novel apply outside of Europe—or even, for that matter, within it?<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin's unrelenting equation of epic and the absolute is perhaps too easy a target from an Africanist perspective, given his complete reliance on the canonized, written Homeric poems as models. And it is clear that his real point of departure is the novel, against which Greek epic is contrasted to provide a foil (Sherman 1995: 184).<sup>56</sup> While some more recent critics have attempted to redraw the line between epic and novel in order to more fully

---

<sup>54</sup> Georg Lukács sees in the novel an alienated consciousness that replaces the holism of epic (1968 [1920]). Ian Watt, who sees the novel's emphasis on individual experience as replacing the more collectivist, universalist orientation of “literary traditionalism,” including epic (Watt 1957: 13)

<sup>55</sup> See Sherman (1995) for a detailed criticism of Bakhtin's construct of epic within the context of European literature.

<sup>56</sup> Clark and Holquist suggest in passing that Bakhtin's construct of the “epic” as absolute may be masking a criticism of the Russian socialist realist novel of his day—an official genre with rigid conventions geared toward the propagation of Soviet ideology, rather than toward deploying the heteroglossic plurality of popular voices that so fascinated Bakhtin (1984: 274).

grasp the inspiration that contemporary literature can draw from epic, their analytical lens is resolutely focused on the continuing affinity, or search, for a heroic archetype which is long gone. Modernity ponders the lost sense of totality that the hero embodies (Moretti 1996), or endlessly rewrites the great genre of Eurasian antiquity (Dimock 2006). Massimo Fusillo expresses a certain awareness of the constructedness of the epic-novel divide and its ramifications, reminding us that

one of the ways that modernity legitimizes itself is by emphasizing discontinuity and creating myths of an absolute past. The same obsession has driven efforts to establish a mechanical equivalence between the epic and orality in “primitive” cultures, an equivalence that has been downplayed or rejected in the latest anthropological studies. (Fusillo 2006: 39-40)

While Fusillo touches on the problem which I seek to develop here, his focus is resolutely on European literary history, which he frames in terms of “the late birth of the novel and the precocious death of the epic” (2006: 35) but does not attempt to export elsewhere. As he suggests, if the equivalence of epic and primitive is applied to Africa, as it was in colonial ethnography (*infra* ch. 1), the relegation of heroic narrative to a time of cultural stagnation or frozenness in the past reproduces a set of temporal structures derived from contradictory tropes of the primitive: the African is either trapped in the present and has no history, or else is trapped in the past and has not yet caught up to the present of modernity.<sup>57</sup> This kind of claim represents a classic example of what Johannes Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness” in anthropological discourse (1983 and 1991): the speaker—in this case, not an anthropologist but a politician seen by many as neocolonial—locates the “other” in an archaic time that is segregated from his own. In the specific context of epic, I have shown how colonial-era commentators used the comparability offered by this invented genre in order to locate African peoples on evolutionist scales of primitiveness and civilization, debating on whether they might be said to be *still* in a “heroic age” which for European history would be always-already in the past. It is my argument that West African epic discourse, contrary to the colonial and neocolonial discourses that have been articulated around it, interacts with, represents, and helps produce the present. It seeks both to define the present in terms of the past and to reinterpret the past in light of the present—all while commenting on political realities like that of the nation-state.

Theoretical work in folklore studies and linguistic anthropology in recent decades has opposed both of the negations I have discussed so far, namely the denials of critical potential and of coevalness in oral performance genres. Studies now emphasize just the opposite: that performances contain many tools for reflecting critically on a community’s history and official discourses while remaking its social relations, and that the student of Africa should allow the “intersubjective time” of communication and fieldwork to penetrate her or his scholarship (Fabian 1983, Tedlock 1995). Karin Barber and Paolo de Moraes Farias have called for a greater attention to that side of oral texts which is “evasive and ambiguous[,] their capacity not only to

---

<sup>57</sup> Denials of African historicity have taken a number of forms during the colonial and neocolonial eras. Colonial publishers of African folklore attempted to standardize and infantilize the narratives they collected in order to facilitate colonial governability (Kavwahireri 2004). Anthropology, following a colonial structure of knowledge, has studied its “natives” in a way that freezes them in an ethnological present (Thomas 1996 [1989]). In economic history, the imposition of neoliberal “structural adjustment programs” on African states starting in the 1980s tried—and, for the most part, failed—to make these states “catch up” with more successfully industrialized countries around the world, implying a colonial logic of time in which Africa always represents a belated copy of European modernity.

take on radically different significances from one historical moment to the next, but also to accommodate at the same moment incompatible significances, with an effect of dynamic ambiguity” (1987: 1). If oral narratives are able to mean differently both diachronically and within a single utterance, it is because they reflect both changing times and the complexity of any given moment; that is, they are always in a self-reflexive dialogue with the present. This conclusion is the result of an increasingly clear awareness among scholars that any traditional repertoire must constantly renew itself in order to remain pertinent in light of present concerns and contexts (Vansina 1965: 78). Pragmatics- and performance-based approaches in linguistic anthropology have emphasized the multiple variables that shape meaning in a single performance event (Bauman and Briggs 1990). This stress on specificity complicates any simple view of “group ideology” or “worldview,” since the interactions between variables, and between participants in the event, dynamize the social creation of meaning and the production of social relations, rather than merely constituting a one-way transmission of message from speaker to listener.

This increased complexity has been bolstered by a redefinition of what traditional discourse is: instead of an ensemble of knowledge or practices that bears objective transmission from past generations, we now tend to see tradition as an interpretive designation that is always applied in the present (Handler and Linneken 1984). The interpretive act of *traditionalization* takes place in a historical present and is inevitably tied to strategic goals; it is “seen less as an inherent quality of old and persistent items or genres passed on from generation to generation, and more as a symbolic construction by which people in the present establish connections with a meaningful past and endow particular cultural forms with value and authority” (Bauman 1992: 128). Such a focus on construct rather than essence has opened up a wide field of study in the area of “invented traditions,” shedding light on the roles played by, for example, colonial governance or local communities in the creation of cultural forms which are said to be old but which in fact are recent.<sup>58</sup> The “strategic process” of traditionalization can thus be directed toward, for example, dominating a colonized other or toward preserving a sense of heritage in a globalized world. While some genres, rituals, or practices can be objectively older, and thus seem less invented, than others, the key point here is that objective oldness is irrelevant when an item is understood as traditional. What matters is the act of interpretation in the present, which is always tied to strategic, and therefore “re-thinking and re-evaluating,” thought processes in the present. Paradoxically, these kinds of analyses draw on approaches similar to that of Bakhtin, who emphasizes the dialogism of all discourses in society,<sup>59</sup> and for whom the novel constitutes a laboratory *par excellence* for studying this reality at work. Studies of verbal performance draw Bakhtinian dialogism away from the novel and into the arena of oral genres, thus including living traditions of epic or heroic narrative, which Bakhtin himself had not considered in his key essay “Epic and Novel” (2002 [1981]).

The consequence of these various areas of anthropological and sociolinguistic inquiry—performance studies, traditionalization, and Bakhtinian dialogism—is that specific performances of epic narrative can be studied in all their complexity, that is, as sites where a diversity of social discourses and interests intersect, rather than as transparent articulations of a group’s ideology. While a sense of the epic genre’s hegemonic function of celebrating authority, identity, and power has not been lost, the importance of this has been relativized by a greater awareness of all

<sup>58</sup> See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Dimitrijevic (2004).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, discussions of dialogism in Bakhtin (1984: 182-185), Bakhtin (1986: 67-76), and Vološinov (1973: 38-41).

the other factors shaping meaning in a performance. Rather than expressing *only* a “monological” worldview or a single official discourse, these messages are traversed by a multitude of other concerns.

### *Compromised Heroes and Transgender Warriors*

Specialists of African epic recognize this complex relation to group ideology and even propose it as a defining aspect of the genre. Pascal Boyer goes so far as to argue that the genre depends on “énoncés confus ou contradictoires dont il est impossible de tirer aucune proposition claire quant à ces notions” (1988: 17), while Christiane Seydou describes African heroes as “excessive, outside norms, and fundamentally inimitable (without which they would doubtlessly lose their very status as epic heroes). It is clear that epic does not propose a model or illustration of behaviors to reproduce; it wishes to be awakening and movement” (1982: 95). Both of these descriptions emphasize incongruity within heroic narrative, a suggestion that the genre does not only enforce social norms, but may also include space to reframe, recontextualize, or even relativize them.

This leads us to a paradox: the “epic” presents itself as both imposing and resisting normative readings, both (centripetally) enforcing social norms and (centrifugally) inviting us to question or reinterpret them. This double potential, at the same time pragmatic and reflexive, takes form concretely in the fact that a performance can reflect or challenge the concerns of those participating in it. It is telling that representations of the figure of the griot<sup>60</sup> are ambivalent in West African cultures and literatures: alternately cheap flatterer, inspiring truth-teller, or shrewd manipulator, the griot’s message is shaped by what he or she wants to accomplish, as well as by what the audience wants to hear (Miller 1990: 82-8, Thiers-Thiam 2005: 7-10). David Conrad highlights the potential for disagreement among traditional utterances in a study of depictions of gender in Mande epic. Discussing the recurring figures of the *femme fatale* and the heroine, he explains,

The men whom these women serve and the jeliw [griots] who tell the story (it is basically all the same one) express their own attitudes toward the femme fatale through variations of such sentiments as “never trust any woman,” “all heroes who perish, do so as victims of woman’s treachery,” and “if you see men fighting it is women who make us fight.” Proverbs reflecting female marginalization on the one hand and epic discourse exalting heroines on the other demonstrate the ambiguous position of women in Mande society. [...] On the positive side [of this ambiguity] are episodes of epic discourse containing implicit acknowledgement that females, however dangerous they may be, lay the foundation of male success. (Conrad 1999: 193)

Conflicting views on gender roles and the importance of women can be encapsulated within traditional speech, and even within individual performances. For Conrad, the griot’s and heroes’ stated mistrust of women are one and the same, for their use of misogynistic proverbs is conflated into a single male discourse shared by performer and character—a discourse which is

---

<sup>60</sup> The French word “griot” refers to a member of an endogamous artisanal class specialized in the preservation and performance of oral tradition in West Africa. Many contemporary scholars prefer to avoid this word precisely because of its contradictory connotations and ethnographic imprecision, preferring local vernacular terms like *jeli* (Mande) or *gewel* (Wolof). However, because this study spans a range of ethnic groups and focuses on commonalities between their traditions, I use the word “griot” without hesitation.

contradicted by figures of women who help deliver victory to male heroes, or take on warlike heroic traits themselves in a given episode. Any attempt to analyze such a performance must take into account both of these narrative components, one of which asserts male superiority and admonishes against female malice, while the other mitigates these claims.

Indeed, the motif of transgender warriors, which recurs in heroic narratives both from within and outside Mande cultural areas, can be revealing here. Conrad gives an example from a *Samori* variant, where “One-Breasted Denba” organizes a vengeful battle against the hero precisely because he did not trust her. She not only bares the formidable occult power of the female sexual organ, but demands to wear her brother’s trousers, thus appropriating male power as well; her one-breastedness serves to underline her androgynous might (1999: 209-210). In the Fulani epic of *Boubou Ardo*, the hero’s wife fights to the death in her husband’s place when he is blinded (B. Dieng et al. 2004: 78-9). In the heroic legend of the *Tuesday of Nder* from northern Senegal’s Walo kingdom, an entire village’s women rides into battle dressed as men because their husbands are away and unable to protect it.<sup>61</sup> My goal here is not to give a distorted picture of the place of women in these stories, which also contain scenes of brutal misogynistic violence, but rather to demonstrate the clash between the social norm of male domination and the female capacity to transgress it. The rape of Sunjata’s mother Sogolon is perhaps one of the most emblematic instances of how power is gendered in West African heroic narrative. Sogolon resists sexual intercourse by using, in some versions, “a variety of defensive weapons including lion-like claws, porcupine-quill pubic hair, and spikes from her breasts” (Conrad 1999: 201), but she is eventually tamed and tricked into sex through terror, thus paving the way for the hero’s birth and the reproduction of male-dominated order. Female power, including the occult forces of sorcery and the body, is immense and dangerous, capable of violently checking or appropriating male power and being violently checked by it.

The case of the Islamic religious epic further demonstrates this ambiguous complexity. The transformation of the animist model of the West African hero into an Islamic one over the course of the 19th century represents a decisive moment in the genre’s historical development.<sup>62</sup> As the region was swept by a wave of massive Islamization led by the jihadist movements of figures like Omar Tall, the new Muslim order adapted ancient institutions and forms of expression, including heroic narrative performed by griots, for its own purposes. An “Islamized” epic like that of *Omar Tall* both appropriates the symbolic grammar of the animist social order which preceded it and portrays this order as impious—while, in fact, depicting the approaching French colonial penetration as aligned with the pagans, against Islam. As Diomaye Sene explains, the main motifs of pre-Islamic heroic narrative, “quoique jugés impies et encombrants,” are transformed and harnessed to serve new religious heroes: “Dieu prend la place des divinités animistes, l’ange se substitue aux génies pourvoyeurs d’objets magiques ou aux vautours messagers, le marabout au roi et le talibé au sujet” (1995: 61). Key animist elements are replaced by Islamic counterparts, creating a multilayered text that draws from both symbolic

---

<sup>61</sup> I discuss this episode in detail in my conclusion.

<sup>62</sup> I am referring here to the specific wave of Islamization that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some older narratives, like *Sunjata*, had been absorbing elements of Islamic influence over many previous centuries, while others had remained relatively impervious to Islamic influence (see Conrad 1985). The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic epics stand out because they specifically recount the jihads of their time.

grammars.<sup>63</sup>

In the case of Omar Tall, who advocated a reformist version of Islam in the areas he conquered (mostly Mali today), the paradox embedded in epic accounts of his feats is clear: the break with animism is sung in a genre of animist origin which retains traces of this past. Samba Dieng notes the visible syncretism which persists in certain parts of the *Omar* narrative, such as the episodes leading up to the death of Karounka Diawara, a warrior who resists the hero's onslaught and refuses to convert to the new religion. Karounka is so powerful that it takes seven years to defeat him; in one version that Dieng recorded in Fulani from the griot Thithié Dramé in suburban Dakar,<sup>64</sup> Karounka's defeat is only possible when Omar gives permission to his companion Ardo Aliou to resort to "black magic," that is, a scheme involving divination, a disguise, and tricking Karounka's wife Sirakhonté—a captive—into revealing the secret of her husband's occult protection (S. Dieng 1984: 241-61 and 1989: 173). The scene in which Omar consents to the use of black magic not only demonstrates the ideological ambiguity of the political landscape in which he is operating, but implicates both him and Karounka personally in that ambiguity. I quote this passage in Dieng's French translation:

[Omar dit:] Ardo, ne déteniez-vous pas la science magique?  
 Ardo dit: Si, nous la détenons jusqu'a présent. [...]  
 [Ardo] dit: Qu'y a-t-il?  
 Cheikh Omar dit: Karounka, ce maudit par Allah, Karounka est divisé: de son nombril jusqu'en haut il est créé à l'image des rois.  
 De son nombril jusqu'à terre, il est créé à l'image des saints [*waliyou*]. C'est ce qui retarde les choses. [...]  
 Essayez [la science magique] à votre tour, si vous pouvez quelque chose.  
 Ardo dit: Nul grief, tu l'ordonnes?  
 [Omar] dit: Je l'ordonne. (S. Dieng 1984: 241 and 247)

Karounka incarnates two contradictory sources of power, namely those of pagan king and Muslim saint; the contradiction is physically inscribed, as the top and bottom halves of his body each reflect a different source of strength. The association of his bottom half to Muslim saintliness is surprising given that his character is presented as fiercely, and entirely, opposed to Islam. Yet the doubleness of his power probably reflects the long history of syncretic or "impure" Islam among the peoples conquered by Omar, and suggests that, even in the realm of heroic jihad, such a daunting combination of Islamic and extra-Islamic forces will require *both* Muslim *and* non-Muslim strategies of conquest. While this kind of allusion to syncretism will hardly be a surprise to anyone familiar with religious practices in Africa, I point it out here because it illustrates the ideological thickness of epic discourse: even *El Hajj* Omar is compromised! The radical religious purist explicitly gives his consent to pre-Islamic magic practices—which Ardo Aliou feels obliged to confirm by asking, "Nul grief?"—because prayer and fighting alone do not seem to be sufficient to conquer Karounka.

This contradiction is significant. The scene where Ardo Aliou tricks Sirakhonté into betraying her husband further illustrates the issue that is at stake here, that is, the entanglement of

<sup>63</sup> This act of appropriation may apply not only to oral tradition but to social institutions more generally; Bassirou Dieng suggests, for example, that the figure of the marabout has taken over the precolonial king's forms of power and role in popular imagination in West Africa (2008: 333-5).

<sup>64</sup> Born in 1919, this performer is of Toucouleur origin (i.e. Fulani-speaking from northern Senegal), and the grandson of a griot involved in Omar's jihad (S. Dieng 1984: 7).

the exaltation of Islamic conquest with a host of pre-Islamic themes, all while bringing us back to the problem of gender:

[Ardo Aliou] lui dit, Mais Karounka est très têtue.  
 Sirakhonté lui dit:  
 Karounka n'est pas têtue, seulement vous n'avez pas encore découvert ses astuces.  
 Karounka possède une femme djinn appelée N'fene Diarra.  
 C'est elle qui a donné un gris-gris protecteur<sup>65</sup> à Karounka.  
 Elle n'a qu'un sein.  
 Elle lui a remis sept cure-dents... [...]  
 Tout homme qu'il combat, il le vaincra.  
 Mais s'il n'achève pas [les sept cure-dents], toute personne qu'il combattra le vaincra.  
 (S. Dieng 1984: 253 and 1989: 174)

This passage again emphasizes the notion of occult forces as key to a person's strength or downfall—a very ancient and widespread idea across Africa, and one which Omar is forced to confront on its own terms rather than condemning it as superstition or idolatry. Moreover, the passage manages in a single breath to weave together multiple strands of gendered themes, including the untrustworthy wife and the one-breasted female fighter, now in supernatural rather than in human form. This narrative strategy reiterates the uncertain place of women as analyzed by Conrad in the context of Mande epic; just as the figure of the hero embodies contradictory relationships to the religion or ideology he is championing, the figure of the woman embodies contradictory relationships to the hero, hovering somewhere between gender-bending occult power and a foolishness that can quickly be either exploited or construed as treachery.

In an even more pronounced way, the narrative of *Boubou Ardo*, also of Fulani origin, actually seems to hover over Muslim and animist ideological models, hesitating on which one to espouse—thus radicalizing the paradox that we already see in *Omar*. The hero, Boubou, is the *enemy* of an Islamic conqueror this time, Seku Amadu, who founded the empire of Macina (today, southeastern Mali) in the early 19th century; as such, the historical events referred to here predate those recounted in *Omar* by three to five decades.<sup>66</sup> In the story, Boubou is tricked into converting to Islam as a matter of keeping his word, but he apostatizes nine days later out of his disgust at seeing a woman being flogged for adultery. He hears her crying the names of pagan Fulani heroes, lamenting that if they were there, they would defend her. Boubou is eventually killed after a protracted magical struggle with a powerful Muslim marabout. But the marabout is unhappy about his adversary's death, as these closing lines show:

[Le marabout] dit: Non, moi, je ne vous ai pas ordonné cela.  
 Je vous ai ordonné  
 D'amener Boubou  
 Pour qu'il se convertisse,  
 Mais vous l'avez malheureusement décapité!  
 Cependant, c'est une tête chanceuse parmi les bienheureux!

<sup>65</sup> A *gris-gris* is an amulet charged with occult, usually protective, powers. In this case, Karounka's *gris-gris* consists of seven toothpicks which he must use before going into battle.

<sup>66</sup> Amadou Sekou founded his theocratic empire of the Macina in 1818, which is the historical period recounted in *Boubou Ardo*. Amadou's state was conquered in turn by (the historical) Omar Tall, who saw the Macina's integrity as compromised for a number of reasons, in 1862.

Boubou est pardonné! (B. Dieng et al. 2004: 83)

More than *Omar's* Karounka, who resists Islam from beginning to end, this hero embodies the conflict of two ideological systems whose clash is only superficially smoothed over by his death and pardoning. Throughout the narrative, each system highlights the other's deficiencies: Islam is associated with dishonor, and paganism with impiety. Boubou converts to Islam to keep a promise; he repudiates the new religion in order to uphold the heroic duty to protect women; but once he is dead, conveniently for the foundation of a Muslim theocracy, even his Muslim enemies ultimately acknowledge his hostile heroism, "pardoning" his recalcitrant disbelief and declaring him blessed. The suggestion in the above passage that Boubou should have been kept alive in order that he might reconvert hints at a desire on the part of the Islamic theocratic system to incorporate a "pagan" sense of honor or courage into itself, for its own benefit—indeed, that was visibly the goal of Islamizing preexisting heroic traditions in the first place.<sup>67</sup> But beyond the inevitable triumph of the theocracy, Bassirou Dieng sees the ambivalence of Boubou as a hero as key to this narrative: "La conscience narratrice reste indécise sur le héros à glorifier. Certes le héros traditionnel [animiste] est défait par la puissance nouvelle, mais le récit est une glorification permanente de la culture pastorale traditionnelle" (2003). We might go so far as to add that this epic seeks to glorify resistance to Islam within an Islamic idiom—or, more precisely, within a pre-Islamic idiom appropriated by Islam. Multiple layers of conflicting values and power/authority structures sit uneasily together in a single text, each system inviting criticism of the other. This ideological complexity illustrates the multidimensionality of epic and opens up a space for questioning and reframing ideological norms within this supposedly monological genre. For at its heart, *Boubou Ardo* not only tries to legitimate Amadou Sekou's moment of triumph, but also poses a question that would become crucial across 19<sup>th</sup>-century West Africa: To what extent must the new Muslim order compromise, or coexist, with the non-Muslim cultural forms and practices that preceded it?

### *Tradition and Power: The Cases of Mali and Guinea*

These layers of ideological complexity in the West African epic are generated by narrative and pragmatic forces that influence a performance's production of meaning in different ways. These forces are exercised not only at the level of content, as I have discussed in the cases above, but also in the way epic, or other traditional genres, are *used* for political purposes: many scholars have remarked that oral tradition serves a kind of praise function that can be directed toward anyone the performer wishes to flatter.<sup>68</sup> In the specific case of *Sunjata's* role in the nation-state of Mali, Manthia Diawara writes insightfully that

the Griots praised Modibo Keita, the country's first president, as the direct descendant of Soundiata Keita, Emperor of Mali. After the coup d'état in 1969, however, the same Griots

<sup>67</sup> This sense of Islam's admiration for its enemies is confirmed in the *Omar* epic, when Omar stops his troops from killing Karounka—at least at first: "His gifts are not yet exhausted, / And they are many. / He is not alone, do not capture him. / If by a happy turn he were to join us, what a valiant warrior! What a steadfast combatant, what a pagan!" (S. Dieng 1984: 195).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Jean-Loup Amselle's comment that epic flatters the powerful and marginalizes the powerless (Amselle et al. 1979: 383), which seems to echo in less pejorative terms the colonial ethnographer Charles Monteil's remark that oral tradition constitutes a mere "projection dans le passé des temps proches de nous" (C. Monteil 1968 [1929]: 54).



hailed the new president, Moussa Traore, as the savior of the country, a parallel to Tira Maghan Traore, one of Soundiata's chief generals who conquered Gambia. Evidently, Griots relate every event to The Epic of Soundiata. (Manthia Diawara 1992: 157)<sup>69</sup>

The work of a number of Malian intellectuals, most notably Massa Makan Diabaté, lends support to this analysis. Much literary effort has been expended to link the contemporary Malian state to the ancient Mali empire, and specifically the *Sunjata* epic, thus connecting statehood upwards to a heroic age and downwards to still current ethnic identities (Miller 1990: 99; McGuire 1999: 253-7).<sup>70</sup> Yambo Ouloguem's novel *Le Devoir de violence* (1968) represents a major, and vehement, exception to this trend. Mamadou Diawara suggests that the advent of radio and television actually *encourages* present-day griots to put traditional knowledge at the service of the nation-state, since getting on national or international radio exponentially magnifies their audience and prestige (1996). However, the relations between the state and the griot's art are not always straightforward or free of conflict. For one, the Malian state both needs and resists the power of griots: traditionality is an "indispensable" sign of legitimacy, yet it represents "an archaic social order anathema to the modern democratic state where citizens are all equal under the law and owe allegiance only to the state itself" (Roth 2008: 52). Conversely, griots are sometimes expected to maintain their independence from politicians. In one notorious case, Bakary Soumano, who had been recognized as the "chief griot" (*jelikuntigi*) of all Mali in 1992, was "destituted" from this function in 1998 for being perceived as too closely allied with the government of President Alpha Konaré; the public, feeling that griots should be beholden to their local patrons rather than to politicians on the national stage, turned against him and sided with his usurper Jeli Baba Sissoko (Roth 2008: ch. 5).

But the collusion between presidents and griots is by no means universally rejected. It is common practice for high-level West African politicians to hire griots for public occasions; in the case of Senegal, presidents have been known to choose official, personal griots to glorify them while recounting episodes in national history in traditionalizing or epic-like terms.<sup>71</sup> In spite of the uneasiness that may arise in such connivance between state and tradition, it is certain that each contributes to the other: griots confer legitimacy on the state, and the state claims traditional legitimacy for itself while conferring prestige and fame on fortunate griots. For Shaka Bagayogo, the inevitably heroic terms in which the Malian state thus casts its own legitimacy are eminently problematic, for they elevate

au rang de culture nationale la geste des guerriers pillards et esclavagistes qui ont dominé pendant des siècles le Soudan. Cette geste, extraite de son contexte, n'est nullement présentée comme l'expression d'une oppression passée, mais comme un des fondements culturels de l'affirmation de l'identité nationale. (Bagayogo 1987: 107)

Bagayogo here both acknowledges and condemns the practice of traditionalizing politics and politicizing tradition, since these processes constitute "une lecture fantasmagorique de l'histoire" and "une production culturelle qui n'a jamais été autre que celle des maîtres" (1987: 107). The

<sup>69</sup> See also Miller (1990: 99) and Diabaté (1986: 22-3) for similar observations.

<sup>70</sup> However, toward the end of his life in 1988 Massa Makan Diabaté expressed great disappointment with what he saw as the degradation of traditional class values, seeing griots of his day as cheap entertainers, and politicians claiming noble origin as impostors (Keita 1988: 59-60). This led him to declare in a 1984 interview that Mali needs modern statesmen who are willing to break with heroic models of the past (Thiers-Thiam 2005: 130).

<sup>71</sup> L.S. Senghor's personal griotte was Yandé Codou; Abdoulaye Wade's official griot was Ablaye Mbaye Pexh.

only thing truly linking politicians and their heroic models is the fact that both belong to the ruling class: an aristocracy in precolonial times, and a bourgeois elite in the postcolony. At the same time, Bagayogo complicates the role of genealogy—proposed by Manthia Diawara and others as a major strategy for griots of legitimating or marginalizing political figures (Miller 1990: 82-3)—in the case of the despotic ruler, arguing that the despot both claims a heroic lineage and places himself above family ties altogether. Through this contradictory gesture, the ruler intends to connect himself to the hero's family even as he echoes the uncertainties and exceptionality of a hero's birth, removing both from their family histories so that he may pose as the universal leader with no interests but those of the nation (Bagayogo 1987: 94-5).

We can thus adjust Manthia Diawara's formulation of politics and tradition under Mali's first two presidents. First, there are multiple, contradictory strategies of heroizing a political figure: the president is both descended from Sunjata and beyond family descent. Second, griot opinion is not universal, for traditionalizing speech may serve critical rather than purely sycophantic ends: "les faits et gestes serviront de supports pour expliquer, justifier, voire critiquer, la vie politique contemporaine" (Bagayogo 1987: 106). This insight is verified at least partially when we turn to the case of Guinea, where Sékou Touré claimed to be and was hailed as a descendent of Samori Touré, a warlord who built a military empire to oppose the French penetration of what is today Guinea and Mali toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Conrad has collected fragments of a *Samori* epic narrative which alternately praise and criticize the dictator; admittedly, in the selections published so far<sup>72</sup>, the Guinean performers sing Sékou Touré's praises while it is a Malian hunters' singer, Seydou Camara, who offers criticism in his performance, presumably safe on his side of the border and insulated from any possible retribution (Conrad 2008: 179-81). A look at Seydou Camara's words in a Malinké-language *Samori* fragment, which I quote below in Conrad's English translation, nevertheless demonstrates the potential for criticism of power in griot speech:

If you don't know politics, don't start a war. [...]  
Don't lead other people's sons into battles where they will disappear.  
Sékou Touré is a descendant of Toure ni Manjan [Samori]. (Conrad 2008: 181)

The griot's criticism is left implicit, phrased as a commentary on Samori's actions at the siege of Sikasso—which he lost; the allusion to Sékou Touré's behavior is only legible because his name is inserted as a descendent of Samori, ostensibly as a praise-line, but precisely during the description of one of the hero's failures. We are left to infer that Sékou Touré has committed the same mistake as his supposed ancestor Samori at the siege of Sikasso. Scholars have reflected on this double-sidedness of praise and panegyric<sup>73</sup> in other African contexts<sup>74</sup>, suggesting that beyond legitimation of a ruler's authority, praise also formulates "exemplary standards of

<sup>72</sup> Conrad is currently working on a book-length transcription, translation, and analysis of a complete *Samori* epic performance (see Conrad 2008: 175 and 2010: 372).

<sup>73</sup> For Roth, "Praise formulae can be seen as occupying a continuum between the utterance of an individual clan name and a complete epic recitation" (2008: 76). For a discussion of how panegyric or "praise-poems" are embedded in epic, see Johnson (1986: 7-10). Okpewho also reflects on the interrelatedness of panegyric and epic, suggesting that a universal distinction between them is unwarranted (1979: 70). Austen argues that the *Sunjata* epic as we know it today took shape in past centuries as panegyric combined with narrative motifs from Mande folktales and hunters' stories (1999: 70-2).

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Apter discusses the complex uses of panegyric at length (2007: ch. 2), drawing on the work of John Comaroff on the Southern Bantu (1975: 144-9) and of Ruth Finnegan in Sierra Leone (1970: 142).

conduct” against which his rule is to be judged, as well as a means of influencing his actions (Apter 2007: 33). Ralph Austen explains the potential for veiled reproach in such a context: “The performed praise language may even be deliberately cryptic both to display the poetic skill of the performer and to convey in a subtle way sometimes discomfiting messages to an incumbent ruler” (1999: 71). This phenomenon seems to be exactly what we observe in the speech of Seydou Camara regarding Sékou Touré.

In spite of such a potential for criticism, scholars like Shaka Bagayogo see the legitimating efforts of griots and politicians as always unjustifiably uniting traditionalization and decontextualization: to link the political present to a heroic past is to muddy and misuse history, to interpret the past in a deceitful way. In Guinea, the view of history provided by Djibril Tamsir Niane, the historian famous for having published the French-language *Soundjata* (1960) which has remained a central work of reference in African epic studies, provides a counterpoint to Bagayogo’s skepticism; for Niane, African history must “affirmer la personnalité africaine,”<sup>75</sup> which includes using the medieval Sudanese empires as inspiration for present-day government (Niane 1961: 6). Niane held this view not only in the early days of independence, but has continued to do so throughout his career.<sup>76</sup> What has changed over time is how specifically to construe the “African personality” in heroic terms. Mohamed Saidou N’Daou, once a student of Niane’s, explains how the latter’s version of *Soundjata*—which, we will recall, was the first widely distributed publication of any African epic—was eagerly read by the Guinean political elite as the story of Sékou Touré (N’Daou 2007). The fact that it appeared serially in *Horoya*, the official newspaper of the ruling *Parti démocratique de Guinée* (PDG), in 1961 suggests that Niane’s prose rendering of the epic originally lent itself quite easily to a propagandistic, pro-regime interpretation: “During this time, the epic story metaphorically identified Sunjata and the anti-colonialist struggle against Soumaoro’s domination with the nationalist Ahmed Sékou Touré and the Guinean heroic resistance against French colonization, respectively” (N’Daou 2007: 172).<sup>77</sup> N’Daou’s reformulation of the same idea in a footnote is particularly revealing, since it places the origin of this “metaphorical identification” squarely in the act of reading, rather than in, for example, authorial intent: “In this early post-colonial context, a reading of *Sundiata* easily telescoped our memories of Ahmed Sékou Touré’s struggle against the French colonizers” (169 n. 121, emphasis mine). The act of interpretation is thus brought to the fore: the epic narrative

<sup>75</sup> The term “African personality” is itself a historically charged term in Anglophone African letters. First coined by the colonial racial theorist Edward Blyden, it was taken up by the decolonization movement, most memorably by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. It is often seen as an Anglophone counterpart to Negritude. See Owomoyela 2008: 59-61.

<sup>76</sup> According to N’Daou, Niane presented a paper on “Nation-State Building in Medieval Africa” at a national conference in Conakry in 1995, and “defended the same idea again at the national televised debate on the history and cultures of the Mande people, in 2005” (N’Daou 2007: 169).

<sup>77</sup> N’Daou claims that Niane’s *Soundjata ou l’épopée mandingue* was “first published in sequences in *Horoya*” (N’Daou 2007: 172). However, this newspaper did not exist until April 1961, whereas the original *Présence africaine* edition of *Soundjata* is dated 1960. The serial publication of *Soundjata* in *Horoya* began in issue 2, dated 22 April 1961, and appears to have stopped by July (see issue 34, dated 13 July), with less than half of Niane’s text appearing in the newspaper’s pages. This odd interruption may be related to Niane’s fall from grace with Sékou Touré: Niane was imprisoned later in the year for his involvement in a teachers’ strike which was in full swing in September and October, but which had been preceded by governmental plans for education “reform” as early as June and July. Thus, while the *Soundjata* book appears to have preceded the serial publication in *Horoya*, and the serial publication itself was incomplete, the PDG clearly co-opted this epic for its own political ambitions, at least as long as Niane was on good terms with party leadership. This confirms yet nuances N’Daou’s assertion that the earliest Guinean readership read Niane’s *Soundjata* as a symbol of Sékou Touré’s anticolonial heroism.

may well promote group identity and normative values, but the process of applying these to real life—or even defining them—happens in a dialogical context, shaped by collective memories and current politics. In this case the “we” of collective memory is undoubtedly the educated political elite of Guinea whose hope was focused in the late 1950s and very early -60s on the person of Sékou Touré. Even if we hypothesize that Niane deliberately allowed context clues to lead the reader to an identification of Touré with Sunjata in those years, this strategy of writing becomes one more act of interpretation, however important, in the social process of attributing meaning to the epic.

Christopher Miller’s research confirms that a pro-Touré reading of Niane’s *Soundjata* was practiced at least as late as 1983; but he adds astutely that when we consider the book in retrospect, in particular given Niane’s personal suffering at Touré’s hands beginning in late 1961,<sup>78</sup> it is nearly impossible for critically minded readers not to invert the early nationalist paradigm, such that the despot becomes the nemesis rather than the hero (Miller 1990: 98). It is almost certainly with these readings and events in mind that Camara Laye, who himself had been forced to flee Guinea for fear of Touré, included a barely veiled attack on the dictator in his introductory essay to *Maître de la parole* (1978), another French prose rendering of the *Sunjata* narrative which has been said to be more deliberately “novelized” than Niane’s version (*infra* ch. 1). Camara begins his tirade by questioning the political legitimacy that epic is supposed to bring: “Nos hommes politiques d’aujourd’hui, à l’exception de quelques-uns, sont-ils de grands hommes? C’est douteux: ils font de la politique une entreprise sanglante” (Camara 1978: 34; Miller 1990: 99). This declaration is all the more striking since it does not appear in the first draft of this essay, which Camara had written between 1963 and 1971 as the introduction to his thesis *Le Haut Niger vu à travers la tradition orale* (Camara 1971). The thesis focuses only on the potential for postcolonial liberation that epic symbolizes, while the published version bitterly denounces the disappointments that followed the hope of independence.<sup>79</sup> These various pro- and anti-Touré interpretations of *Sunjata* are complemented by N’Daou’s own opinion: following his reading of the whole of Niane’s work, he concludes that this epic is specifically pro-democratic, recommending an exemplary form of parliamentary government—which the PDG abandoned soon after Guinean independence—since the hero Sunjata always respected the principle of shared governance (2007: 149, 169 n. 121, 172-3).<sup>80</sup> As such, N’Daou’s own work demonstrates the tension between normative readings of epic and the recognition that such readings are always embedded in particular political agendas. As such, if a comparison between African and European “epic” forms is possible, the point of contact is to be found in the politicization of this genre for a multitude of particular agendas, as David Quint has shown

<sup>78</sup> See, among other accounts of Niane’s imprisonment under Touré, Conrad (2010: 356-9).

<sup>79</sup> Both versions of the essay were most likely written during the author’s exile in Senegal, where he lived from 1965 until his death in 1980. During this period Camara worked on his thesis at the University of Dakar with historian Yves Person, author of the monumental 3-volume work on Samori (Person 1968). *Maître de la parole* was published shortly before Camara’s death, when he was gravely ill and beset by financial problems (see King 1980: ch. 1 and 2002: ch. 2).

<sup>80</sup> One cannot help but notice the contrast between the self-assuredness of this pro-democracy reading of Niane’s *Soundjata* and N’Daou’s analysis of later nationalist appropriations of the heroic figure of Samori in Guinea (2008). Beginning in 1968, the regime of Sékou Touré named a list of heroes specifically involved in the anticolonial resistance—thus including Samori but excluding Sunjata—and constructed official, nationalist interpretations of their legacy. Since the historical Samori’s opposition to the French consisted of a violent empire-building project of his own, many local communities have conserved traditions and memories of him as an oppressor rather than a hero, which the regime tried to suppress in favor of its own unified nationalist ideology.

throughout European literary history (1993), and as Isabel DiVanna has argued more specifically in the context of the *Song of Roland* amid 19<sup>th</sup>-century France's vacillations between monarchy, republic, and empire (2011). What is universal is not necessarily the existence of a worldwide epic genre *per se*, but the use, or invention, of genre to claim traditionality for power and authority. The past is glorified through cultural forms to simultaneously bolster and distract from a political present; but its refraction through different interests and interpretations illuminates the present with different hues.

*Toward a Critical Use, or Open Reading, of Epic*

Thus, epic fills a political need. As Christiane Seydou has argued so eloquently, it not only expresses a common sense of belonging, but moves a group's members to want to belong. More than a fact we can take for granted, epic is a construct into whose mold existing texts and traditions are placed—monumentalized—to serve the interests of cultural arbitrators, be they nation-states looking for legitimacy or colonialist powers trying to make sense of the civilizing mission. In the process, social actors inevitably have different intentions and interpretations when they perform or react to an epic narrative, complicating any attempt to identify the messages embedded in it as expressions of common values or beliefs. The fundamental characteristic of oral tradition—that it must be constantly reperformed and reinterpreted in order to remain pertinent in the present (Vansina 1965: 78)—is the source of this ambiguity. We can see the innumerable rereadings and rewritings of epic narratives, such as *Sunjata* or *Roland*, as a continued application of this principle, since the written word has become increasingly inescapable in the wake of colonialism, industrialization, and globalization. Among the many ideological readings that can be, or have been, ascribed to such traditions—imperialist, democratic, monarchist, for or against a given president—I have tried to highlight their ability to challenge, rather than exalt, the political status quo or regime in place, in order to show, against Diomaye Sene's view, that an "esprit critique" is indeed possible in the epic tradition (1995: 38-9). While an epic text or performance may always include an element of exaltation which seeks to defend and reanimate normative categories, there is ample opportunity for this process of traditionalization to be mobilized by speakers and listeners, writers and readers, toward critical rather than purely sycophantic or "culturally sedentary" ends.

Andrew Apter sees this potential in oral performance as one of *critical agency*, defined as "a speaker's self-conscious deployment of discourse to transform the sociopolitical relations within which he or she is embedded"; such agency is always "grounded in linguistic performance and reflexivity" (Apter 2007: 12 n. 11). Apter points out that agency can be directed toward any purpose the speaker intends, whether for claiming authority, exercising power, or both, "maximizing agentive power within the cloak of legitimate authority to make the desired difference" (2007: 6). But we can expand on this notion of agency by studying it not only in the metapragmatics of a given moment of oral performance, but also in the unending dialogical process of interpretation that takes place in society. The moment of performance itself is already inscribed in this dialogical process, since it constitutes an interpretation of a wider, preexisting repertoire. The communal values, sense of identity, and claim to traditionality that epics transmit are always being discussed and reinterpreted by a variety of different speakers—sometimes in a way restricted to qualified participants such as elders, a court, or griots themselves, but also,

especially in the democratized Africa of today, by citizens and writers at large.<sup>81</sup> In this increasingly scattered process of interpretation, there is a real potential for performers and other speakers to use epic, amid other kinds of traditional discourse, to question or reframe social norms rather than to merely assert them. Indeed, the multidimensionality of African heroic narrative has always been able, to some degree, to invite both individual performances and wider discussions of them to reflect on and challenge political and cultural realities. But this is all the more true today, for the weakening of censorship imposed by ancient social institutions, coupled with the spread of new ideas and intellectual empowerment, enables people interested in traditional genres like epic to conduct increasingly “open” interpretations or readings of them—so much so that certain figures have been accused of reading modern concerns, like liberation of the individual, into discourses where they have no place.

### *Traditional Criticism? An Ambiguous Example*

An interesting case of this tension between the “authentically ancient” and the “modern intrusion” within traditional discourse is that of an unusual griot from Mali, Wâ Kamissoko—unusual both because he was recognized by his peers as a *nwâra*, a griot of special talent and privilege, and as such was eventually buried with state honors (Cissé and Kamissoko 2000 [1988]: 1, 21), but also because his work has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest. Not only was he extremely prolific in his knowledge of Mande traditions, but his performances of these were extensively documented and submitted to considerable scrutiny by academics. Paulo de Moraes Farias identifies Wâ Kamissoko’s critical perspective as a key aspect of his originality: his representation of Mande tradition offers criticism of past communities, of unfolding events in Mali, and of the historical formation of particular traditions themselves (1993: 15). This originality would be challenged by other scholars precisely because they saw it as too unique.

Beginning in 1959, Kamissoko became a close collaborator with the Malian ethnologist Youssouf Tata Cissé, with whom he traveled across the country on research trips until his death in 1976, and through whom he met such luminaries of French anthropology as Jean Rouch, Germaine Dieterlen, and Claude Meillassoux. A frequenter of this milieu, he also participated in two unconventional seminars of the *Société commerciale de l’Ouest africain* (SCOA) in Bamako in 1975 and 1976, attended by the above scholars and others, including Amadou Hampâté Bâ and D.T. Niane.<sup>82</sup> The idea behind these gatherings was that Kamissoko, as the griot, would participate fully: both by performing or providing recordings of traditional material, much of which was related to *Sunjata* and other aspects of precolonial history, and by accepting questions

---

<sup>81</sup> Moraes Farias suggests, regarding Mande historical discourse, that the increasing degrees of secrecy surrounding the most esoteric layers of traditional knowledge provides “a necessary screen, behind which required rethinkings of tradition can be initiated and given restricted circulation, and behind which they can mature and become established among the *cognoscenti*, before being released to wider circles” (1993: 31). Apter applies this argument in detail to the case of Yoruba ritual genres that are reserved to priestesses, and more generally to what Mudimbe calls African gnosis or secret knowledge: for Apter, practices of gnosis do not necessarily have fixed content, but can have their meanings shaped and reinterpreted by authorized arbiters according to the needs of the moment (Apter 2007: ch. 3 and 5; Mudimbe 1988). For an analysis of the social and class transformations that Malian performers of oral tradition—who are no longer restricted to the professional class of griots—have undergone in the wake of colonization and independence, see Keita (1988), Mamadou Diawara (1996), Schulz (1997 and 2001), McGuire (1999), and Roth (2008).

<sup>82</sup> A third SCOA conference was held in Niamey, Niger, in 1977, but Kamissoko did not live to participate in it. Nevertheless the participants continued to discuss his work and legacy.

about his performances. This gave rise to lively, sometimes tense debate, since the authenticity of certain passages and themes of Kamissoko's repertoire was disputed by scholars as idiosyncratic; and, just as problematically from Kamissoko's point of view, the scholarly debate included issues of oral history, questioning the status of certain events that he recounted and their relation to what "really" happened. Moraes Farias identifies items that were especially controversial, such as Wâ Kamissoko's assertion that Sunjata, upon conquering the Manden from his enemy Sumaoro, abolished a certain practice of the slave trade that had been current in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Because this narrative element had not been found elsewhere, scholars disagreed over whether it could reflect an accurate historical reality, or perhaps a projection of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century experience of slavery into medieval historical discourse; it was further unclear, in the latter case, whether such a projection constituted a theme that had actually been transmitted over a few generations, or was merely evidence of revisionism undertaken by Wâ Kamissoko himself (Moraes Farias 1993: 15, 28-9). This kind of intellectual skepticism, when expressed during the SCOA conferences, put Kamissoko in an uncomfortable position, leaving him torn between the role of griot—which he took extremely seriously, and through which he claimed authority and expected some degree of deference (Cissé and Kamissoko 2000 [1988]: 16)—and that of scholarly interlocutor, expected by at least some participants to dialogue openly with them as an equal (Moraes Farias 1993: 22-3).

A second point of controversy was Wâ Kamissoko's frequent formulation of critiques of Islam, especially of what he called the "nouveaux, petits musulmans," whose reformist rigor he saw as destructive of pre-Islamic Mande culture (Cissé and Kamissoko 2000 [1988]: 5; Moraes Farias 1993: 15). He commented in particular on the artificiality of Mande traditional genealogies that claim Muslim founders, since the lineages in question clearly predate Islam. I quote Cissé's French translation of Kamissoko:

Quand l'islam prit au Manden le dessus sur la religion traditionnelle, "on" demanda à chaque clan de se trouver un ancêtre parmi les personnalités dont les noms figurent dans les "quatre livres descendus du ciel," autrement dit dans les quatre livres révélés par Dieu aux prophètes. C'est ainsi que *Djôn Bilali*, "Bilal, le serviteur" du prophète Mahomet devint l'ancêtre des Massalens. Sinon chacun sait que les ancêtres des Keïta, les Konâté, ont vécu longtemps au Wagadou avant d'émigrer au Manden où leurs descendants sont installés depuis plus de 2700 ans. (Cissé and Kamissoko 2000 [1988]: 26)

This discussion by Wâ Kamissoko of the origin of the Massalens-Keita, the lineage that gave birth to Sunjata and the Mali empire, deserves special attention. On one level, it can be read simply as a critique of Islam that defends pre-Islamic culture and ideology. The expression "religion traditionnelle" reflects the specifically non-Muslim valence that the words *tradition* and *traditional* have taken in the work of many Africanist scholars, who use these terms to refer to precolonial, pre-Islamic ideological systems with their own norms, and which are understood as being in competition with strict Islam. According to this reading, which would emphasize an ideological clash of "tradition vs. Islam,"—that is, "non-Islam vs. Islam,"—the griot attributes both authority and superiority to the former; for the fact of claiming a Muslim foundation narrative for the Massalens-Keita lineage can clearly be challenged on empiricist historical grounds.<sup>83</sup> But at another level, Wâ Kamissoko's discourse can be read as drawing attention to

---

<sup>83</sup> See Conrad (1985) for a discussion of the significance of the attribution of Muslim ancestors to Sunjata's lineage, and in particular of the figure of Bilali mentioned by Wâ Kamissoko.

traditionalization as historical process. His comments highlight how discourses of authenticity can change over time as a function of particular ideological interests—in this case, how Keita genealogies were reinvented to accommodate Islam. As such, he has formulated a critique not only of Islam, but of traditionalization itself—understood as the process by which authority drawn from the past is attributed to a cultural item—for he portrays it as historically contingent and dependent upon the political needs of the moment. In this reading, the notion of tradition takes on a wider meaning than “pre-Islamic,” for the essential criterion is that Mande genealogies still claim authenticity and authority from the past, even though they combine Muslim and non-Muslim elements.

This depiction of “tradition” as historically contingent is something of a risky business for a griot, because if taken too far, it could mitigate the authority of his or her own discourse, which is also influenced by present political needs that are projected into the past. For this reason, Jean Rouch remarks that “les traditionalistes ne veulent pas parler les uns devant les autres” (SCOA 1977: 257); any disagreement between their discourses could undermine the credibility of all. Wâ Kamissoko’s allusion to the historical limitedness and inventedness of certain traditions, then, constitutes a remarkable sense of self-reflexivity and critical perspective. The question we must ask is whether to understand this reflexivity as something which is part and parcel of speech that claims traditionality, or whether it is something from elsewhere, the product of a “modern” or ethnological consciousness that this particular griot may have acquired during his travels or from contact with outsiders—especially ethnologists. For Rouch, the latter scenario is more likely:

Pour moi, aujourd'hui, ce phénomène de Wâ Kamissoko est peut-être unique. Wâ est à la fois un traditionaliste et un érudit, capable de participer avec véhémence et vigilance à des discussions comme celle-ci. Pour le moment, [...] nous n'avons pas rencontré de personnage de cette classe et de cette catégorie. Si c'est un cas unique, pourquoi? Ma seule hypothèse: c'est que cette érudition est le fruit d'une collaboration de plus de 15 ans entre Cissé et Wâ. (SCOA 1977: 256)

Charles Bird echoes this recognition of Kamissoko’s uniqueness while expressing a greater sense of doubt as to its cause:

Bards like Wa Kamissoko could hold forth for hours explaining his interpretations of the things that he sang. Some of the things he would say were also said by others over a large territory; they were common knowledge. Other things that Wa would say were, to me, idiosyncratic. That is, I knew no other bards who said things like that. Did this mean that he was revealing things to outsiders that should be kept secret? I do not know the answer. My feeling is that he was a very original person. (Bird 1999: 280)

Paulo de Moraes Farias, on the other hand, sees Wâ Kamissoko as most likely working within the conventions and limits of tradition, under the principle that “tradition and critique of tradition [are] not watertight compartments” (1993: 22):

In spite of remaining a *jeli* [griot], he transgressed the roles conventionally ascribed to the informant/performer. He did so by weaving critical comments into his narratives, or parallel to them, and by re-expressing tradition in ways which risked being perceived as eccentric adulterations of traditional sapience. The substance of what he said can be shown to belong to the Mandenka pool of criss-cross traditions and counter-traditions, and can be attested from other oral



sources. But inherited information was liable to be organised by him in new patterns (including new time patterns), and to be presented in the form of new narrative episodes, in the light of his personal interpretation of it. (Moraes Farias 1993: 15)

Rouch's framing of the problem implies a certain incompatibility between tradition and modernity, authenticity and intrusion: Wâ Kamissoko's praxis either is located within the strictures of tradition, or supersedes it somehow. Moraes Farias's approach is perhaps more productive in that it moves beyond this opposition. While he does not use the word traditionalization, he hints at the reality that traditional discourse is not a given fact but a dependent on a process of interpretation, and as such has always been capable of incorporating new elements into preexisting material, or rearranging itself according to present-day concerns. Seen from this point of view, Wâ Kamissoko's reorganization of ancient discourse according to "his personal interpretation" is what all performers have always done. Whether we choose to interpret Wâ Kamissoko's idiosyncrasies as mostly "authentic" or mostly new, his intertwining of social criticism and self-reflexivity into traditional narrative offers us an inspiration to search actively for such criticism in the oral epic tradition. Was Kamissoko, or are we, reading modern concerns into ancient traditions? Maybe to some degree; but he shows us that there is enough creative space in those traditions for such a reading to be possible.

### *Oral Epic and Writing Realigned*

Wâ Kamissoko illustrates the ability of traditional discourse—including epic, given the central place of *Sunjata* in his documented work—to adapt to new situations, to draw in new perspectives, and to reinterpret itself from a critical point of view. In doing so, he invites us to question the classic binaries that underpin anthropological thinking in general, and discourse about Africa in particular. Johannes Fabian, discussing the work of Michèle Duchet (1971), expresses these binaries in a diagram, proposing the analogy

<i>civilized</i>		<i>present</i>		<i>subject</i>
to	as	to	as	to
<i>savage</i>		<i>past</i>		<i>object</i>

(Fabian 1991: 195)

where each term in the top row represents the speaker position of anthropological or colonial discourse. This (European) speaker reifies his other as belonging to a different category from himself, a category that is stuck in the past and incapable of adequate representation or self-reflexivity, and against which the speaker's own exclusive category of subjectivity, present-ness, and the ability to represent is defined. To this set of correspondences we might also add the following terms:

<i>anthropologist</i>		<i>modernity</i>		<i>novel</i>
to	as	to	as	to
<i>native or informant</i>		<i>tradition</i>		<i>epic</i>

The top-row alignment of the novel with modernity, as forcefully expressed by Bakhtin in "Epic and Novel," corresponds to the classic trope of the anthropologist, for it is only to these three

figures that the ability to critique and interpret is said to belong.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, the native informant, the traditional, or the African epic are not represented as thinking, but as simply *being*, or at most *speaking themselves*, in as restricted and unreflexive a way as possible.<sup>85</sup> Wâ Kamissoko, in contrast, demonstrates the possibility that traditional speech can incorporate a critical consciousness which is both self-reflexive and in dialogue with outside ideas, potentially including professional anthropology—with its links to colonial legacy and mass education—into the process of performance, thus rendering the above binaries obsolete. Like the ideological thickness and dispersed processes of interpretation which I have highlighted, Wâ Kamissoko allows us to envision epic as something dynamic, rather than flat.

Turning more specifically to the epic-novel problem, we can now move beyond the schema in which a complex novel form replaces a relatively simple epic one. Franco Moretti's theorization of the place of epic in literature, while broadly revising Bakhtin's straightforward set of oppositions, still rehearses it in significant ways. Moretti argues that a number of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Euro-American masterpieces should be construed as belonging to a "modern epic" genre because they engage in *bricolage* with forms identified as "epic" by Hegel: great action that pervades the narrative, embodiment of a "total world," and the identification of collective values with the individual or hero (1996: 11). His analysis is useful insofar as it illuminates a literary fascination with, and return to, the monumental past, arising from a need felt even by the most resolutely anti-traditional of Western intellectuals to revisit, if only ironically, the theological questions posed by Antiquity or Christianity (1996: 36). Yet Moretti does not escape the tendency of his predecessors to flatten the heritage of the past. His notion of the "modern epic" depends on an act of reinvention that is entirely located within a modern aesthetics, that is, in aesthetic orientations leading up to and following European high modernism. The question that he attributes to Goethe's work captures this problem: "Creation from the past . . . As in *bricolage*: old materials, and new treatment. [...] What is more important here: the 'objective' meaning of the classical figures, fixed by tradition—or their 'subjective' reinterpretation, mediated through the modern hero?" (1996: 41). Classical figures are, in this analysis, indeed fixed by tradition, and can only be rethought or *bricolés* by such artistic giants as Goethe, Joyce, Pound, and Garcia Marquez. Like other theorists of the novel, or of "the modern" in literature, Moretti's real starting point is relatively recent European literary history, not heroic narrative *per se*.

What his paradigm does not capture is the fact that tradition is itself already the product of a certain *bricolage* and "subjective reinterpretation." While tradition's ability to reinvent itself may be more limited than that of "modern" written literature because of the generic and institutional conventions that it must respect—hence the debate on whether Wâ Kamissoko's discourse can be considered truly "traditional"—it is clear that a certain amount of reworking must always be applied to a performer's repertoire in order to produce a performance. This process generates new opportunities for traditional speech to be pertinent in the present, and in some cases, endows it with entirely new themes, as the example of Sunjata's purported

---

<sup>84</sup> Concerning the figure of the anthropologist, I am thinking in particular of Marcel Griaule's careful orchestrations of his own ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988: ch. 2). Often comparing himself to an "examining magistrate [*juge d'instruction*]" who must sift through witnesses' testimonies and "documents," Griaule saw himself as finding truth and coherency among the chaotic fragments supplied by his informants (Clifford 1988: 74-5, 85). Their perspectives were limited, but his was panoramic.

<sup>85</sup> The notion of an age of epic as one of childlike wholeness finds its most complete expression in Lukács (1968 [1920]): ch. 1-3.

abolitionism may demonstrate. Seen from this light, the turn toward heroic material among certain African writers becomes not just an attempt to monumentalize the past—nor only an attempt to parody, reinvent, or lament it—but to mobilize those features of epic discourse which enable dialogue with the present, especially criticism of the present. Since the novel has long served as a platform for social criticism, it can thus be seen as continuous with epic in an important way. While the two genres are not the same thing, this continuity reveals an attention on the part of literary writers to details of orality, in particular to the timeliness of orality, which can shed new light on their work.

## Chapter Three

*Fetishes of Empire: Complex Historicities in the writings of Amadou Hampâté Bâ*<sup>86</sup>

The Sahel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a region in crisis. As jihads proliferated and one empire conquered another, clashes over religion, opposing alliances, and rival dynasties became more acute. The conflicts were first enflamed, then “pacified” by the French penetration of the West African interior in the century’s last decades. The fourth episode in Lilyan Kesteloot’s presentation of the *Epopée Bambara de Ségou* captures this turmoil. The scene, translated from an undated Bamana-language performance by the griot Sissoko Kabiné, stages a stalemate between the powers of Muslim and Bamana magic in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Segou (located today in Mali), where animist practices were recognized as official until the imperial city’s defeat by Omar Tall in 1861; yet a certain number of Muslims had long been tolerated there. A komo ritual elder called Dibi and a Muslim marabout named Karamoko Birama Siré Touré threaten each other at Nyamina<sup>87</sup> with occult punishments:

[Karamoko:] Dibi, je t’avais bien prévenu.  
 Je t’avais permis de faire ton Komo,  
 mais je t’ai interdit de passer ici [devant la mosquée]  
 sinon le matin te trouverait encore là.  
 L’avais-tu donc oublié Dibi?  
 [Dibi:] Certes tu as dit cela, Karamoko,  
 mais moi aussi j’ai dit quelque chose:  
 “Dieu ne fait pas le jour là où je me trouve.” (Kesteloot 1993: v. 1 p. 88-9)

Karamoko, offended that Dibi performs ritual dancing in front of the mosque, suspends him in the air, leaving him unable to move; but this apparent victory is really a draw, for as long as Dibi is stuck, the sun refuses to rise. Both men’s threats have come true. Although the narrative associates the marabout’s power with light but depicts the Komo ritual as presiding over darkness, it attributes clear moral superiority to neither. The two figures’ powers appear opposed yet complementary, each capable of immobilizing the other, and each requiring a certain amount of leeway from the other in order to function productively. When Karamoko finally agrees to break the deadlock, Dibi returns to his home outside the city, “et au fur et à mesure qu’il s’avançait, on vit le jour blanchir derrière lui / depuis la ville jusqu’à son repaire” (1993: v. 1 p. 89). Even more explicitly than the Fulani narratives of *Omar* and *Boubou Ardo* which we saw in the last chapter, this passage from the epic of Segou juxtaposes Islamic and pre-Islamic cultural

<sup>86</sup> The central narrative considered here is *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1973), read alongside the two posthumously published volumes of the author’s memoirs: *Amkoullel l’enfant peul* (1991), which covers his ancestry and childhood, and *Oui mon commandant!* (1994), which covers his service in the colonial bureaucracy in the 1920s and early -30s. In-text citations of these works are noted as *Wangrin*, *Amkoullel*, and *OMC*, respectively, followed by the appropriate page number.

<sup>87</sup> Conrad indicates that Nyamina was located “in Segou territory in the direction of Kaarta,” that is, to the west (1990: 248 n. 5506). Kaarta was a rival Bamana empire to Segou from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which, like Segou, was conquered by Omar Tall. Conrad also notes that “Monzon et le Dibi de Niamina” is one of only a few episodes that Kesteloot includes in her presentation of the Segou epic which does not appear in his presentation of it (Conrad 1990: 14 n. 2).

codes in a way that relativizes the authority of each, once again asking what kind of compromise between their aspirations for domination is necessary in order for society to thrive.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French conquest of the region was mostly complete. The Segu empire as well as its rivals and successors—especially the states of Omar Tall and Samori Touré—had been subjugated or suppressed by a series of French military campaigns. As colonial political order was imposed, ethnic and religious rivalries continued to simmer in the background, maintained through collective memories and oral tradition. It was in this context that Amadou Hampâté Bâ was born around 1900, descended from rival Fulani lineages that had fought on opposite sides of Omar’s wars; and it was in the same context that the work usually considered his masterpiece, *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1973), is set. Unlike the author, both the character and the historical Wangrin<sup>88</sup> are of Bamana origin, but they circulate within the same continuum of geographical and ethnic spaces in which Bâ spent much of his life—setting the stage, as we shall see, for both the author’s and the hero’s transcultural explorations of the workings of power.

Reflecting the context in which he grew up, the timeliness of tradition would remain, in many ways, the central issue of Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s career. Fascinated by oral stories at an early age, this venerable figure of Malian and African literature famously devoted much of his professional life to the collection and dissemination of oral texts, first during his career as a civil servant of French West Africa (*Afrique Occidentale Française* or A.O.F.) in the 1920s and -30s, and then as a writer, researcher, and diplomat under various auspices from 1942 until his death in 1991.<sup>89</sup> His published work includes essays on ethnography and religion, transcriptions and translations of oral texts, and personal memoirs; as such, he is most often remembered as a religious humanist and an intellectual defender of dying traditions. Nevertheless *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* stands out from the rest of his oeuvre for a number of reasons, not least of which is the controversy surrounding his claim that it is a work of pure nonfiction. The author always insisted that *Wangrin*, which recounts a wily black interpreter’s money-making schemes across a number of A.O.F. colonies from 1906 to 1932, was a nothing more than a faithful translation into French of the real Wangrin’s autobiographical narrative<sup>90</sup>; but scholarly readers have never stopped objecting that the story borrows significant elements from oral tradition, colonial literature, and Bâ’s own life story, displaying elements of creative writing or rewriting—or genius—on his part, and constituting a kind of generic hybrid.<sup>91</sup>

In particular, a number of scholars have seized on the notion that *Wangrin* somehow straddles the genres of novel and epic (Wynchank 1991, Julien 1992, Gorman 2003, Austen 2007: 154-5)—defined according to various lists of criteria—based in large part on the paradox of its “modern” setting and its framing as the oral exaltation of an extraordinary hero. For while the text claims to be a factually reported autobiography, the character Wangrin is characterized and

---

<sup>88</sup> “Wangrin” is a pseudonym for a real person who went by the names Samako Gnembélé (or Niembélé) and Samba Traoré, and whose life trajectory largely followed that recounted in Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s literary narrative (Austen 2007: 150; *OMC* 394-5).

<sup>89</sup> For detailed accounts of Bâ’s personal and professional life, see his memoirs, as well as Muriel Devey’s biography (Devey 1993).

<sup>90</sup> See the author’s foreword (dated 1971) and afterword (dated 1986) in the 1992 edition of *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*. See also Héléne Heckmann’s “Annexe II: La Véritable identité de Wangrin” (*OMC* 394-5).

<sup>91</sup> Maryse Condé raises some of these issues in an interview with Amadou Hampâté Bâ (Garett 1977: disc 2, side A). Samba Dieng (2005) and Ralph Austen (2007) summarize the tensions between biographical, autobiographical, and novelistic aspects of the text. Anna Pondopoulo (2010) analyzes in depth the specific connections between *Wangrin* and colonial literature, especially the novels of Robert Arnaud, an administrator whom Bâ knew personally .

formally framed as the kind of hero one might find in an oral traditional narrative, while also being reminiscent of the trickster tale (Mokobia 2005). Wangrin's virtuosic abilities to deceive his enemies, particularly the French, combined with his specifically noble sense of honor, cause his deeds to be sung and recounted like those of a hero. The text of the story was ostensibly dictated to Bâ by (the real) Wangrin himself while a griot provided accompaniment on the guitar in the manner of a traditional performance; it raises the protagonist to cosmological dimensions, beginning with a myth of origin of the hero's village and a prophecy announcing his great destiny; the account of Wangrin's coming-of-age is centered around his ritual initiation and consecration to a Bamana divinity who returns throughout the narrative as his particular patron; a multitude of proverbs and passages from oral tradition, including heroic narrative, are woven into the main narration; Wangrin himself is depicted as Bamana nobility and therefore demands a certain amount of praise-singing, evoking the panegyric-epic continuum (*infra* n. 73); and the historical context of the hero's birthplace in Macina (today, southeastern Mali) is explicitly situated in the aftermath of Samori Touré,<sup>92</sup> Omar Tall, and the French conquest, that is, in the legacy of empire-builders who had come to be remembered in epic terms. All of these elements have been signaled by scholarly readers as epic dimensions of the text.

Eileen Julien (1992) and Susan Gorman (2003) suggest that these epic features of *Wangrin* essentially function as signifying their own past-ness, even obsolescence: the central drama of this text is the *mise-en-scène* of a recent historical period as absolute past in Bakhtinian epic terms. Julien, in particular, argues that *Wangrin* represents the African epic's final gasp, its last possible expression in a world where the transition from communitarianism to individualism is inevitable. As she puts it, Wangrin's trickeries are heroic in the age of colonialism because "no other outlets for heroic action seem possible. [...] The old heroism is gone, and in its new avatar, it can only work toward personal, material gain" (1992: 66). For her, this situation encapsulates a Bakhtinian shift from an "epic impulse" to novel, while Gorman sees *Wangrin* as occupying a "both-and" position, fulfilling Bakhtin's criteria for both epic and novel (2003: 141-6), but in which epic represents the past.

However, the role of the trickster tale becomes significant here. In a West African context, the trickster figure is embodied in the character of the risk-loving, pretentious hare who always outsmarts the foolish hyena.<sup>93</sup> The hero alludes directly to this stock character, describing himself as a person with "plus de ruses dans [s]a tête qu'il n'y en a dans celle d'un vieux lièvre" (*Wangrin* 181). As the folklorist Harold Scheub has recently argued, the figures of hero and trickster are not as far apart as they might seem: "Trickster is a clown, a master of disguise, of deception," but "What makes the hero of interest is the fact that trickster energy is at the heart of the heroic epic" since both characters embody "chaos and order" (Scheub 2012: 12).<sup>94</sup> At first glance, the trickster, a lowbrow source of entertainment, may seem diametrically

<sup>92</sup> *Wangrin* refers to the Macina as "Namaci" and to Samori as "Yorsam" (18-19). Bâ constantly uses anagrams in this manner to refer to historical places and persons in *Wangrin*, supposedly in order to protect the real-life identities of his characters; yet many such ciphers are easily recognizable to a reader who has some background knowledge of the events in question. This practice was typical of colonial literature (Pondopoulo 2010). "Wangrin" itself is, as the author tells us, a pseudonym. Even when anagrams are not readily decipherable in *Wangrin*, the names they conceal are often, though not always, given in correct form in the author's memoirs.

<sup>93</sup> The best-known written collection of these folktales is probably *La Belle histoire de Leuk-le-lièvre*, co-authored by L.S. Senghor and Abdoulaye Sadj (1965 [1953]). "Leuk" (*lëg* in standard orthography) is Wolof for "hare."

<sup>94</sup> Scheub takes these figures to be transcultural constants, which is debatable, but his reading of their relationship is applicable in a West African context given the presence in oral tradition of epic heroes and trickster tales. Moreover, his analysis of these figures' commonality resonates especially well in *Wangrin*.

opposed to the nobility and virtue of the hero, whose higher-register genre claims to represent an inspiring record of historical events. Yet the latter's feats of heroism are often dangerous to his own society and depend on trickster-like wiliness and deceit.<sup>95</sup> As such, both trickster and hero are exceptional, if not somewhat marginal figures in society.<sup>96</sup> Wangrin's selfishness, which Julien reads as a sign of the end of the epic age, may also be read as the text's amalgamation of trickster and hero types in its protagonist. Like a hero, Wangrin is noble, worthy of praise, divinely protected, defiant of his enemies, and dangerous; like a trickster, he is a con-man.

Given this layered relationship of *Wangrin* to oral tradition, the reading sketched out by Ann Wynchank (1991) is in some ways preferable to Julien's (1992) or Gorman's (2003). Wynchank recognizes the adaptability of oral tradition rather than opposing it to colonialism or modernity, suggesting that *Wangrin* channels this flexibility in its historical tableau of life in the A.O.F: for her, the "evolution of the epic" provides us with an "adaptable" hero, "a witness of, and clear-sighted actor in, the metamorphoses of the times" (Wynchank 1991: 237-8). The text's simultaneous reliance on the figures of hero and trickster may indeed reflect its awareness of the materialism, selfishness, and commercialism of its time. But such a critique is grounded in a historical present which the epic genre helps stage and produce, rather than Julien's notion of an absolute past where the backdrop of the A.O.F. is more or less contingent. Yet Wynchank devotes the majority of her analysis to formal features of the text, rather than exploring the consequences of this present-focused temporal structure in depth. Moreover, she explicitly casts *Wangrin*'s interest in social criticism as a function of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's writerly authority rather than of the representational capacities of oral epic (Wynchank 1991: 236).

It is necessary to flesh out an understanding of *Wangrin*'s epic modalities as productive of a historical present—like the Segou narrative's representation of its own era as one of competing ideologies that must find a way to coexist—rather than an inaccessible, fossilized past. Harry Harootunian's notion of a "thickened" present, which he derives from Edmund Husserl, as an objective conjuncture in time where different subjective collective memories are at play provides a useful starting point from which to delve more deeply into the connections between time, genre, and social critique in this text (Harootunian 2007). Harootunian draws on the concept of colliding "regimes of historicity" (Hartog 2012 [2003]), or structures that allow people to experience time in a particular way, in order to define the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as a global moment of noncontemporaneous contemporaneity<sup>97</sup>: the dominant time of modernity which Western elites construct as normative is riddled with divergences and lapses, that is, experiences outside the temporal norm.<sup>98</sup> If we apply this theoretical framework to literary representations of colonial Africa, the recourse to an epic regime of historicity, which attempts to shape the present by linking it to indigenous heroes of the past, can easily be thought of as locked in conflict with

---

<sup>95</sup> As an example, we might think of Omar Tall's reliance on deception in order to conquer his enemy Karounka, since neither prayer nor combat could accomplish the task (*infra* ch. 2).

<sup>96</sup> See my analysis of the "unwelcome hero" (*infra* ch. 4).

<sup>97</sup> This notion draws on previous work by Maurice Halbwachs, Maurice Bloch, and Reinhart Koselleck (see Harootunian 2007).

<sup>98</sup> The most obvious of these "noncontemporaneous" regimes are poverty and development, experienced as backwardness or lateness given that Western modernity is associated with a high quality of life, but they may also include a sense of "presentism," in which people find the past or the future unthinkable (Hartog 2012 [2003]), or alternative notions of modernity (Harootunian 2007: 484). For both Harootunian and Hartog, the Marxist understanding of dialectic and revolution is all but dead today, at least in society at large.

the colonialist temporal regime of conquest, mercantilism, and progress<sup>99</sup>—as well as its own version of heroism. This was, as I have argued, the Negritude view of epic. But in *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*, regimes of historicity are, as we shall see, entangled with each other as well as produced and contested through concrete political interests and structures of power. Any discursive recourse to heroes of the past, the foundation of traditional epic, is made to accomplish specific goals in the present. That is, it is the very interplay and negotiation between different regimes of historicity—in this case, traditional or epic, Islamic, and colonial—that constitute the thickened historical present which Bâ’s work portrays.

This reading of *Wangrin*, buttressed by Bâ’s accounts in his memoirs of his own ethnological observations and folklore collection during his travels across the A.O.F.—which parallel Wangrin’s career in many ways—will allow us to rethink his work as offering *not only* a backwards-looking “defense and illustration” of African traditions (Mariko 2005), but a simultaneous celebration and critique of them, based on a sense of their representational usability and malleability, which is always put in the service of the present. By masterfully stepping in and out of different cultural codes and regimes of historicity, Wangrin, in a way that both recalls and departs from the oral epic passage from Segou with which I began, becomes a sign of historical change and the necessity of adaptability.

### *The Combat of Fetishes*

In his memoirs, Bâ describes another performance of the Segou epic that encapsulates the clash between African and European imperial ambitions, while complementing the combat scene between Dibi and Karamoko which I quoted above. This performance, offered by the griot Namissé Sissoko in 1921 and attended by Bâ, begins with an account of the struggle between cultural codes that has reduced the once powerful Bamana empire of Segou into a memory; but unlike the duel between Karamoko and Dibi, it also adds the French presence, symbolized by the tricolor flag, as a third force that has conquered both of its predecessors:

Ô Amadou fils de Hampâté! Sais-tu comment les tondjons, ces soldats bambaras de l’empire de Ségou [...] désignaient chacun des trois esprits du grand fétiche de la France? Ils appelaient le premier *bakagué*, le bleu, et prétendaient qu’il surveille le ciel bleu pour essayer d’empêcher Dieu d’intervenir dans les affaires des Noirs. Ils disaient que le deuxième, *gnegué*, le blanc, répand une tache blanche sur la cornée des yeux des “sujets français,” pour mieux les aveugler. Quant au troisième, *torowoulen*, le rouge, pour eux il était chargé de répandre le sang des ennemis et des indisciplinés. Ce fétiche triplet de la France s’est révélé plus fort que le chapelet à cent grains, fétiche des marabouts toucouleurs,<sup>100</sup> et plus efficace que les douze grands dieux du panthéon

<sup>99</sup> François Hartog, who coined the notion of a “regime of historicity,” explores a related scenario in the case of Hawaii, referring to an archaic Polynesian “heroic” time, which is more or less universal across supposedly premodern cultures and lines up almost perfectly with the worldwide genre of epic which I discussed in ch. 1. According to Hartog, the archaic heroic regime generated intercultural conflicts and “working misunderstandings” between native Hawaiians and Captain Cook in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hartog 2012 [2003]: 57-60; Sahlins 1987). This primitive archaic regime never enables self-reflexivity, however, whose symbolic origin Hartog attributes to a moment in the *Odyssey* when Ulysses realizes that he is no longer the same as he once was. In other words, Western heroism is more self-aware than its primitive counterparts. While Hartog’s analysis has many useful points, such as his demonstration that traditionalization is a politically motivated process of interpretation, his outline of non-Western heroic historicity remains overly schematic and homogenizing.

<sup>100</sup> That is, Muslim prayer beads, a “fetish” symbolizing the power of Islam. Islam was imposed on Segou by Omar Tall’s conquest of the city in 1861. Tall is identified politically and ethnically as “Toucouleur,” that is, as belonging



*banmana* de Ségou. Oui, le fétiche français a supplanté tous les fétiches locaux et il occupe leur place. Voilà trente et un ans que cela dure, et Dieu seul sait combien de temps cela durera encore! (OMC 29-30)

This rendition of the Segou narrative once again portrays the warring supernatural forces of distinct cultural systems at Segou in particular, and throughout the A.O.F more generally: the official animist practices of the precolonial political order, the reformist version of Islam imposed by jihad, and the colonial state implanted by the French. The temporal dimension of the passage is especially striking, for it both historicizes the sequence of imperial periods and portrays the French colonial order as having established a present of its own that is dominant yet hybrid: it has “supplanted” the previous orders with itself, and yet the cultural memories of past political entities remains so strong that the French occupation can still be interpreted and represented according to precolonial discursive repertoires emphasizing magic objects and ritual power. Moreover, the very description of French power as an occult “fetish” with obscure powers—especially the allusion to the “blinding” of colonial subjects symbolized by the color white—suggests the need to remove the veil that conceals white power, to reveal to all how it works. The barely implicit message is that understanding colonial power is the first step to contesting it. The griot’s emphasis on the thirty-one years that have passed since the fall of Segou to the French (in 1890) as well as his apparent desire for an end to the colonial occupation make it clear that he is expressly relating epic discourse to a very real set of political realities in the present—so much so that his boss, the local *commandant*’s interpreter, threatens to report his anti-French attitude to the authorities and have him thrown in jail (OMC 30). The idea of a Bakhtinian absolute past has no place here at all; the performance, while offering a representation of the past, is articulated in a way that produces a rather subversive picture of the present.

*L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* offers us a vision of life in the A.O.F. that both recalls the two manifestations of the Segou epic I have evoked and contrasts with them in an important way. The two Segou passages conjure a seemingly irreducible conflict between rival cultural and political norms, only gesturing toward the need for a solution—whether through a call for some form of coexistence, as the duel between the Komo and the marabout suggests, or through a call for a new political order, as the reading of the French flag as fetish suggests. *Wangrin* is equally concerned with the struggle between French, Muslim, and indigenous claims to power and ways of knowing the world, but actually proposes an explicit, if temporary, solution: its characters, and most dramatically the heroic figure of Wangrin himself, must *mediate* between these norms. The question posed to Wangrin by Quinomel, chief of personnel in “Goudougoua,”<sup>101</sup> reveals the all-importance of cultural versatility:

“Quelle est ta religion?” “Je n’en ai pas de bien définie,” répondit Wangrin. “En tant qu’interprète, je dois ménager tout le monde. Aussi suis-je autant à mon aise dans la mosquée que dans le bois sacré des villages animistes.” (*Wangrin* 112)

Wangrin’s enigmatic answer, an apparent celebration of syncretism and hybridity, intimates a

---

to a Fulani-speaking group from northern Senegal. His jihads farther inland subjugated other groups of Fulani-speakers, especially those of Sekou Amadou’s Muslim empire in Macina, referred to by Amadou Hampâté Bâ as “Peuls” (see *Amkoullel* 17-22).

<sup>101</sup> That is, Ouagadougou, capital formerly of Upper Volta and now of Burkina Faso.

deeper awareness of culture as a means to power—which he makes even clearer in an interview with a later boss, Arnaud de Bonneval:

Je ne connais de religion que mon service. Plaire à mon commandant équivaut pour moi à plaire à la force supérieure d'en haut. Je "fais salame," mais je ne suis pas bigot. Je n'aime pas les chauvins, je suis pour la civilisation et particulièrement enthousiaste pour la civilisation française, mère des droits de l'homme et anti-esclavagiste! (*Wangrin* 220)

The obligation to "ménager tout le monde" indicates that Wangrin's refusal to define himself in an exclusive way is a means of accommodating the demands of outside powers and exigencies; this suppleness is advantageous for the administration, whose job of imposing colonial control depends on its subordinates' ability to navigate the mire of indigenous politics; and yet the very enunciation of such a flexible religious identity allows Wangrin to gain his bosses' trust and exercise power in their name with minimal supervision, giving him an edge in the power play he is entering. Thus the colonial hierarchy itself joins the mosque and the sacred forest as one more domain in which Wangrin is totally at ease: he speaks its language perfectly, both literally through his perfect French, and figuratively through his intuition for what to say and how to say it. His opportunistic portrayals of his own identity hint at his awareness that all of these regimes of historicity are produced by discourses of political control and domination. Moreover, his strategies of self-marketing reveal his awareness that adaptation to the historical changes sweeping across West Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would require the ability to shuttle in and out of these various cultural codes.

But even the terms of this negotiation are not taken for granted. Rather than staging competing cultural norms as locked in an essentialized combat, as we see in the oral Segu narratives, *Wangrin* rewrites the relationship between culture and power, while still drawing on the metaphor of the occult battle. Consider this account of the struggle between Wangrin and his enemy "Romo,"<sup>102</sup> who is trying to punish the hero for stealing his job:

Un combat entre deux sorciers ne se livre pas à la manière des lutteurs de foire, mais à coups de pratiques magiques, lancement d'effluves qui aveuglent, paralysent, rendent fou ou, parfois, tuent froidement l'adversaire. Or—et Romo le savait—Wangrin était passé maître en ces matières, à force de fréquenter et de faire travailler les plus grands dignitaires de la sorcellerie bambara, peule, dogon, marka, yarsé, samo, bobo, mossi, gourma, gourounsi, pomporon, etc. Aussi Romo n'accepta-t-il d'aller affronter Wangrin chez lui, c'est-à-dire dans son élément, avant de s'y être magiquement préparé. (*Wangrin* 296)

The text proceeds to describe Romo's ritual preparations in great detail. Here we do not have a struggle between cultures embodied in magic persons or objects, but rather between individuals who *use* a variety of culture-bound magics in the service of their political interests. Wangrin is the superior sorcerer because he can conjure any of the different ritual codes at his disposition. The "etc." which finishes the almost Rabelaisian litany of markers of belonging emphasizes that the list is not exhaustive and could be elaborated further. Likewise, no single element is privileged over the others; each is an instrument to be combined with others. This strategy of *bricolage* constitutes a way out of the symbolic Segovian deadlock between the Komo and the marabout, joined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the figure of the French *commandant*: Wangrin is

---

<sup>102</sup> That is, Moro Sidibé (*OMC* 97-8; Austen 2007: 153).

subversively heroic precisely because he, as interpreter, is the only character capable of consistently manipulating the A.O.F's multiplicity of coexisting cultural codes and unequal power structures to his advantage. That is, he moves between several regimes of historicity: those imposed by the recent conquests of Islamic and French empire-building, as well as of animist traditionalities from multiple ethnic groups; each of these regimes competes yet may compromise or overlap with the others. He juxtaposes and translates them into their underlying political interests and structures of power, which can then be evaluated, compared, and maneuvered (or ignored).

The comparison of cultural entities thus returns to the fore of our concerns, not so much in the evolutionist terms underlying the colonial invention of an African "epic," but in a way that reveals a certain kind of anthropological relativism on the part of *Wangrin* as text and of Amadou Hampâté Bâ as writer. For both colonizer and colonized, culture, including its more specific manifestations as traditionality or regimes of historicity, is constantly revealed to be the product of competing interests and mechanisms of domination, rather than a static set of beliefs and practices that simply "exists" in and of itself.

#### *A God of Contradiction: Tradition Turned on its Head?*

Wangrin's ability to move between cultural codes is key to his adaptability. This gift is prefigured in the traditionalized setting of animist initiation which frames the main story: the hero consecrates himself as a young adult to Gongoloma-Sooké, god of contradictions and paradoxes, "dieu bizarre [...] à la fois bon et mauvais, sage et libertin," "le grand confluent des contraires" (*Wangrin* 20-1), who will be his main protector throughout the narrative. While some critics have argued that the two-facedness of this spirit prefigures the moral or cultural ambiguity of Wangrin as hero,<sup>103</sup> its use a framing device also grounds this ambiguity in a traditionalizing register—that is, in a claim to continuity with ancient forms of Bamana ritual and narrative. In other words, it underscores the ambiguity of tradition itself: rather than prescribing a set of beliefs or practices, as Bamana "religion" had been described in French anthropology (Tauxier 1927, Dieterlen 1951),<sup>104</sup> the god of Wangrin's initiation is presented as an amalgam of paradoxes which orients it toward fulfilling its own changing needs and desires—as well as, by extension, those of the hero whom he will protect. The god's body is made up of anatomically inverted functions: he drinks from his nostrils and eats through his anus, walks with his back facing forward, his head on the ground, and his feet in the air, and with a sexual organ growing from his forehead. This topsy-turvy physiology is nevertheless made to work.

Sa bouche n'avait pas de langue. Elle était munie de deux mâchoires édentées mais plus tranchantes qu'un rasoir neuf. Il s'en servait pour scier, couper, sculpter et excaver, selon les besoins. (*Wangrin* 20)

Even without teeth, the divinity accomplishes whatever he needs that would require sharp tools: one way or another, he manages to perform his task. He is clearly a god of *débrouillardise* (Bayart 1997), a key aspect of Wangrin's heroic exceptionalism. Even more significantly, he embodies interpretative *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1962), the reinvention and combination of concepts "selon les besoins." The substance of this traditional deity is, in a way,

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Rao (2007: 225-8).

<sup>104</sup> For a critique of conceptions of traditional thought as systems of belief, see Boyer (1984: 248-51).

inconsequential: his nose could have just as easily been razor-sharp instead of his jaws, just as his penis might as well have protruded from an arm instead of his face. Yet, regardless of how he manages to “saw, cut, sculpt, and excavate,” or for that matter eat or walk, he does it. His symbolic reversals of the order of the human body only serve to highlight the fact that his bodily functionality continues unimpeded. This deification of changeability reflects the fact that Wangrin will have recourse to traditional practices calling upon the god’s protection to do whatever he wants, whether that be “bon [ou] mauvais, sage [ou] libertin.” The content or intent of traditional discourse is subjugated to its use in the present: it means or justifies what its interpreter wants it to mean or justify.

A more explicitly moral side to Gongoloma-Sooké’s ambiguity extends the usability of tradition either further. The spirit is described as weeping “à en tarir ses larmes” when he hears of a birth or marriage, but laughing “à faire éclater son foie” when he hears of death or divorce; he insults benefactors and sings the praises of enemies (*Wangrin* 21). These contradictions suggest that he is a god of ruse, for the reader suspects that such counter-intuitive behaviors must hide ulterior motives. To curse one’s friends implies that the friendship was feigned, just as to praise one’s enemies implies that one will get the better of them later on. On the other hand, he may also be a god of truth, willing to uncover faults and speak unpleasant realities in spite of human conventions of politeness or loyalty. Such a tension between selfish duplicity and embarrassing straightforwardness is reflected in Wangrin’s feats of trickery throughout the story, though these are not recounted in a necessarily antipathetic light. His strange heroism, turned in many cases away from community-building and toward selfish goals, paradoxically also becomes a source of “liver-bursting” laughter. The text drives home the point here that traditionalizing discourse—or its objects or institutions—is capable of serving exactly opposed ends, or being used in ways exactly opposite from what we would expect.

The text’s playful yet ideologically significant use of Gongoloma-Sooké is complicated by the fact the existence of such a deity is uncertain in Bamana mythology.<sup>105</sup> The question of whether Bâ invented it entirely, or perhaps adjusted material he collected in order to fit his needs here, is interesting because it raises not only the issue of his authorship of *Wangrin* as text (once again), but also the possibility that the text is actually parodying, or at least stretching, Bamana mythology in a way that highlights its flexibility. Whatever the case may be, the narrative’s style of cultural description here emphasizes the creativity, humor, and self-reflexivity of storytelling even in its explanation of ethnographic detail, offering a remarkable difference from, or rewriting of, classic accounts of Bamana “religion” that are more intent on systematically constructing an organized scheme of beliefs and practices (Tauxier 1927, Dieterlen 1951).<sup>106</sup> We might even think of Roman Jakobson’s example of an eminently dialogical Russian storyteller who tells stories “only for the sake of contradiction,” that is, to contradict whatever his interlocutor has just said (Jakobson 1990: 94). *Wangrin* can be read as a lively counterpoint to colonial-era

---

<sup>105</sup> It would require archival and perhaps field research to determine whether this divinity is well-known in a particular area, or whether Amadou Hampâté Bâ invented it entirely, or whether he created its name based on a “rearrangement” of allusions to traditional material, as Paulo de Moriaes Farias suggests was the case for the idiosyncratic aspects of Wâ Kamissoko’s epic discourse (1993; see also *infra* ch. 1). All documented scholarly references to Gongoloma-Sooké that I have found can be traced back to Bâ’s authority, but not independently verified (see, for example, Dumestre 2011: 379). An archive of the author’s papers, which might shed light on this issue, is housed at the *Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine* (IMEC) in Normandy, but is currently inaccessible to researchers.

<sup>106</sup> We know that Bâ was an avid reader of French ethnology, especially starting in 1942 when he began his job as researcher at the *Institut français d’Afrique noire* (IFAN) in Dakar (Devey 1993, Aggarwal 1999).

anthropological writing, including that of the author himself: it celebrates mixing, ambiguity, and compromise instead of the classic attempts to identify a “pure” African essence—epitomized, for example, by the quest of Marcel Griaule and others to unveil the secrets of Dogon cosmogony, or by the one-dimensionality of Senghorian Negritude and its forebear, Leo Frobenius.

Indeed, the playfulness and irreverence of *Wangrin* even contrast with Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s own insistence on the “authenticity” of African traditions in his more essayistic work. For example, in an article called “La Tradition vivante,” he asserts that the transmission of traditional discourse requires “un respect religieux de la vérité” (Bâ 1980: 101), which would seem to fit uneasily with Gonogoloma-Sooké’s amorphousness, and indeed with any argument for the inventedness of this spirit. Even so, a certain continuity connects *Wangrin* to Bâ’s ethnographic thought: the same article bases the authenticity of tradition on two principles, namely the divine origin of the word, and the pragmatic effects of the word in society. Traditional knowledge is a “science éminemment pratique, consistant à mobiliser des énergies au service de la vie” (Bâ 1980: 100-1). Such a statement actually expresses quite succinctly the relation between *Wangrin* as hero and his understanding of cultural codes like traditionality: he channels them for “eminently practical” ends in real life, while his chameleon-like ability to move between languages and codes finds its divine origin or inspiration in the figure of Gonogoloma-Sooké, god of contradiction. The *Wangrin* story, regardless of the accuracy of particular ethnographic or historical details, thus becomes an illustration *in extremis* of Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s notion that traditional knowledge is a “science éminemment pratique,” subject to different kinds of uses—like magic or even money: “Ni la magie, ni la fortune ne sont mauvaises en soi. C’est leur utilisation qui les rend bonnes ou mauvaises” (Bâ 1980: 100). Furthermore, traditional knowledge requires acts of enunciation and interpretation that make its meaning operate in different ways, and therefore ambiguous. For Bâ, “living tradition” (as well as, we might surmise, epic) is not a category that signifies a bygone sense of wholeness, as much literary and colonial theory have conceived it, but rather one which has always encapsulated the ambiguities and paradoxes of societies that make use of it. Gonogoloma-Sooké’s contradictions reproduce, within the discursive repertoire of Bamana mythology, a set of contradictions and ambiguities that echo other oral narratives’ depictions of ideological ambivalence in their own times and places.

### *Labyrinths of Custom and Praise*

The hero’s negotiation of such cultural contradictions is the major concern of *Wangrin* as narrative. One long episode (ch. 11-15) makes the stakes of *Wangrin*’s heroic political savvy especially visible. In hopes of making money, he inserts himself into a dispute over inheritance among local Fulani nobility who fall under the jurisdiction of his post at “Yagouwahi,” Upper Volta (*Haute-Volta*).<sup>107</sup> Upon the death of the chief “Brildji Madouma Thiala,” an old resentment between rival heirs, namely the dead man’s half-brother “Karibou Sawali” and son “Loli,” erupts into a contest of conspiracies, with each trying to secure for himself the chief’s title and wealth;<sup>108</sup> Karibou feels especially snubbed because his brother’s immediate family had excluded him, the natural elder, from all burial plans. *Wangrin*, pretending to represent the colonial *commandant*’s interest in maintaining order among indigenous elites, acts as a double

<sup>107</sup> That is, Ouahigouya, located today in Burkina Faso.

<sup>108</sup> That is, Djibril Mamadou Ala-Atchi, Boukari Salihou, and Lolo, respectively (*OMC* 88-96).

agent and plays each side against the other in exchange for financial compensation. This episode brings out problems not only surrounding customs of inheritance, which are different in Islamic law, local Fulani animism, and French colonialism, but also of exhumation, since Wangrin proposes that Karibou assert his dominance by digging up and reburying his brother. Each party defends the custom that protects its interests: Islamic and French law favor inheritance by the son (Loli), who has the added advantage from the colonial perspective of being a veteran of World War I, while local Fulani custom designates the nephew or brother as heir (Karibou); but Loli's followers point out that Islam and Fulani custom abhor exhumation,<sup>109</sup> while Wangrin and Karibou know that French law permits or even encourages it in cases where there is doubt surrounding the facts of a burial. The characters' way of mobilizing parallel cultural systems based on their own interests creates a sort of leveling effect on the playing field. The explicit hierarchy between colonizer and colonized, and the struggle for dominance between Islam and older ritual practices, are simultaneously deployed and, in a way, relativized. Every cultural code can be instrumentalized or set aside in the contest for power. Wangrin is the best player in the game, the one with the most transcultural perspicacity and daring, who is "prêt à affronter textes sacrés et fournaises infernales" in order to get what he wants—in this case, to enflame both sides and solidify their dependence on him by making the idea of an exhumation seem like it might become reality (*Wangrin* 176). The political implications of each set of symbolic grammars are carefully weighed, and yet each one serves only as an interchangeable means to an end.

However, the final compromise that settles the dispute between Loli and Karibou—giving Brildji's wealth to the former but his title to the latter—has another level of complexity. Beyond idioms of parallel cultures is the issue of honor, tied to noble status,<sup>110</sup> which can be manipulated by certain actors in order to influence the behavior of others. This manipulation takes the form of flattering persons of noble status by alluding to the sense of pride and innate superiority particular to their class, or more specifically by singing their praises according to a generic pattern of traditional panegyric. Wangrin, who is of noble Bamana origin (*horon*) in Bâ's narrative (*Wangrin* 166-8),<sup>111</sup> agrees to forego the exhumation he has planned when the deceased man's captive, "Diofo,"<sup>112</sup> begs him in the name of his high traditional rank and "sang

---

<sup>109</sup> At least, this is how Islamic law is interpreted in the episode (see, for example, *Wangrin* 177). Islamic law permits exhumation in certain circumstances, though Karibou's ultimate motives of vengeance and seizure of power would hardly meet its criteria.

<sup>110</sup> A number of West African peoples—fifteen by one count, including the Bamana (and other speakers of Mande languages), Wolof, and Fulani (Tamari 1995: 61)—have an inherited status or class system, which much colonial ethnography referred to as a system of "castes" (Conrad and Frank 1995: 7-10). Inherited status in these societies falls into three general categories: nobility or freemen, "casted" professionals such as griots or blacksmiths, and slaves or captives. I follow the argument that the word caste is inappropriate (Conrad and Frank 1995) and should be replaced by a term such as "endogamous artisan and musician groups" (Tamari 1995: 61). Although a sense of hierarchy pervades the West African status system, it is not so rigid as to prevent a certain ambiguity of interpretation: "Individuals are acutely aware of the social frameworks that structure their relationships with others, but how they define the nature of attendant rights and responsibilities depends on a whole range of factors" (Conrad and Frank 1995: 12). My reading of Amadou Hampâté Bâ addresses how this author compares African and European interpretations of noble status.

<sup>111</sup> Ralph Austen suggests that the historical Wangrin may have been a captive who took the surname of a noble family (2007: 152), but his analysis does not address the fact that the literary Wangrin is specifically praised as a born noble, *not* as having a captive background. The literary Wangrin's noble identity becomes important in the episode I am discussing here because it is used as a leverage to influence his behavior.

<sup>112</sup> That is, Goffo (*OMC* 88).

pur” (*Wangrin* 167) to respect the honor of a man of equally princely rank; elegant gifts help buttress his plea. Compelled by this formulaic appeal to his ego, Wangrin accedes to Diofo’s request, declaring:

Wallaye! Wallaye! Diofo! Sous les coups de l’enclume et du marteau que constituent tes deux mains et sous l’effet magique de ta langue incantatrice, le plus résistant et le plus dur des métaux devient de la cire molle que tu façannes à volonté. (*Wangrin* 172)

This exclamation suggests that status-based praise has an irresistible effect on a noble person’s behavior: praise is a specific cultural modality, with strong connections to traditional patterns of panegyric, and by extension epic, which can again be instrumentalized in order to achieve political outcomes. Wangrin’s change of heart, which might appear to depict vulnerability to flattery as a weakness, actually impels him to rethink the political pros and cons of an unpopular scene of disinterment that would be perceived as shameful. Moreover, praise itself, which has caused Wangrin’s change of heart, finally serves as a solution to the predicament that he has created for himself as a double agent. Rather than desecrate Brildji’s corpse, he orchestrates a public meeting in which the family of the deceased will appease the offended Karibou with a formal apology—complete with traditional praise, sung by a griot and filled with examples of Karibou’s heroic Fulani ancestors who respected the honor of their enemies:

Karibou! fils de Sawali le preux, petit-fils de Mawnde le vaillant pasteur qui [...] blessait grièvement, même tuait impitoyablement ses ennemis, mais ne les déshonorait jamais [...] Quand le sang d’un tel noble coule dans les veines et artères d’un homme, dans tes artères, ô Karibou Sawali, tu ne saurais souffrir et moins encore te complaire à voir déshonorer ton frère, alors que ton aïeul a sauvé l’honneur de son voleur et ennemi Bila Wobogo le Mossi. (179-80)

This passage weaves heroic narrative into a didactic discourse of explicit praise and implicit criticism, illustrating both the continuum between panegyric and epic (*infra* n. 73) and the usability of epic praise for critical and political ends.

The panegyric-epic continuum thus becomes an interethnic idiom which, though it expresses a common set of expectations for lofty noble ideals, is deployed for concrete, politically motivated reasons that expose such ideals as dependent on the needs of the present moment. The present is, as such, the dominant temporality of praise discourse. People forget everything else in the moment when their praises are sung, becoming like “de la cire molle.”<sup>113</sup> The text’s relentless focus on the political and strategic machinations that precede and contextualize any traditional utterance or traditionalizing discourse, such as status-based praise, reveals that these cultural forms are tools for obtaining or exercising power, anchored in the time of present politics. The temporality of political exigency is thickened in the story by the variety of regimes of historicity at play: just as the griot’s panegyric of Karibou explicitly relates his present conduct to heroic feats of the past that it poses as normative, so do Muslim and French legal systems respectively seek to enforce the historicities of West African Islamization and of the Third Republic. And yet, Bâ’s *Wangrin* does not set these regimes in an irreducible clash, as the Segu epic seems to, but highlights their lapses and compromises, their use in an ongoing and ever-changing game of politically significant *bricolage*. For Wangrin, negotiating these regimes serves as a source of power and creativity in his scheme of deception with Brildji’s family, his

---

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Manthia Diawara’s description of this phenomenon in another Bamana context (1997: 28).

yielding to Diofo's praise, and his change of strategy and ultimate solution to the dispute between Brildji's heirs.

The text brings this critique of cultural forms as always relative, contingent, and connected to power to bear not only on African "traditions" or religion, based on transmission from the past, but more specifically on the French legal system as well, in spite of its pretensions to rationality and due process. *Wangrin* makes clear that French law in the colonies is always subjugated to political concerns, the most important of which is white prestige. When Wangrin implicates his French superior the Count de Villermoz in a cattle theft affair, he knows that he risks more than the Count before the French courts:

Wangrin savait également qu'une affaire dans laquelle un Européen se trouvait impliqué serait bien difficile à trancher à la colonie. Sans doute préférerait-on étouffer n'importe quel crime plutôt que de condamner un Européen, à plus forte raison si ce dernier était un agent de l'autorité. Il en allait du prestige des colonisateurs, et la politique menée en ce domaine ne s'embarrassait pas de problèmes de conscience. Wangrin tira son parti de cette conjoncture pour, lui aussi, se dépouiller de tout scrupule. Se défendre par tous les moyens devint son seul objectif. (*Wangrin* 82-3)

The fact that Wangrin is objectively guilty and Villermoz is innocent (that is, guilty at most of negligence) and a victim of Wangrin's plotting, must be set aside for a moment. As an arm of the colonial apparatus, the justice system's first concern is not to right wrongs or to guarantee moral rectitude in its jurisdiction, but to maintain French control. This requires that Villermoz not be made to look guilty publically, even though evidence is stacked up against him because of Wangrin's machinations. The judicial system's general logic of treating blacks as pawns in a game of white privilege proves to be not only unjust, but outdone, since, in at least in this case, the game is inverted: a black interpreter has used a French count as an unwitting pawn in his money-making ruse. While individual persons or cases may present exceptions to the legal system's logic of exploitation and racial preference,<sup>114</sup> the ultimate preeminence of politics over the law in the colonies is unquestionable and insurmountable. The outcome of the cattle investigation confirms this fact, for the highest judicial authority involved, the *cour d'assises* in Dakar, decides not to pronounce judgment at all, but rather to "renvoyer l'affaire dite des boeufs à l'autorité administrative pour un complément d'enquête quant aux conséquences politiques de cette affaire" (*Wangrin* 95). In other words, a lengthy trial originally referred to the judiciary by the bureau of political affairs in Bamako leads only to a cover-up by the bureau of political affairs in Dakar—which even bribes Wangrin to keep quiet afterwards.

While the politicization of law is clear enough in the case of colonial French courts, it is even more so in the case of the parallel system of *tribunaux indigènes* that were set up to adjudicate affairs among Africans, the vast majority of whom were not French citizens until 1946,<sup>115</sup> according to local African customs in the case of non-Muslims, or Islamic law in the

---

<sup>114</sup> *Wangrin* and Bâ's memoirs provide several examples of colonial judges and officials who are admirable for their sense of fairness. However these individual cases do not undo the systemic injustice of the colonial world. See, for example, the Martinican magistrate assigned to the cattle affair, whose "droiture en tant que juge fut totale" (*Wangrin* 85); the inspector Robert Arnaud, whose "sens aigu de la justice [s']appliquait indifféremment aux Blancs et aux Noirs" (*OMC* 218); and Edouard Hesling, governor of Upper Volta, who declares that "Le plus grand prestige de la France [...] est de commettre ni injustice ni abus de pouvoir" (*OMC* 243).

<sup>115</sup> French nationality in the colonies was a complicated and disparate affair. However, a major reform was passed in 1946, impelled by the Second World War, extending the status of full French citizen to all French nationals in overseas territories (*loi Lamine Guèye*). Prior to this, France had granted citizenship in 1916 to residents of the



case of Muslims. The codifications of native “law,” written as reference books called *coutumiers* and used in native courts, were already products of the political agendas of their authors (Jézéquel 2006); even more problematically, native courts were ultimately under the authority of local colonial administrators—and their subordinates, given that most French administrators did not understand African customs deeply enough to judge cases based on them—rather than of an independent judiciary (Ginio 2006). For this reason, when Wangrin is later accused of selling alcohol illegally in “Dioussola,”<sup>116</sup> the narrative voice takes care to specify:

Heureusement pour lui, Wangrin fut cité devant le tribunal français. S’il avait été justiciable des tribunaux indigènes, que présidaient le commandant de cercle ou son adjoint, c’en était fait de lui. (*Wangrin* 292)

Although Wangrin is once again taking advantage of the system, since he is guilty but ends up getting himself acquitted, what is important in the text’s portrait of politicized law in the A.O.F. is that the judicial system *would have* taken advantage of him if he had let it—just as, historically speaking, it doubtlessly did crush many other less shrewd, or less lucky, Africans under its unfairness.

### *Climbing Ladders, Crossing Lines*

*Wangrin* thus portrays its place and time as strongly characterized by an imperative of “eat or be eaten.” While this seemingly amoral setting is tempered by moments where various characters—most importantly the hero himself, as Amadou Hampâté Bâ always insisted<sup>117</sup>—appear sympathetic, thanks to traits like generosity, loyalty, or honor, the narrative nonetheless articulates a major cultural critique that encompasses both colonizer and colonized, indeed blurring the line between them. For all the boundaries that separate them—black and white, dominated and dominant, Muslim/animist and Christian/secular—both sides have in common the politicization of the cultural codes at their disposal, whether it be oral tradition, religious practices, or law. This suggests that, at least in some ways, the two major categories of human subjects in the colonial world are more alike than they are different. In a way reminiscent of other Francophone African writers’ use of bodily functions as a sign of common humanity to cut across different groups’ pretensions to superiority,<sup>118</sup> Bâ’s writing emphasizes that similar political structures, fractures, and processes are repeated in all quarters of the colonial world and its past.

The author’s interest in detailing social hierarchies makes this concern especially recognizable in his personal memoirs, which are dotted with ethnographic observations and reported oral narrative from throughout his travels as a colonial bureaucrat in French Sudan and Upper Volta. In many instances, these remarks offer historical analyses that illuminate themes in *Wangrin*. The reader cannot help but see a rapprochement, for example, between the meticulous

“four communes” of Senegal—Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque, and Saint Louis—as a measure to increase recruitment into the army in the context of World War I. It was also possible for certain literate blacks to be naturalized as citizens. Most nonwhites from elsewhere in the A.O.F. were considered French “subjects” until 1946.

<sup>116</sup> Bobo Dioulasso, Upper Volta (today Burkina Faso), where Wangrin, both in the text and historically, settles after his service in the colonial bureaucracy.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Bâ’s defense of Wangrin’s character in the afterword to the narrative (*Wangrin* 360-1).

<sup>118</sup> I am thinking in particular of the novels of Ferdinand Oyono and Sony Labou Tansi.

descriptions of the functioning of the Toucouleur state of Macina (*Amkoullel* 32-4) or the various posts and ministries of the Mossi state of Yatenga (*OMC* 100-102 and 162-4),<sup>119</sup> and, on the other hand, those of the colonial bureaucracy: whether at the level of the colony (mainly Upper Volta) or the federation (the A.O.F.), promotions and demotions, desirable and undesirable transfers, the movement of dossiers up and down the colonial ladder, and the many intrigues that these events generate or feed into constitute the bulk of the narratives of both Bâ's and Wangrin's time in the civil service. Alongside these bureaucratic hierarchies, the author describes parallel groups and subgroups of the A.O.F.'s power-holders and population—church vs. state, citizen vs. subject, *blanc-blanc* vs. *blanc-noir* vs. *noir-noir*, etc. (*OMC* 228-30; *Wangrin* 25 and 203)—emphasizing the highly nuanced relations of domination which, at particular moments, strongly recall those of the precolonial world. Both the colonial state and its precolonial predecessors have top-down power structures with carefully delineated divisions of labor;<sup>120</sup> both have capacities for military and occult power<sup>121</sup> whose exercise is carefully regulated; and both are subject to disputes caused by conflicting egos.

A consequence of this kind of political comparison is the implication that both colonial and precolonial empires have positive aspects of their political legacy, whatever their flaws or excesses. Sekou Amadou's reign in Macina (1818-1845) is described as "éclairé" not only because it succeeded in organizing nomadic Peul populations into a powerful state, but also because it effectively managed more mundane tasks—"ce qui n'était pas une petite affaire," the author tells us—like regulating "les dates de transhumance du bétail en concertation avec les populations agricoles locales" (*Amkoullel* 20). Similarly, even though Tidjani Tall, who reigned over a successor state in the same region (1864-1887), was responsible for the ruthless massacre of hundreds of Peul men (including members of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's family) in retaliation for the death of his celebrated uncle Omar, we are nevertheless reminded that none of his subjects ever had to pay "quoi que ce soit pour sa subsistance. L'Etat leur fournissait viande et nourriture, et de grands repas étaient ouverts chaque jour aux pauvres" (*Amkoullel* 31). Such a description contrasts noticeably with the colonial administration's impotence when it is faced with the horrific famine of 1914 (*Amkoullel* 313-9). These historical details betray a certain admiration on the author's part for efficient, "enlightened" administration, even though it may be inflected with histories of violence or traces of paternalism. He echoes this love for a job well done while narrating his own work as a mail clerk in the colonial governor's office at Ouagadougou in 1924:

---

<sup>119</sup> The Toucouleur state of Macina, centered in Bâ's hometown of Bandiagara (Mali), was established by Omar Tall's nephew Tidjani following Omar's death in 1864. The French formally suppressed it in 1902 (*Amkoullel* 71). The Mossi kingdom of Yatenga, centered in Ouahigouya (Burkina Faso), repulsed Tidjani Tall's attempted conquest in 1880 (*OMC* 87), signed a protectorate treaty in 1895 with the French, and was never formally suppressed; thus its structures still operated as a hierarchy parallel (and subject) first to the colonial administration of the A.O.F., then to the Burkinabe government after independence.

<sup>120</sup> Although they occasionally describe alternative African cultural environments such as nomadic pastoral life, Bâ's memoirs focus their historical attention on complex empire-like precolonial states such as the ones mentioned here. Regarding his interest in the political organization of Yatenga, Bâ expresses that he finds it "utile d'en rapporter ici le schéma simplifié, afin de donner au moins un aperçu de la richesse et de la complexité des structures du pouvoir dans certains empires africains" (*OMC* 162). Such a statement recalls, and probably reflects, colonial ethnography's fascination with African empires and its metanarrative of imperial conquest.

<sup>121</sup> The "occult" power of the precolonial state is exercised in obvious forms, such as through special rituals, practices, and objects. For Bâ, the colonial state also wields "occult" force, not only through the obvious vehicle of the Catholic Church (*OMC* 228), but through the colonial administrators' status as "intouchables" and "dieux de la brousse" (*OMC* 220-1, *Wangrin* 9-10).

[Demba Sadio] m’initia à tous les travaux bureaucratiques du cabinet, véritable coeur du grand corps qu’était un territoire colonial. [...] A l’école professionnelle de Bamako, on nous avait enseigné que le travail anoblit, et nous étions marqués par cette formation. Pour nous, il n’y avait pas d’heures fixes: tant qu’il y avait du travail, il fallait le liquider, et il n’était point besoin de nous le demander; c’était pour nous comme un point d’honneur à respecter. Le retard par simple négligence était impensable, et d’ailleurs, il faut le dire, nos chefs blancs nous donnaient l’exemple. Ni pluie ni extrême chaleur ne les empêchaient d’être à l’heure au bureau. (*OMC* 230-1)

While this passage might seem like a concession to colonial fantasies of bringing enlightenment to the Dark Continent, a deeper reading reveals that the worth of competent management is so significant to Bâ precisely because *incompetence* and *unenlightenment* abound, both among African rulers and colonial administrators. One has only to think of the Dori prison disaster of 1924, in which cramped conditions result in nine deaths by asphyxiation and disciplinary measures against several colonial employees, both black and white (*OMC* 212-26; Pondopoulo 2010: 242-7), or the Fulani prince Lolo—that is, “Loli” from the inheritance dispute (*Wangrin* 143)—whose drunkenness and eccentricity cause him to squander his father’s wealth, proving his unfitness to assume the throne that his uncle had usurped from him (*OMC* 96).

These anecdotes, which crisscross *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* and Bâ’s personal memoirs, establish a mirror-like reflection effect between colonial and precolonial forms of government. Cruelty, prejudice, and pettiness, but also dedication and attempts at reform, run across both periods, deepening the reader’s sense of the historical “thickness” of life in the A.O.F. In spite of the profound rupture that colonialism introduced, the constantly intersecting regimes of historicity at play still share important moments of continuity. Good governance, abuse, and expansionism in the colonial world all have antecedents and parallels—a sort of genealogy—in African kingdoms. The time of empires and heroes is once again brought to bear on the colonial historical present.

A striking instance of this continuity is the issue of class, especially nobility, which returns again and again throughout *Wangrin* and Bâ’s memoirs as a point of intersection between French and African structures of power. These texts reveal a sense of mutual recognition between a number of colonial administrators who have ties to the French aristocracy and African nobles—that is, Africans who are neither captives nor artisans by birth, but hold the status of “freemen” (*horonw* in Bamana or *rimbe* in Fulani). Noble origin on both continents involves a taste for honor, style, and chivalry: the Count de Villermoz’s love for elegant horses (*Wangrin* 63) parallels that of the Fulani prince Karibou Sawali (*Wangrin* 174); Wangrin, whose Bamana noble origins make him sensitive to this aesthetic and moral code (*Wangrin* 167-8) and who is himself described as a “chevalier” (*Wangrin* 172), acknowledges the aristocratic Count, “qui se comportait en grand seigneur et portait un monocle” (*Wangrin* 63), as a dignified enemy because of his “attitude de grande noblesse” (*Wangrin* 218). In Bâ’s memoirs, one *commandant* expresses sympathy for the author’s stepfather Tidjani Thiam, who was deposed and imprisoned in 1905, through a language of class solidarity:

Il nous apprit qu’il se nommait de Courcelles, qu’il appartenait, en France, à un très vieux clan de chefs et que ses ancêtres, à une certaine époque qu’il appela “Révolution,” avaient été, tout comme Tidjani, dépouillés de leur chefferie. Quelques membres de sa famille avaient même été exécutés et d’autres envoyés au bagne après confiscation de leurs biens. C’est dire s’il

comprenait Tidjani et se sentait proche de lui! (*Amkoullel* 159)

Interestingly, this scenario is repeated a generation later, in the early 1920s, when the *commandant* François de Coutouly declares a similar solidarity with his employee Amadou Hampâté:

Tu appartiens donc à la noblesse de ton pays, comme moi-même dans le mien. Nous allons nous lier pour défendre cette institution sacrée que la Révolution française a jetée dans la poubelle. (*OMC* 200)

While not everyone shares such sentiments of transcultural unity, an awareness exists on each side of the colonial divide that the other side has a code of aristocracy reminiscent of its own. This cross-cultural intelligibility reflects the fascination that many colonial administrators and ethnographers had for African “upper classes,” being “inclined to assimilate them into the Western aristocracy” (Jézéquel 2006: 146); writers like François-Victor Equilbecq and Leo Frobenius exemplify this romanticizing tendency.<sup>122</sup> Bâ seems both to channel this romanticization and to demystify it: he drives home the idea that the African code of nobility is worthy of the prestige afforded to its French counterpart; yet he also documents ambivalent attitudes toward class differences, such as that of the egalitarian Charles de Brière, who traded the *de* in his name “contre un dé à coudre,” that is, the sign of his aristocratic origin in exchange for compensated labor (*Wangrin* 75). Moreover, many of the author’s portraits of aristocratic Frenchmen are hardly flattering, such the administrator de Lopino,<sup>123</sup> described as

le prototype même de ces administrateurs qui, fiers de leur valeur intrinsèque ou de leur naissance, se croyaient tout permis, et dont certains écarts frôlaient l’acte d’indiscipline grave. (*OMC* 232)

De Lopino’s abusive assertion of noble prerogatives earns him an unwanted transfer out of Upper Volta to the colony of Niger (*OMC* 232-44). People like him, the Count de Villermoz, and the Fulani prince Lolo are so obsessed with the outward accoutrements of their rank that they become, in the author’s view, frivolous. For these men, and for French aristocrats especially, noble status actually becomes more of a liability than an asset, as it causes them to live in a world of denial, nostalgia, and fantasy that impedes diligent, serious work. Several French administrators of noble origin are described as jumpy, nervous, and defensive of their status, as though aware of their increasing marginalization in the republican world.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic interest in French nobility suggests that it parallels its African counterpart in many ways, especially because in neither case does reality truly live up to the ideal. From an ethical point of view, this confirms the words of a griot singing Wangrin’s praises:

On peut naître noble et cependant perdre sa noblesse par avarice et cupidité. La vraie noblesse est celle que l’on acquiert par sa valeur. Il en est de la noblesse comme d’un édifice. Il y a les

<sup>122</sup> See my discussions of these writers in ch. 1.

<sup>123</sup> It appears that Bâ misspelled this administrator’s name, which shows up in A.O.F. documents of the time as “A. de Loppinot.” See, for example, the article “Souvenirs d’Aguibou” (De Loppinot 1919), which discusses the reign of Aguibou Tall, Omar’s son who was installed as “king” of Macina by the French after the fall of Bandiagara, and who was responsible for the deposition and imprisonment of Bâ’s stepfather Tidjani Thiam.

fondations, les murs et la toiture. On hérite des fondations, mais on construit soi-même les murs et la toiture, faute de quoi l'édifice reste en ébauche et risque de retourner à l'état de terrain vague. (*Wangrin* 122)

Although this statement belongs to an African praise context, it is clearly applicable to both sets of nobles—and especially to Wangrin himself, for although the griot continues to proclaim that Wangrin's "edifice" is solidly built, the reader cannot help but notice that the incompatibility of "avarice and cupidity" with "true nobility" pertains to the hero more than anyone. More importantly than the didactic point, however, the comparison of aristocracies allows Bâ to explore two related problems of life in the colonial world: the fact that French theories of colonialism and even nationhood are not all in harmony with each other, and the resulting fact that colonialism is not as single-minded, and certainly not as egalitarian as some of its champions claimed it to be. "Colonialism was no one thing," writes Dipesh Chakrabarty (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002: 169); Alice Conklin carries the point further, arguing that the A.O.F's attempts to eradicate African aristocracies in the name of individual emancipation before World War I shifted to a more conservative cooptation of existing social hierarchies after the war (Conklin 1997: 249). The colonial system appears in Bâ's writings as a machine that tries to be effective and efficient, but whose optimal functioning is hindered by disagreeing factions and individuals struggling among each other over how to operate it.

This special concern for systems of social inequality and domination not only turns the anthropological gaze onto the colonizers, whose contradictions and failures are exhibited in detail, but also undermines their claims to legitimacy in the colonies, as they can never quite agree among each other what the basis for this legitimacy is. Wangrin's opportunistically patriotic reference to France as "mère des droits de l'homme et anti-esclavagiste" (*Wangrin* 220) sounds even more hollow when read alongside Villermoz's spiteful frustration with "cette putain de Révolution française, mère d'une république aussi dévergondée qu'elle" (*Wangrin* 62). The colonial regime of historicity seems to be fractured or punctured by persistent sub-regimes, for the reference points of monarchy, revolution, and republic are still disputed within it. What does it mean, after all, to raise the tricolor flag over Africa when not even colonizers believe in it? We might read Bâ's prolonged explorations of tensions within the colonial bureaucracy as a kind of response to the Segou epic's portrayal of the French flag as a ritual "fetish." Both in *Wangrin* and in his memoirs, the author illustrates that the colonial hold on power simultaneously corresponds to and complicates the epic image of an occult object capable of neutralizing God (blue), blinding African eyes (white), and spilling their blood (red). The colonial government does, or tries to do, all of these things in various ways, but its power is riddled with internal inconsistencies and weaknesses. Like Karounka's invincibility in the epic of *Omar Tall*, which is stripped when his enemies prevent him from using his seven magic toothpicks,<sup>124</sup> or for that matter like Wangrin's own divine protection, which lasts only as long as he keeps his *pièce d'alliance* with him (*Wangrin* 22), France's control in Africa is subject to the limitations of its protective "fetish," which can be summed up as ideological violence. Abuse, resentment, conflicting agendas and collective memories, and, as well shall see, power vacuums jeopardize the colonial endeavor as it plays out on the ground. Colonialism—like the empire of Segou, and like Bamana mythology—is portrayed as defined by contradiction.

The epic historicity that *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* mobilizes through the

---

<sup>124</sup> See my discussion of this narrative (*infra* ch. 2).

characterization of its hero, the description of the god Gongoloma-Sooké, and various other formal features is well-placed to capture these paradoxes. It offers not just an alternative to the colonial regime of historicity—a thrilling narrative of an African genius thwarting his white masters and their minions—but a multitude of ways in which to explore how the regimes of historicity at work in the A.O.F. compromise and intertwine with each other. The issues of ideology, custom, praise, status, and belonging, all of which are of crucial importance in West African heroic narrative, are explored not as components of the “worldview” of an isolated village or ethnic group, as an ethnographic monograph might do, but as conjunctures where the plural cultures of the A.O.F. meet, negotiate, and contradict themselves in a historical present: just as colonialism is no one thing, neither are the alternatives to it, such as “African traditions,” “precolonial empires,” or religious belief.

### *Wangrin’s Legacy*

In a sense, the most significant indictment of the colonial system in *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* is the fact that it enables someone like Wangrin to exist. The colonial administrators’ incapability of ruling on the ground in spite of their pretensions to superiority creates a power vacuum between them and their subjects, requiring recourse to intermediaries who end up corrupted by the outsized power entrusted to them. The colonial administrator Henri Labouret—a historical figure, not a character in the book—denounces this situation so precisely that he *sounds* like a character in the book, or at least a reader of it. One can easily imagine him as yet another administrator embittered by Wangrin’s swindles:

Lorsque le milicien ne se manifeste pas, on trouve à sa place l’interprète ou le secrétaire, toujours correct, attentionné, discret, et dévoué, intermédiaire obligé entre l’administrateur, qui ne parle pas les langues du pays et les indigènes qui n’entendent pas le français. Sa tyrannie est plus intelligente, mais non moins lourde, elle est tout aussi profitable. Gardes de cercle, interprètes ou secrétaires sont presque partout les véritables chefs du pays. Ces auxiliaires, dont les méfaits ont été dénoncés en 1917 par le Gouverneur Général Van Vollenhoven dans une circulaire célèbre,<sup>125</sup> ont contribué pour une large part à la déposition des représentants légitimes de certaines collectivités qui auraient pu devenir de précieux collaborateurs. Ils en complotèrent souvent la perte pour prendre leur place ou y mettre une de leurs créatures. (Labouret 1931: 40)

The fact that Labouret’s colonial career unfolded in the A.O.F. during the same period as the historical Wangrin’s, combined with his allusion to concerns about interpreters at the highest levels of the administrative hierarchy, is a powerful testimony to the fact that the “interpreter phenomenon” was real and widespread. Having written these lines while teaching in Paris, Labouret was himself a speaker of two West African languages (Deschamps 1959: 291-2); his implication here is that French rule could be more effective if only administrators were competent enough to control their subordinates, notably through unimpeded communication and surveillance. The historian Jean Suret-Canale, commenting on Labouret’s remarks, extends the critique into a denunciation of colonialism more generally:

Pour l’administrateur qui trace ce tableau [i.e. Labouret], tout le mal vient évidemment de l’auxiliaire indigène... En réalité, le mal vient du despotisme du “commandant,” au nom duquel

---

<sup>125</sup> See Van Vollenhoven (1917).

agissent les sous-ordres, et dont ils cherchent à tirer quelques profits personnels! (Suret-Canale 1962: 102)

For Suret-Canale, the true problem lies in the almighty white colonial hierarchy, whose decisions are without appeal, and from whose power the interpreter draws his own. The problem is not the “tyranny” of the interpreter, but the tyranny of the system; the corrupt interpreter is but a node—and a peripheral one at that—in a vast network of exploitation.

And yet, these historical analyses do not fully account for the richness of Wangrin’s character in the text, which portrays him as both a selfish opportunist and a “Robin Hood”-type hero. The narrative voice insists that Wangrin only deploys his deceptions against the oppressors, rather than the oppressed:

Sa grande concupiscence naturelle, qu’il avouait hardiment et qu’il haïssait sincèrement sans pour autant pouvoir s’en corriger, ne l’empêchait nullement, en effet, d’avoir du coeur et d’être enclin à la charité. Certes, pour avoir de l’argent, il était prêt à jouer des tours pendables, mais toujours au détriment des colonisateurs ou des chefs de canton ou des gros commerçants qui, à ses yeux, n’étaient que des exploiters de la masse paysanne. (*Wangrin* 229)

This take on the hero’s corruption as socially productive, repeated many times by Amadou Hampâté Bâ in an apparent attempt to protect the reputation of the real Wangrin and his descendants, radicalizes Suret-Canale’s position by trying, as much as possible, to situate the hero as an enemy of the colonial system rather than a perpetrator of it. The allusion to the “masse paysanne” even seems to suggest, however delicately, a Marxist aura that recalls Suret-Canale’s own intellectual convictions.<sup>126</sup> Bâ’s defense of Wangrin as a kind of almost-resister has inspired many readings that turn the text into a political allegory. Eileen Julien complicates this reading, arguing that *Wangrin* expresses only a hollow or impotent sort of anticolonialism: “Wangrin’s defiant acts, which are so satisfying to his friends and the reader, are mere dents and scratches on the carapace of colonialism, which remains firmly in place” (Julien 1993: 66). For Pierre N’da, Wangrin is a precursor of the neopatrimonial workings of the independent African state, whereby government employees use their access to public resources in order to acquire favor and influence from private social networks (N’da 2005).

All of these readings have as a common focus Wangrin’s daring in the face of the colonial elite and his ability to expose the weaknesses of their rule. And yet, these readers’ inability to cast the hero as unambiguously anticolonial is revealing. Julien is right that the narrative does not offer any firm alternative to colonial rule: the French occupation, like African reactions to it, and like the political formations that preceded it, is “no one thing.” An anticolonial manifesto is impossible within the narrative world. If Wangrin is a resister of sorts, his resistance is eminently problematic, entangled in selfish motives and complicity with colonial injustice. While his exhilarating defiance certainly goes to the heart of his status as hero, the narrative’s cultural critique extends beyond colonialism itself. *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*, especially when read alongside Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s memoirs, draws a larger tableau of life in the A.O.F. that details the region’s cultural and historical multiplicity—its complex

---

<sup>126</sup> Jean Suret-Canale, a friend and collaborator of D.T. Niane, was an outspoken critic of colonialism in his historical work, especially in the early post-independence era (see Niane and Suret-Canale 1961); he was also active in the intellectual life of the French Communist Party.

historicités—as well as the labyrinthine politics that result from it, in a way that is not adequately captured by a dichotomy of oppression and resistance. Colonialism is but one element, however central, in this intricate web of cultural and political interests.



## Chapter Four

*“A Hero is Not Welcome” : Imagined Traditionalities in Ahmadou Kourouma’s Political-Historical Trilogy*

The novels of Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma offer a panoramic take on the intertwining historicities of West Africa. Unlike *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*, the trilogy formed by *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968), *Monnè, outrages, et défis* (1990), and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) covers not so much the height of colonial French West Africa as its foundation by conquest in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and its impoverished, oppressive aftermath in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>127</sup> Oral epic genres remain a central means for these novels to recount that history: each text in the series satirizes an obstinate, backwards-looking or out-of-touch ruler who functions as an ambiguous or failed hero. The rulers cling to the trappings of traditional heroism, including oral praise speech and heroic narrative, in order to help cement their extravagant sense of their own power. In the first two novels, the protagonist-kings are ridiculous because they insist on living in a world of denial, verging on fantasy, where precolonial authority structures remain intact. They refuse to acknowledge the marginalization irrevocably imposed on them by French colonialism (Djigui in *Monnè*) and its successor independent state (Fama in *Soleils*). The third volume, focusing on the era of single-party dictatorships, is framed as an oral epic tale ostensibly being performed to exalt the dictator as a hero, but actually conveying a not-so-subtle, damning criticism of his abuses (Koyaga in *EAVBS*).

Many scholarly readings of these texts have focused on their parodic function: they use traditional epic forms in order to parody or eviscerate failed heroes (Traoré 2000, Kyoore 2010, Kabanda 2010), or even to parody the epic form itself (Dieng 1993). Such readings would seem to suggest that the precolonial association between heroism and kingly power—which finds a direct parallel in the figure of the dictator—as well as the praise traditions associated with it should be abandoned in favor of a kind of government that is both more democratic and more open to change. But it is important to remember that all of these texts still stage or envision other, more open-ended practices of traditionality. Such practices are capable of representing and commenting on historical change, however drastic it may be. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* makes the link between oral tradition and historical reflexivity especially explicit, given its framing as a profoundly ambiguous epic that both extols and decries its hero. This chapter will argue that for Kourouma, traditional narrative forms can and must be “opened” in order to engage with the unfolding present of the real world, rather than obsessed with a romanticized past heyday. The openness with which he imagines, and rewrites, epic traditions is not merely a product of his own authorial imagination, but a way of channeling oral traditions’ capacity for creativity and reinvention.

*The example of Bilali: A complex heroic model*

The Malian performer Seydou Camara was a celebrated hunters’ singer. Of blacksmith status by birth, he was not a griot in the usually understood sense of having inherited his art

---

<sup>127</sup> In-text citations of these works are noted as *Soleils*, *Monnè*, and *EAVBS*, respectively, followed by the appropriate page number.

through family. Nevertheless the Malinke name of his profession, *donsojeli*—literally “hunter’s griot”—demonstrates the analogy between such bards’ relationship to the highly specialized and ritualized world of Mande hunting and that of a *jeli* (“griot”) to a patron of noble status.<sup>128</sup> His repertoire included ritual songs, dancing songs, and epic narratives praising hunter heroes (Bird 1974: ix). The last of these genres, known as the “hunter’s epic” or *donosomana* (Thoyer 1995: 21-3, Kesteloot and Dieng 1997: 44-5), praises past champions, both historical and mythological, whose memorable feats in the killing of animals are meant to inspire emulation by living hunters. Camara’s art shares with that of Wâ Kamissoko, the griot whom I discussed at some length in chapter 2, the distinction of having been recorded, translated, and studied by a number of professional scholars (Bird 1974, Cashion 1982, Conrad 1989).<sup>129</sup> More recently, the *donsomana* genre, of which Camara was a master, has become an object of interest in the field of francophone literature because of its centrality to Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, which is explicitly framed as a *donsomana* being performed for its protagonist, the dictator and hunter-hero Koyaga. This research trend exemplifies the increasing attention that critics have been paying to Kourouma’s creative use of oral tradition throughout his work (Borgomano 1998, Rochat 2011, Mestaoui 2012).

In order to build on these studies, I propose to illuminate Kourouma’s novels more concretely by way of comparison with a specific oral text. *Bilali of Faransekila*, a 454-line oral song recorded by David Conrad in Bamako in 1975, recounts the story of an African hunter who goes to Europe to fight in World War I. Although the hero “Bilali” does not correspond to a single real-world veteran of the war, the narrative of his heroic feats as a hunter and soldier reflect the experiences and perceptions of a great many colonial subjects from French West Africa who fought overseas for the metropole (Conrad 1989, Lunn 1999):

A hero is not welcome,  
 A hero is welcome only on troubled days.  
 Bilali saved the rubber tree cutters,  
 The lions fell into the darkness of a musket shot. [...]  
 When the rubber tree cutting was over the war began,  
 The German war. [...]  
 The blacks must be called. (l. 146-64)

Call Bilali of Faransekila,  
 Call the brave one.  
 In God’s name Bilali was brave;  
 A man of valor, no lie,  
 Bilali was born a hero.  
 The commandant sent a message to Bilali,

<sup>128</sup> Bird provides biographical information for Seydou Camara: the performer only began learning his art as an adolescent, winning his first competition in 1953 at around age 20 (Bird 1974: v). Other scholars explain that, in spite of the linguistic analogy between the terms *jeli* and *donsojeli*, the former represents a hereditary status, and therefore an inherited profession, while the latter does not (Conrad 1989: 46 n. 9, Thoyer 1995: 19, Traoré 1999: 172).

<sup>129</sup> Seydou Camara had a close working relationship with Charles Bird, who introduced him to other scholars. His son Sékou Camara, also a performer of oral tradition, worked with a number of American researchers as well (Conrad 2002: vi). However, to my knowledge, unlike Wâ Kamissoko (*infra* ch. 2), none of the researchers who knew Seydou Camara problematized his relationship to professional academics as potentially influencing his performances.

The white commandant:  
 “Come to the war.” (l. 205-12)

The bombs fell like thunder,  
 The machine-guns rattled.  
 The grenades burst,  
 The rifles cracked.  
 Bilali said to the white man,  
 “I do not want your rifle,  
 Give me a sword.  
 I am going to the enemy [...]” (l. 290-7)

No lie, the wealth belongs to the white men.  
 The black is born with only his heart,  
 The black is fearless.  
 The black is worthy, no lie.  
 Bilali attacked the Germans,  
 The Germans surrendered to the will of the whites [i.e. the French]. [...]
   
 Since the Germans’ defeat they have respected the blacks. (l. 337-44)  
 (Conrad 1989: 51-6)

The richness of this text is stunning on its own terms, and all the more so when we consider it in relation to Ahmadou Kourouma’s novels. Conrad, who collected it, sees the song as incorporating both elements of oral history and oral tradition, in the sense that the performer probably combined news he had heard about African soldiers leaving for war with elements of traditional legend (1989: 41-2). Though Conrad does not classify *Bilali* as a *donsomana per se*, the song strongly appears to borrow its narrative setup from the genre of the hunter’s epic. In particular, the connection between the prowess of the hunter and of the military hero—in the case of Bilali, a killer of lions who becomes a killer of Germans—harkens back to an ancient theme in West African heroic narrative more generally. The *Sunjata* itself famously opens with two hunters defeating a buffalo woman who had terrorized the region, paving the way for the birth of the hero.<sup>130</sup> In a reminiscent way, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* stages the story of the semi-fictional<sup>131</sup> dictator-hero Koyaga, who was trained in his youth as a master hunter, as a *donsomana* or hunter’s epic performed by a *donsojeli*<sup>132</sup> named Bingo. Like Bilali, Koyaga’s feats in the wild—which include slaying a panther, buffalo, elephant, and crocodile (*EAVBS* 69-75)—prepare his fearless service as a young *tirailleur* in the French colonial army, under whose auspices he distinguishes himself in Indochina (29-39). Indeed, Seydou Camara’s insistence that Bilali’s aptitude in war earned respect for his race from the French echoes the

<sup>130</sup> Traoré (1999) explores in depth the connections between the *Sunjata*, which as a royal epic is the domain of endogamous *jeliw* or griots, and hunters’ literature, which belongs to non-endogamous *donsojeliw* or hunters’ bards. These connections include explicit comparisons between the slaughter of animals and the killing of human enemies.

<sup>131</sup> Much of the story of Koyaga’s time in power closely follows that of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, the autocratic president of Togo from 1967 to 2005. Koyaga’s country, the “République du Golfe,” is a calque of Togo. As Kourouma himself pointed out, all the dictator characters in the novel are given fictional names but correspond to real rulers of postcolonial francophone Africa (Le Renard and Toulabor 1999: 178-82). As such, an important dimension of the novel is its status as *roman à clé*.

<sup>132</sup> The word used in Kourouma’s novel to name Bingo’s profession is *sora* (*EAVBS* 9), which is a synonym of *donsojeli* (Traoré 1999: 172).

admiration that Koyaga's exploits on the Vietnamese battlefield command from his white comrades (*EAVBS* 38). In a more sinister twist on the hunter-fighter connection, Koyaga kills anyone who opposes his rise to absolute political power as though he were dealing with "fauves," mutilating their bodies in order to neutralize their occult energy, and thereby recalling the ritual preparation of a game animal's carcass (*EAVBS* 70, 100-1).<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, the hunter-fighter link is hardly limited to the literary imagination: in the 1990s, during a crime wave exacerbated by Ivory Coast's political crisis, ritually initiated hunters took on the role of informal police "according to the imitative logic by which they blended themselves into the forest to kill game" (Hellweg 2011: 1).

This historicity, which links Malinke ritual hunting to battles and struggles in human society, is illustrated well in the *Bilali* text, demonstrating the ability of the *donsomana* genre to inspire performances that reflect on current or recent times. Rather than limiting his repertoire to ancient heroes, the performer uses them as a model for a new song about relatively recent events in colonial history, filled with allusions to African experiences of foreign wars, travel, forced labor ("rubber tree cutters"), and leadership in shaping political affairs in the A.O.F. and even France itself.<sup>134</sup> All of these historical issues and their relationship to traditional narrative forms are of central interest in Kourouma's novels. In fact, they are key to understanding not just the author's use of diverse generic influences in his writing, but also his philosophy of traditionality more generally. The dynamism and creativity with which Kourouma infuses his representations of oral tradition in his novels—including the ability of traditional speech to criticize the hero it is praising—are not merely the result of his own authorial originality, but intrinsic traits of oral tradition which he tries to channel in his written work. Lobna Mestaoui argues that

dans l'Afrique moderne, l'épique n'est certes pas une matière fossilisée, sclérosée, que l'on conserve dans les musées. Plus que jamais la tradition épique fermente et bouillonne. Elle est vivante et dynamique: on la déclame. [...] Kourouma travaille à la jonction de ces deux univers, celui de la dictature et celui du fait héroïque épique, pour parler d'une Afrique hybride où s'interpénètrent vieux fonds archaïque et modernité, une Afrique qui, par là, s'avère capable de donner naissance aussi bien à des œuvres qu'à des êtres métissés qui portent en eux une ouverture sur la modernité sans jamais cesser de manifester un lien permanent avec les pratiques de l'héritage culturel traditionnel. (2012: 33)

While her recognition of the dynamism of epic is important, we must recognize that it is not only Kourouma who works at the junction of the archaic and the modern. The oral tradition from which he draws inspiration is itself already straddling that junction. By emphasizing how his novels are aligned with such traditional narrative forms, my analysis will allow us to grasp the complexity, and indeed the subversive potential, of the traditions themselves on which the author is drawing, and thereby to understand more completely their relation to his novelistic writing.

This chapter will study Kourouma's philosophy of traditionality through his appropriations of oral epic features in his writing. Using *Bilali* as a point of departure, it will explore the potential of oral epic both to convey healthy social criticism and to impose a

<sup>133</sup> Kourouma discussed this ritual hunting practice outside the context of the novel in an interview (Le Renard and Toulabor 1999: 181).

<sup>134</sup> Seydou Camara's son Sékou, discussing the text with David Conrad, suggested that the invented hero Bilali was inspired at least partially by Blaise Diagne, the Senegalese deputy to the French National Assembly who negotiated certain reforms in the colonies in exchange for African participation in World War I (Conrad 1989: 43-44 and 61 n. 45).

dangerous demagoguery on society. The analysis will then explore Kourouma's theorization of closed and open traditionalities as an alternative to older anthropological schemes of primitive and scientific mentalities. On one hand, for Kourouma, culture can indeed stagnate, and power structures can become fanatically despotic, when veneration of the past is equated with the obstinate rejection of historical change; but a more democratic, pragmatic, and tolerant politics is possible when tradition is conceived in a way that makes room for new interpretations and an embrace of historical change. One way or the other, tradition is always inseparable from politics for Kourouma, whether based on the interests of colonial ethnography, precolonial chiefdoms, or postcolonial dictators. As a textual example of this ideological embeddedness, Kourouma's reading of the *donsoton* or hunting society as emblematic of openness, egalitarianism, and freedom at the end of *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* borrows heavily from a particular published ethnography of that institution; but this act of textual recycling only serves to remind the reader that the author's explicitly politicized appropriation of the hunter's epic and hunter's society is undoubtedly more salutary than the equally political but insane uses of these made by the rulers whom his novels ridicule.

### *The Unwelcome Hero*

The subversive potential of oral tradition is expressed remarkably in the *Bilali* passage through the lines, "A hero is not welcome / A hero is welcome only on troubled days" (Conrad 1989: p. 51, l. 146-7). These lines, which Seydou Camara wove into many of his performances of heroic narrative (Bird 1974: vii), invite differing interpretations. For David Conrad, they indicate in the context of *Bilali* that the hero was "despised" in a literal sense except in times of need (1989: 64)—both by his own society, to some degree, since the hero is described as an orphan with no family history (1989: 63), and by the French, whom Seydou Camara mocks as suddenly seeing their colonial subjects as "milk-brothers" and "milk-sisters"<sup>135</sup> when it is time to go to war (Conrad 1989: p. 51 l. 162-3). But the lines carry a deeper significance for Charles Bird, according to whom they encapsulate

the anomalous relationship between the hero and the society. The hero is asocial, capable of unrestricted cruelty and destructiveness, whose presence is always a threat to the stability of the collectivity. He is, however, perhaps the only member associated with the group who is capable of swift and conclusive action. [...] The society is thus damned with the hero and damned without him. (Bird 1974: vii)

Bird's analysis, though directly concerned with Seydou Camara's vision of the epic hero, represents a pertinent standard against which Ahmadou Kourouma's protagonists can be judged. The particular point of the hero's capacity for "unrestricted cruelty and destructiveness" could be applied verbatim to the dictator Koyaga, whose ruthlessness is a principal concern of *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. That novel is, in one sense, a long illustration of how the "République du Golfe" and its fellow dictatorships in francophone Africa are "damned" by the

---

<sup>135</sup> That is, siblings from the same father and mother, particularly in the context of a polygamous family. This relationship carries connotations of solidarity and cooperation between the siblings (*badenya*), whereas children of the same father but different mothers represent an archetypal relationship of rivalry and competition (*fadenya*) (Jansen 1996). By pointing out that the French colonizers claimed a relation of *badenya* with their African subjects only in time of need, Seydou Camara is highlighting their hypocrisy.

actions of their tyrant-heroes. And yet, even when Koyaga is deposed and an era of democracy declared, the ensuing power vacuum and social chaos lead many *Golfe* citizens to miss their sense of order and to pave the way for the dictator's return to power, however tenuous his hold on it might be (*EAVBS* 365-72). The public is strangely attracted to the powerful domination that he provides, even though his rule is oppressive and corrupt, because the opposition's forces are fragmented, incompetent, and just as narcissistic. The hero's destructive nature actually functions as a centripetal force against the anarchy represented by his opponents—which consist of hoards of desperate young “*déscolarisés*” and a completely inept “*Conférence nationale*” (*EAVBS* 346-51 and 359-68). Moreover, Koyaga provides the paradoxically comforting illusion that “swift and conclusive action” can run the country although the problems facing it—neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and entrenched corruption and poverty—are rooted in historical networks of intercontinental exploitation that are far more powerful, and consequential, than he. The *République du Golfe* is damned with or without him.

Bird's explanation of Seydou Camara's ambiguous hero is relevant in a different way to Koyaga's counterparts Fama and Djigui, the protagonists from the trilogy's other two novels. While Koyaga fails at achieving a truly praiseworthy heroic status because the cruelty of his grip on power outweighs any productive contributions he might make to his country, these other protagonists are unsuccessful heroes because they are simply incapable of any decisive action at all. Fama is delusional, too fixated on his own nostalgia for his traditional chieftaincy to adapt to the postcolonial world. A friend exhorts him not to go back to Togobala, the seat of Fama's ancestral power:

Ecoute, Fama! On ne part pas quand on a la possibilité d'avoir l'argent, d'avoir une situation, d'être quelqu'un, d'être utile aux amis et aux parents. Que feras-tu à Togobala? La chefferie est morte. Togobala est fini, c'est un village en ruine. Tu n'es pas une feuille d'arbre qui jaunit quand la saison change. Les soleils ont tourné avec la colonisation et l'indépendance: chauffe-toi avec ces nouveaux soleils [...] Adapte-toi! Accepte le monde!” (*Soleils* 181-2)

Fama's refusal to “adapt” or “accept the world” makes him the opposite of a “useful” person or a “somebody.” A useless no-one in the eyes of society, he is an epic hero only in his own mind. The metaphor of the passing seasons and the play on the word “soleil,” which borrows from Malinke the word *tele*'s double meanings of sun and day, reinforce the novel's insistence that Fama ought to embrace the passage of time rather than deplore it.

However, this interpretation of *Les Soleils des indépendances* leads us to an impasse when we turn to *Monnè, outrages et défis*. For Djigui's great failure as a hero is precisely the fact that he is *too* willing to cave in, or “adapt,” to the colonial conquest, ushering in decades of dishonor (“*monnè*”) for his people. He is constantly compared negatively to Samori Touré, who represents the definitive heroic model for having steadfastly refused to bow before the French conquest. Djigui's subjects, serving collectively as narrator, tell us that he had been

l'ami de Samory et nous nous rappelâmes que lorsque la défaite de celui-ci avait paru inéluctable, [Djigui] l'avait trahi en accueillant les Blancs nazaréens à Soba. Le pouvoir et la force de ces incroyants, plus que nul autre Nègre, l'avaient honoré en lui proposant un train et, plus que nul autre chef, il avait fatigué ses sujets pour servir le Blanc. Mais nous promîmes de témoigner qu[e Djigui] avait renoncé au train, avait combattu la colonisation et, suprême refus, qu'il était mort avec un non samorien entre les dents. (*Monnè* 274-5)

This brief passage summarizes the entire novel in a few sentences. Seen in Samori's shadow, Djigui always looks impotent. "Le pouvoir et la force" belong not to the supposed hero, but to the colonizers, whom Djigui "serves" in spite of the fact that they should have been his enemies. And even that decision does not qualify as "swift and conclusive action" (Bird 1974: vii) because Djigui ends up regretting it to the point of absurdity: he declares forty years after the fact that his defeat and its consequences never actually happened at all (*Monnè* 181). He goes so far as to gather a ragtag army of "vieillard[s] terminé[s]" to declare war on the colonial governor—to no effect whatsoever, since the governor does not even acknowledge their existence (183). Unlike Fama, Djigui shows a willingness to compromise with the era of colonialism; but in an extremely similar way, both protagonists end up blinded to the present by their longing for the past. Once again, society is damned regardless of whether the hero resists the enemy or compromises with him. (It is worth recalling that even Samori's heroic resistance ended in defeat.)

Nonetheless, in spite of Djigui's failures as a hero, society feels the need to heroicize him in its memory, to remember him *as though* had obstinately repeated Samori's "no" to the French. This relationship between a flawed leader and his subjects' collective memory suggests another aspect of what Bird calls the "anomalous relationship" between hero and society: Djigui's people is painfully aware of his shortcomings during his lifetime, yet chooses to remember him according to the heroic model which already governs its memory of Samori. In that sense, the notion that "a hero is only welcome on troubled days" takes on a new meaning, suggesting that public memory *needs* to fill its chronicles with colorful acts of heroism which can serve as sources of inspiration for action during difficult times. Historical events as they happened may be far less "welcome" in the public imagination.

### *Competing Traditionalities: The Closure-Openness Dichotomy*

But the theme of inevitable damnation should not be exaggerated, for Ahmadou Kourouma's novels are not narrowly Afro-pessimistic (Paravy 2011). Nor should we conclude that the epic traditions which animate them can only lead society to dead ends. Rather, these novels represent traditionality as a kind of meta-language, a set of discourses and practices that are neither good nor bad in themselves, but which can be mobilized in a variety of ways. As a point of departure, we might borrow for a moment the problematic dichotomy formulated by Robin Horton (1993 [1967]: 222) in order to locate particular recourses to tradition on a continuum from "closed" to "open," where closure signals blind adherence to an ideology of venerating the past, while openness emphasizes the ability to adapt, to foster critical reflexivity and self-reflexivity, and to dynamically engage with the present. In this formulation, a totally closed traditionality refuses to see the world through any lens but itself, while an open one makes itself available to outside perspectives and to change. This continuum, which is applicable to many episodes in Kourouma's writing, draws inspiration from a long debate in anthropology about the nature of thought in "primitive" or "traditional" societies and what differentiates it from "civilized," "modern," or "scientific" thought.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, Kourouma was a

---

<sup>136</sup> Key moments in this conversation include Lévy-Bruhl (1922), Lévi-Strauss (1962), Horton (1993 [1967] and 1993 [1982]), Goody (1977), and Latour (1991). I discuss Horton in greater detail below. Much of this thought equates the "traditional" or "primitive" with a particular kind of worldview in which the past is venerated over the present, whereas other understandings of the traditional define it as a genre of discourse rather than an ideology or set of beliefs *per se*. The argument that tradition is a genre and not a type or set of beliefs was energetically articulated by Boyer (1984). Nonetheless, I draw on the outdated worldview approach to traditionality in this

reader of ethnography and alludes to it in his novels. His novels ridicule the absurdly closed attachment to precolonial culture that characters like Djigui or Fama personify, but they incorporate more open-minded instantiations of traditional discourse into their narrative voice. In doing so, Kourouma's writing celebrates the critical reflexivity of "open" traditionality and uses it as a key means of realizing for his novels' function of social criticism.

As such, the author is working against the more rigid, and formerly dominant, understanding of the category of the "traditional." In a well-known essay first published in 1967, Horton, an anthropologist, wrote that

in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such awareness is highly developed. It is this difference we refer to when we say that traditional cultures are "closed" and scientifically oriented cultures "open." (1993 [1967]: 222)

Reacting 15 years later to the largely negative critical response to this paper, Horton would revise his understanding of tradition. He acknowledged the reductionism of aligning the open-closed dichotomy—which closely parallels Lévi-Strauss's distinction between "hot" and "cold" societies (Lévi-Strauss 1962)—with the tradition-modernity divide (Horton 1993 [1982]).<sup>137</sup> In one important critique of Horton, Jack Goody tried to replace the opposition between closed tradition and open modernity with that of closed orality and open writing, suggesting that modes of thought born from orality are more closed because they cannot generate the more open "critical tradition" enabled by writing (Goody 1977: 43).<sup>138</sup> More recent anthropological work has critiqued the traditionality-closure pairing from a historical perspective, showing how tradition has been reified for centuries as an object which, by being conceived as depending on closure, made conceivable such other political projects as modernity, progress, and identity politics (Bauman and Briggs 2003, Briggs and Naithani 2012).

Ultimately, the reading I am proposing of Kourouma will challenge both Horton and Goody by situating openness within the domain of the traditional and the oral: these forms of cultural transmission are "specific knowledges, always open to revision since history itself is open-ended" (Clifford 2004: 161). And yet, Kourouma's writing does not do away with closure altogether. On the contrary, Horton's original formulation serves as an articulation of the kind of extreme worldview that Kourouma is parodying and writing against in his novels. Fama and Djigui, whose obsession with the precolonial past prevents them from functioning productively in the present, seem to exemplify Horton's equation of tradition with closure, a conflation which contemporary anthropology has long since left behind. Not only are these characters forever looking backwards, but they always fail or refuse to recognize "alternatives" to their belief in their own invincible legitimacy. Any acceptance of historical change is anathema to Fama, whose thoughts are always trained on the Horodougou, his idealized lost homeland: "La colonisation, les commandants, les réquisitions, les épidémies, les sécheresses, les Indépendances, le parti unique et la révolution sont exactement des enfants de la même couche,

---

chapter because it is important to Ahmadou Kourouma, who sees in traditional discourse's dependence on the authority of the past a *risk* of encouraging a delusional worldview.

<sup>137</sup> Nonetheless, Horton's 1982 reformulation was not radically different from that of 1967. He was still invested in establishing a sweeping divide between tradition and modernity; each side of the divide was still characterized by a distinct concept of time and theorization of knowledge (Horton 1993 [1982]: 220-42).

<sup>138</sup> See Miller's critique of Goody on this point (Miller 1990: 105-6) and my discussion of Goody in the introduction.



des étrangers au Horodougou, des sortes de malédictions inventées par le diable” (*Soleils* 132). This litany, which rejects the consequences of historical change as the scandalous “inventions” of foreigners and demons, echoes Djigui’s quixotic rejection of reality when he declares that colonialism never happened at all: “ni la colonisation, ni les travaux forcés, ni le train, ni les années, ni notre vieillesse n’avaient existé” (*Monnè* 181).

Both of these examples of men living in denial match up well with Horton’s rather extreme vision of the traditional concept of time:

One might well describe the Western Sudanic cultures as obsessed with the annulment of time to a degree unparalleled in Africa as a whole. [...] This widespread attempt to annul the passage of time seems closely linked to features of traditional thought which I have already reviewed. [...] [T]he new and the strange, in so far as they fail to fit into the established system of classification and theory, are intimations of chaos to be avoided as far as possible. Advancing time, with its inevitable element of non-repetitive change, is the vehicle *par excellence* of the new and the strange. Hence its effects must be annulled at all costs. (Horton 1993 [1967]: 247-8)

Horton is referring here to “rites of recreation” which are supposed to renew the time of mythical heroes in the present. The kinds of rituals that he has in mind do not claim to “annul” the passage of time in a strong sense, like that intended by Djigui, but rather to surpass it, to connect the mundane present to the spiritual past.<sup>139</sup> But Horton’s use of forceful vocabulary—“annul,” “obsessed,” “unparalleled,” “at all costs”—suggests an extreme level of past-worship that corresponds to the most absurd excesses of characters like Djigui and Fama. For Kourouma, these characters represent the danger of distorted traditionality: looking too much toward the past can lead people to become delusional and to withdraw from the present. As such, while Horton’s dichotomy fails to account for the category of tradition *per se* in its complexity, it can serve as a useful point of entry into Kourouma’s writing, if only because the “closed” traditionalities that this author imagines are so pathetic as to warrant parody and rejection.

### *Hyper-Primitive Societies*

An exaggerated attachment to the past applies not just to the protagonists of Kourouma’s novels, but to the societies they represent as well. Fittingly, both *Monnè*, *outrages et défis* and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* begin with communities which are described in hyper-primitivizing terms, seeming to match Horton’s view of closed traditionality point for point. In *Monnè*, an imaginary Malinke kingdom is portrayed as a sealed-off world:

Depuis des siècles, les gens de Soba et leurs rois vivaient dans un monde clos à l’abri de toute idée et croyance nouvelles. Protégés par des montagnes, ils avaient réussi, tant bien que mal, à préserver leur indépendance. C’était une société arrêtée. Les sorciers, les marabouts, les griots,

---

<sup>139</sup> Horton’s own examples of these rites confirm this interpretation. He mentions, in particular, Dogon practices of cultivating a field or planning a homestead as being ritualized in a way that perpetuates certain aspects of Dogon cosmogony (1993 [1967]: 247-8). Claude Lévi-Strauss, whom Horton cites as an influence (Horton 1993 [1967]: 423 n. 26), compares such rites of recreation to the Euro-American institution of the archive, which treasures original documents like the Declaration of Independence as precious in their materiality even though the originals themselves may add nothing to our knowledge of history (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 319-23). These examples, which Horton calls “time annulment,” hardly seem obsessive or unparalleled compared to Djigui’s intention of “annulling” the last 40 years of his people’s collective life by mere fiat.

les sages, tous les intellectuels croyaient que le monde était définitivement achevé et ils le disaient. [...] La religion était un syncrétisme du fétichisme malinké et de l'islam. Elle donnait des explications satisfaisantes à toutes les graves questions que les habitants pouvaient se poser et les gens n'allaient pas au-delà [...]. Certes, ce n'était pas le bonheur pour tout le monde, mais cela semblait transparent pour chacun, donc logique [...]. C'était beaucoup. (*Monnè* 21)

Here the author expresses a definite interest in anthropological discussions of so-called primitive mentality or rationality. He writes the dominant paradigm of closed traditionality directly into his description of the Soba kingdom. The expression “monde clos” highlights this correspondence especially well. Moreover, the passage’s reiteration of the implications of that closure—that the community is “arrêtée” or in a state of arrested development, that the world is “définitivement achevé” and thus resistant to anything new or strange, that no alternative ideas had presented themselves in centuries, that people’s worldview seems logical because it is self-contained—is driven home with such insistence that it begins to come across as written self-consciously or hyperbolically. The passage’s air of irony is confirmed when the reader thinks carefully about the place of religion. The fact that the residents of Soba practice a syncretic combination of Islam and animism reflects the enormous ideological upheaval of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when jihadist empire-building activities spread Islam massively across West Africa—that is, an obvious example of not-so-distant exposure to the new and the strange (Borgomano 1998: 144).

In a similar way, the dictator-hero Koyaga comes from a hyper-primitive community of “hommes nus” (*EAVBS* 12) who, like the kingdom of Soba, resisted the European conquest for a long time thanks to their isolation in the mountains. Even more explicitly than in *Monnè*, Kourouma frames his description of this group as an ironic critique of how ethnographic writing overdetermined the notion of primitiveness:

[Les Européens] se trouvent face aux hommes nus. Des hommes totalement nus. Sans organisation sociale. Sans chef. Chaque chef de famille vit dans son fortin et l'autorité du chef ne va pas au-delà de la portée de sa flèche. Des sauvages parmi les sauvages avec lesquels on ne trouve pas de langage de politesse ou violence pour communiquer. [...] Les conquérants font appel aux ethnologues. Les ethnologues les appellent les hommes nus. Ils les appellent les paléonigritiques—le mot est trop long, contentons-nous de l'abréviation “paléos.” Les ethnologues recommandent aux militaires de contourner les montagnes et de poursuivre leurs conquêtes victorieuses et sanguinaires dans les savanes parmi les Nègres habillés, les Nègres organisés, hiérarchisés. (*EAVBS* 12)

This passage makes express reference to the place of ethnography in inventing ethnic identifications and in facilitating colonial conquest. The short, choppy rhythm of its sentences, especially those beginning with “sans,” emphasizes that the *hommes nus* are conceived in terms of lack: lack of clothes, lack of political or social organization, lack of contact. The shortness of this description gives way to an equally rapid series of events, underlining the reductionism of colonial logic as depending on its need to make fast, convenient decisions: the military calls up the ethnographers, who in turn invent an ethnic category and offer a recommendation of what to do. The notion of “sauvages parmi les sauvages” places the *hommes nus* at the bottom of an evolutionist typology according to which the heirs of the ancient West African empires are more civilized—although, as we saw in the passage from *Monnè* above, this supposed superiority did not stop groups like the Malinke from being described in highly primitivizing terms as well.

Even the neologism “paléonigritique,” which by its etymology evokes a prehistoric version of blackness or “sauvages parmi les sauvages,” must be shortened to “paléos” because of the need for a quick and easily digestible system of classification.

Kourouma’s use of this term merits special attention. His writing alludes to the paleonigritic theory of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, according to which isolated communities living in hills or mountains across a huge zone stretching from Senegal to eastern or southern Africa had resisted conquest by others, maintaining an archaic civilization with some traits in common, including near-nudity (Baumann and Westermann 1957 [1940]: 65-9). Some anthropological scholarship classified the Kabre people of northern Togo, which produced the real-life dictator Gnassingbé Eyadéma—of whom the character Koyaga is a calque—as an example of a paleonigritic people (Froelich 1964 and 1968); earlier, colonial-era scholarship had emphasized the Kabre’s isolation (Frobenius 1913, Cornevin 1961).<sup>140</sup> Just as the novel’s protagonist Koyaga mirrors the historical Eyadéma, the *paléos* or *hommes nus* mirror the Kabre. The novel’s narration of tensions between *paléos* and the southern inhabitants of the *République du Golfe* closely follows the historical tensions between Togo’s Kabre from the north and Ewe from the south, which, for example, caused Eyadéma to be initially rejected from the Togolese army because of his ethnicity (Piot 1999: 44-5), just as the young Koyaga is rejected from the army of the *République du Golfe* (EAVBS 78-9). The Kabre’s fortunes changed upon Eyadéma’s seizure of power: though they constituted a minority in the country, the dictator and his entourage favored this ethnic group as their kinsmen in the attribution of power and resources (Piot 1999: 44-5).

On one hand, Kourouma’s use of the term “paléo” clearly channels colonial-era ethnography by highlighting its fixation with primitiveness—a discourse which has survived in contemporary Togo, since the Kabre are still stereotyped as “ancient” or “traditional” by foreigners and as “inferior” by some southerners (Piot 1999: 28, 41, 44). Although Kourouma himself expressed a certain credence in the paleonigritic theory,<sup>141</sup> his strategy of writing it into his novel while avoiding the term “Kabre” emphasizes the inventedness of ethnic categories as a key mechanism in the apparatus of colonial governance. One might even go so far as to read Kourouma’s deployment of hyper-primitivizing descriptions of both the Malinke and the Kabre as a strategy of parodic hyperbole which exaggerates colonial stereotypes in order to expose their origins as self-contradictory fictions (Kabanda 2000: 259). On the other hand, Kourouma’s use of this kind of ethnography underscores his message that historical change is accompanied by violence, and all the more so in a “closed” or “cold” society. This point is emphasized by the *hommes nus*’s depiction as not only traditional, closed, or primitive, but archetypally so. In effect, an important sub-plot of the novel’s first *veillée* is how, in a radical break with traditional practice, the *hommes nus* come to wear clothing, a shift which makes them vulnerable to exploitation by the French (EAVBS 16)—for they are now “colonisables, administrables, exploitables” (12). In spite of these negative consequences, such a change could not have been

---

<sup>140</sup> See also Mercier (1968), who analyzes and challenges the primitivist ethnography of a neighboring people with “paleonigritic” characteristics, namely the Somba of what is today northern Benin.

<sup>141</sup> Kourouma stated in an interview that “Les hommes nus étaient en Afrique un peuple important, s’étendant du Sénégal jusqu’au Soudan actuel” (Le Renard and Toulabor 1999: 178). The paleonigritic theory has, for the most part, lost currency today. Bayart, following earlier sources, nevertheless marshals it as an example of stateless societies being capable of political innovation (1993: 17). In contrast, Piot’s book-length study of the Kabre in northern Togo problematizes that group’s reputation for primitiveness yet makes no mention of its supposed belonging to a larger paleonigritic category (Piot 1999).

avoided. As Koyaga's father Tchao puts it, "l'univers est un monde d'habillés. Nous ne pouvons pas entrer dans ce monde sans nous vêtir, sans abandonner notre nudité" (20). The wrenching decision to replace a closed ideology, which eschews the outside world, with an open one, which embraces it, brings no guarantee of happiness or just treatment by others.

Kourouma's portrayal of Soba and of the *hommes nus* as hyper-primitive ethnic groups awaiting the "entry into history" brought by colonization seems to suggest an intractable conflict of essentialized worldviews, similar to that theorized by Horton in his opposition between a closed, traditional Africa and an open, scientific West. However, the author's ironic approach to this kind of facile ethnographic scenario undermines our ability to take it completely seriously. The author's explicit reference to the role of ethnography in inventing categories like the "paleonigrific" and in enabling colonial governance clarifies his critical posture. And yet, the theme of the closed worldview being called upon to open itself up to the new and strange—illustrated by Djigui and Fama, Soba and the *hommes nus*—is not parodic in a one-dimensional way for Kourouma, but a recurring metanarrative in his novels. This layered strategy of writing suggests that although closure to the outside world is not a fact that we can take for granted among African persons or societies, an ideological orientation which values tradition carries a real risk of becoming totalizing and all-consuming. Closed traditionality represents an absurd pole which cannot last in the wake of colonialism, industrialization, and globalization; the question is what alternatives are available. Does the experience of the *hommes nus* call for an abandonment of tradition altogether? What tools do Kourouma's novels offer to help us theorize a more open approach to traditionality?

### *Opened Traditions*

A starting point for answering this question lies in the theory of knowledge that the novels advocate. Anthropological depictions, and Kourouma's caricatures, of traditionality as self-absorbed and either removed from or opposed to the outside world contrast markedly with the philosophy that a chastened Djigui elaborates in his old age, disillusioned by his own failures and experience of colonialism. He tells his son Béma that

on peut planter un fruitier sans ramasser les gousses, ramasser les gousses sans les ouvrir, les ouvrir sans les consommer. Le monde est toujours plus nombreux et plus large qu'on ne le croit. Allah peut plus que ce que tu connais; trop de choses que nous ne soupçonnons pas sont vraies; tout ce que nous pouvons concevoir est du domaine du possible. Personne ne connaît le monde en totalité; il ne faut jurer de rien. (*Monnè* 264)

The image of the tree, instead of signifying rootedness or a totalizing traditional ideology, signifies the "domain of the possible," a series of experiences of the world which can always be deepened by more experience. No matter how much we know, there is more to know. The variety of the world and the volatility of the future underscore the incompleteness of human knowledge and call for a philosophy that is always aware of its own limits—of what Horton would call "alternatives" to itself. This articulation of knowledge emphasizes the openness of the future. More explicitly, this passage points to the constant adaptation and readjustment of one's beliefs, whether these are traditionally transmitted or not, in order to account for new and previously unsuspected data. Ironically, even though it is Djigui who pronounces these words, his inability to adjust his own beliefs to reality at various points in the novel is precisely what

makes both him and his counterpart Fama pathetic imitations of epic heroes.

This theory of knowledge, which exemplifies openness in Horton's sense, is applied to the specific domain of the traditional by the narrative voice of Kourouma's novels. As a first example, the *donsojeli's* narration of *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, which is divided into six large sections called "veillées" or evening performances, devotes its first *veillée* to the theme of tradition. Proverbs are used to conclude each chapter within the *veillée*, specifically counseling "le respect de la tradition" (EAVBS 39) and "la vénération de la tradition" (65), and elaborating what such attitudes entail. In keeping with this novel's central preoccupation with hunting, these proverbs often portray the respect that an individual ought to bear toward tradition through analogies to animal behavior, especially to a baby animal's dependence on its parents: both relationships require that the new generation learn by imitating its predecessors. Some of these maxims seem to envisage a relatively closed understanding of what respect for tradition means. The admonition that "Si la petite souris abandonne le sentier de ses pères, les pointes de chiendent lui crèvent les yeux" suggests that to follow a path different from the heritage of the past will bring harm (65). On the other hand, the set of proverbs which follows chapter 1 lends itself to a more layered reading:

La tradition doit être respectée parce que :  
*Si la perdrix s'envole son enfant ne reste pas à terre.*  
*Malgré le séjour prolongé d'un oiseau perché sur un baobab, il n'oublie pas que le nid dans lequel il a été couvé est dans l'arbuste.*  
*Et quand on ne sait où l'on va, qu'on sache d'où l'on vient.* (10-11, emphasis Kourouma's)

Each of these proverbs refers to the future as being connected to a past sense of home or rootedness. But the importance of this memory is relativized: what is striking about these illustrative sentences is their emphasis on the openness of the future. They do not suggest that one must blindly mimic or obey one's elders, or even that one must respect the authority of the past in order to navigate the present. Rather, tradition is a point of reference that should be remembered, in the sense of being recalled to a person's mind, as he or she chooses a path in life. To know "d'où l'on vient" does not oblige us to be slaves to the past, but to situate ourselves in relation to it. In addition, the first two maxims point to the elasticity of the heritage of the past. In the first, the parent partridge plays the role of transmitter of knowledge, the guarantor of tradition; but the activity which the young partridge imitates from this authority-figure is to "s'envoler," to fly away—the opposite of "rester à terre," which connotes fixity or groundedness. The act of flying is framed as both an act of transmitted knowledge and a celebration of mobility, as embodying the dynamism that is necessary for survival. In the second one, a preliminary reading suggests that the bush and the baobab tree represent more stable, less explicitly mobile locations: the bush is low to the ground, while the bird has a "séjour prolongé" in the tree's branches. Yet even here, the proverb emphasizes movement between these two poles: the adult bird is only "perché" on its branch, implying that it could, like the partridge, fly away. The bird is tied neither to the baobab where it now sojourns, nor to the nest where it was born. Traditionality is a point of reference, a source of inspiration, an object worthy of remembrance and some degree of reverence, but it cannot claim the last word. For this reason, it is not surprising or overly significant that some of the proverbs in this *veillée* represent tradition as relatively more open or closed than others: "Proverbe n'est pas dogme" (Kesteloot 1983: 141). Coming from this angle, one might suppose that Koyaga's father Tchao was actually following

some of these proverbs' advice by braving the wrath of the *hommes nus*'s ancestors and introducing clothing into their society.

It is important to note that the status of Kourouma's proverbs is unclear. He claimed in an interview that they were all authentic: "Dans le *donsomana*, les gens disent un ou deux proverbes. Moi j'en ai fait un procédé systématique et j'ai beaucoup exploité les livres de proverbes africains. Les proverbes que vous trouvez dans le roman sont tous authentiques" (quoted in Chemla 1999: 29). However, the critic Jean Derive offers a different explanation:

Il me souvient avoir un jour eu une conversation privée avec Kourouma sur les nombreux proverbes qui émaillent tous ses romans. Ayant moi-même recueilli de la tradition orale dans la zone mandingue, je connaissais une bonne partie d'entre eux mais il y en avait un certain nombre d'autres que je n'avais jamais rencontrés. Quand je lui demandais de m'en donner la version originale en malinké, Kourouma me confessa avec un sourire qu'il avait inventé plusieurs d'entre eux, directement en français. [...] Kourouma en truffait le texte de ses romans en mélangeant de vrais adages du répertoire avec des trouvailles de son cru tellement bien construites sur le modèle canonique, tellement bien adaptées dans la fiction à l'usage qui était fait dans la réalité, qu'il était presque impossible de faire le départ entre proverbes réels et proverbes créés. (Derive in Mestaoui 2012: 12-13)

Read together, these two accounts of how Kourouma saw his practice of writing folklore are jarring in their contradiction. It is certain that, in general, Kourouma was willing to adapt oral tradition to his needs as a writer—which he acknowledged himself by pointing out that an oral *donsomana* might have one or two proverbs, while his novel uses them systematically. It therefore seems plausible that some of the many proverbs that appear in the novel may indeed be invented. Yet, as Derive emphasizes, Kourouma's presumed invention of proverbs is so skillful and careful that it is extremely difficult to tell which are invented and which are collected or quoted. That in itself implies a faithfulness to the style and models of oral tradition on Kourouma's part which may suffice to justify his proverbs' claim to authenticity. However, if creativity and invention have a place within an "authentic" practice of writing folklore, then they must also be an intrinsic element in Kourouma's vision of traditionality itself. Traditions are, in such a view, subject to change, to reinvention, and to creative reimaginings.

Returning to *Monnè*, Djigui's griot Djéliba offers an eloquent articulation of the necessity of this kind of opened traditionality:

L'infini qui est au ciel a changé de paroles; le Mandingue ne sera plus la terre des preux. Je suis un griot, donc homme de la parole. Chaque fois que les mots changent de sens et les choses de symboles, je retourne à la terre qui m'a vu naître pour tout recommencer: réapprendre l'histoire et les nouveaux noms des hommes, des animaux et des choses.<sup>142</sup> [...] Je m'en vais pour réapprendre les nouvelles appellations de l'héroïsme et celles des grands clans du Mandingue. Comment se nomment maintenant les Touré, les Koné, les Kourouma, [...] maintenant que leur terre mandingue est vaincue et possédée par des infidèles d'incirconcis, fils d'incirconcis et de non incisées? (*Monnè* 42-3)

It is significant that this project of renaming the world in light of the profound changes that have

<sup>142</sup> From this sentence is taken the title of the novel's chapter 4: "Chaque fois que les mots changent de sens et les choses de symbole, les Diabaté retournent réapprendre l'histoire et les nouveaux noms des hommes, des animaux et des choses" (*Monnè* 41). The surname Diabaté is typically associated with griot families.

taken place belongs to a griot, a specialist of traditionalizing speech. Even though he declares that the time of “preux” like Samori has given way to the shame of colonialism, the notion of “héroïsme” will not be forgotten—only perhaps recounted in a different way. Djéliba does not claim that he is permanently unable to understand or to comment on the new, strange events that are unfolding. Rather, he intends to go back to his ancestral home—the site *par excellence* for the transmission of traditions, and presumably where he learned his craft—in order to *relearn* his craft.

But even this resolve to leave the royal court does not last: at Djigui’s repeated insistence, the griot renounces his plans, and stays to invent a new song for the new times. Rather than singing epics which praise the royal Keita clan—to which both Sunjata and Djigui belong—he composes “sur sa cora un nouvel air” that is specially adapted to the times of *monnè*, of dishonorable subjugation to the French (*Monnè* 49):

*Le soleil rougit, ombre par ombre la nuit triomphe  
Les fromagers se déverdissent avec l’harmattan  
Se reverdissent avec l’hivernage.  
Arrête de soupirer, de désespérer, Prince.  
Rien ne se présente aussi nombreux et multicolore que la vie. [...]  
Djéliba une fois encore a repris son air qui, aussitôt, a été appelé le chant des monnew. (Monnè 49, emphasis Kourouma’s)*

In a fascinating way, this song takes up the multifaceted Malinke word *tele* or *tile* which gives *Les Soleils des Indépendances* its title, the image of the sun or day signifying an era. But instead of placing the sun at its zenith, which in oral epic connotes a heroic time in which the hero defines his age, the sun is at its setting. The heroless nighttime of colonial domination begins. But even then there is room for hope: the seasonal rhythm of fading and returning green leaves reminds the listener that the passage of time brings new life—and, no doubt, another day when the sun will be at its highest again. Even though heroism seems gone from this new era of shame, the fact that the griot’s performance still has the power to name the times with the word *monnè* (“dishonor”) signifies the relevance of his traditional function in spite of profound historical change. If anything, profound change *requires* the griot to find a name for it: Djéliba describes his mission as one of learning the “nouveaux noms des hommes, des animaux et des choses” (*Monnè* 41, 42). Moreover, the naming of the era as one of *monnè* actually reinscribes the memory of heroism into the representation of the times of colonialism. According to the griot’s song, the new era is not an end, but a transition, a night between two days. The line that “Rien ne se présente aussi nombreux et multicolore que la vie” celebrates this diversity of experience in time, reminding the listener that the unpredictability of the future is actually a reason for hope.

### *Truth, Lies, and Fiction: Is Africa False?*

This reading of Kourouma allows us to displace Horton’s open-closed dichotomy. Rather than positioning it along the boundary between modernity and tradition, we can place it within the category of tradition itself. Traditionality can be closed off from the rest of the world, as Djigui and Fama, Soba and the *hommes nus* demonstrate, but it can also open itself up to it, as Djéliba’s *chant des monnew* exemplifies. Kourouma’s novels allow us to theorize an open dimension of traditionality precisely because they mobilize oral heroic traditions in order to

criticize the failings of leaders like Fama, Djigui, and Koyaga, each of whom imagines himself, or is cast by the narrative, as an epic hero. However, the novels extend their criticism of traditionalizing discourse: not only because looking to the past risks generating a closed worldview, but also because praise or epic-like speech is infinitely capable of stretching the truth in order to fit pre-established narrative schemes that are exemplary or heroic in nature. As we have seen, the community of Soba promises to remember Djigui as a heroic anticolonial resister in the mold of Samori in spite of his incessant compromises (*Monnè* 274-5). Another aspect of this skepticism concerns the frequent existence of competing or conflicting narrative versions of the same events. Any event can be narrated differently—with a different cultural baggage, or from another character’s point of view, or with a different political objective. Yet each of the resulting alternative narratives can stake its own claim to authority.

The backstory of Djigui’s wife Moussokoro is especially revealing in this regard (*Monnè* ch. 10). This subplot is framed as four episodes of her life story, recounting how she came to Djigui’s court and became his favored, youngest wife. Each of the four episodes is narrated from two conflicting perspectives which alternate with one another: first Djigui’s court griots and historians, who tell Moussokoro’s story in a way that is sympathetic to her and, by extension, flattering to Djigui (130, 150); but this perspective is juxtaposed with a much harsher narrative voice which is said to belong either to the people of Soba (130) or to Moussokoro’s jealous co-wives (140, 152). The initial explanation of how Moussokoro was given as a gift to Djigui as a child is immediately challenged by this second, antagonistic voice:

Qu’y avait-il de solide dans cette biographie? “Peu... très peu de grains. [Moussokoro] était née fabulatrice et c’était elle qui dictait cette relation des faits aux griots,” répondait le petit peuple de Soba qui détestait Moussokoro, la préférée—il l’appelait l’étrangère. La réalité aurait été plus simple : [...] C’est tout... Le reste est conte, menterie. (*Monnè* 130-1)

This classic example of a multiply narrated, self-undermining narrative strategy calls attention to the fact that collective memory is always subject to contestation (Traoré 2000: 1356-7). Each version that can be told of the Moussokoro story is rooted in its own vested interests: griots affirm the prestige of Djigui’s newest marriage, and by extension his prestige and power; and competitors for the king’s attention are hostile to the foreigner’s intrusion. Even the second version, which claims greater fidelity to truth and objectivity by eliminating the supposed embellishments of the griots—everything that is “conte, menterie”—is embodied in a specific set of speakers with their own biases and agenda. The act of narrating is cast as deeply ambivalent, always enmeshed in a web of intrigue which makes it impossible to sort out fact from self-interested, politicized rhetoric. Whatever healthy social criticism can be drawn from oral tradition, it is imbued with ideological stakes that ultimately serve the political goals of its enunciators. In this sense, it is easy for the people of Soba to criticize Moussokoro as a “fabulatrice” and her version of the story as “conte, menterie,” but their own version of the events is no less fabricated, no less self-interested. The same is true of the series of episodes in *veillée 5* of *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Four times, Koyaga is said to escape from an assassination attempt; he circulates an official version of events which attributes his survival to his own supernatural invincibility; and each time, his fellow dictators from neighboring countries send a delegation to find out what “really” happened (*EAVBS* 270-1, 275-6, 288-9, 305-6). While what “really” happened in these events is likely different from the official mythologizations offered by Koyaga’s government—especially when we consider the historical



events in the life of Gnassingbé Eyadéma to which these episodes allude—the search for objective truth is itself intertwined with the interests of other dictators. The conflict here is not so much between truth and lies as it is between conflicting interests inscribed in competing narratives and struggles for power. Within the world of these novels, no voice can validly claim a monopoly on truth or objectivity.

The conflict between versions of events in these episodes thus has a double edge. On one hand, it is framed as an issue of hyperbole versus realism: the official narrative of what happened is inevitably a version of a “real” event that has been exaggerated or mythologized for political reasons. But on the other, no version of events is more authoritative than any other because they are all entwined in political interests. Here the stakes of Kourouma’s political critique become clearest and sharpest: what does it mean to represent the “truth” of African politics or to criticize its “lies”? It is not enough to point out that the practice of instituting an official version of a narrative is only one step away from the postcolonial authoritarian government’s maniacal attempts to maintain its own credibility and control popular faith in it. Nor is it enough to decenter an official, nationalist version of African history by recounting it from an alternative perspective, whether that be of the marginalized king-turned-citizen (Fama in *Soleils*, Djigui in *Monnè*), objectified women (Salimata in *Soleils*, Moussokoro in *EAVBS*), or a representation of collective consciousness (the people of Soba in *Monnè* or the “jeunes déscolarisés” in *EAVBS*). After all, each of these perspectives remains partial and rooted in a particular set of interests. Even the act of debunking magic and superstition in the name of rationality does not go far enough, for it reproduces ethnography’s reductive binary of a closed, traditional Africa and an open, scientific West. Kourouma’s writing performs all of these rhetorical strategies, but none of them can claim to represent the “truth” about the political situation which he is criticizing. Each is already compromised by its own embeddedness in previous, problematic discourses, indicating its ability to be instrumentalized toward inherently ideological if not oppressive ends. The following exclamation of Fricasso Santos, president of the *République du Golfe*,<sup>143</sup> supports this reading. Santos, who is unable to foresee his immanent downfall because of an obstinate belief in his own invulnerability, interjects just before death:

Nous sommes les plus compétents en magie. [...] Si un tirailleur comme Koyaga parvenait à me tuer cette nuit, cela signifierait que tout ce que j’ai appris est faux, que tous mes maîtres m’ont menti. C’est-à-dire que l’Afrique entière est fautive, est mensonge, que tous les talismans, tous les sacrifices n’ont aucun effet. Cela n’est pas pensable, n’est pas possible. Cela ne peut pas être vrai. (*EAVBS* 91-2)

At one level, this passage recalls the dichotomy of closed and open worldviews discussed above, since Santos’s stubborn belief in magic gives him an unfounded self-confidence and renders him both pathetic and absurd. But even more absurd is his reduction of “Africa” into a true-false proposition that depends on the validity or invalidity of magical beliefs. All of Kourouma’s writing serves as a vast illustration of the fact that the contradictory yet intertwined regimes of historicity, narratives, and claims to legitimacy circulating on the continent cannot be amalgamated into a single monolithic whole. The very attempt to cast truth as singular and unambiguous is, in itself, the trademark of the dictator. An unshakeable belief in magic is

---

<sup>143</sup> The character Fricasso Santos is a calque of the historical Sylvanus Olympio, Togo’s first president, who was assassinated during the coup of 1963 that put Nicolas Grunitzky (figured in the novel by the “métis Crunet”) in power. Eyadéma claimed to have personally killed Olympio, just as Koyaga shoots Santos in the novel.

unfounded and has dire consequences, but so does any epistemology that claims total access to truth.

As such, the very issue of truth is problematized in Kourouma's novels—in spite of the fact that the author of a play entitled *Diseur de vérité* said of himself, rejecting the label of the *auteur engagé*, “J'écris des choses qui sont vraies. [...] J'écris les choses comes elles sont. Comme le diseur de vérité” (Le Renard and Toulabor 1999: 178). But Kourouma's approach to truth is not so much to discover whether a given narrative—a griot's flattery, a dictator's claims to invincibility, a rationalist rebuttal, or even the novels themselves—is “true” or “false.” All such narratives are fictions insofar as they cannot claim a monopoly on truth. Rather, the key question is how a given narrative mobilizes the terms of truth and falsehood: in order to cement its own authority, to delegitimize or silence other narratives, or, in fact, to celebrate the coexistence of divergent narratives in a democratic society. From this perspective, the motivation behind Kourouma's interest in Malinke hunting societies in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* becomes clear. Just as Mohamed Saidou N'Daou interprets the *Sunjata* epic as a model for the democratic governance of African nations (*infra* ch. 2), Ahmadou Kourouma sees the hunting association or *donsoton*—the fraternal organization within which Malinke hunters are trained, are ritually initiated, and work together—as a model for an egalitarian, democratic, participatory form of self-government. Every narrative is ideological, but the ideology that Kourouma infuses into the *donsoton* is clearly more salutary and constructive than the monstrous absolutism of the dictator:

Le donso-ton est en fait une franc-maçonnerie, une religion. La confrérie a été fondée pour résister à l'oppression des gouvernants et combattre l'esclavage. Elle prêche l'égalité, la fraternité entre tous les hommes de toute race, toute origine sociale, de toutes les castes, de toutes croyance et fonction. Elle reste depuis cinquante siècles le lieu de ralliement de tous ceux qui, sous tous régimes, disent deux fois non: non à l'oppression, non au renoncement devant l'adversité. (EAVBS 312)

The hunting association is, for Kourouma, exemplary in its egalitarianism. Unlike other Mande cultural settings, social status has no significance at all within the *donsoton*: the only hierarchy that exists among its members is one of seniority based on length of membership. Kourouma's interpretation of this egalitarianism as a manifestation of resistance to oppression, captured in the repeated word “non,” recalls the memory of the “non samorien” as the ideal of anticolonial resistance (*Monnè* 275). The repetition of this word even has a certain dimension of orality to it, seeming to echo perhaps a protest chant, or at least an emphatic declaration. Paradoxically, the French words “égalité” and “fraternité” allude noticeably to the motto of the French Republic, a surprising declaration of universality in the context of a precolonial African ritual practice inflected with anticolonial overtones. The anthropological fact of the hunting society is, in the world of this novel, inseparable from its interpretation by Kourouma as a model of democracy opposed to the abusive authoritarian paradigms of colonialism and dictatorship.

And yet, it is significant that the above description of the *donsoton* is drawn almost verbatim from the work of Y.T. Cissé, the Malian anthropologist and collaborator of Wâ Kamissoko (*infra* ch. 2). In a monograph on Malinke hunting associations, Cissé recounts the mythic origin story

d'une confrérie de type maçonnique prêchant la liberté pour chacun, l'égalité, la fraternité et l'entente entre tous les hommes, et ceci quelles que soient leur race, leur origine sociale, leurs

croyances, ou la fonction qu'ils exercent. [...] Ainsi naquit la *donso tòn*, 'société des chasseurs,' qui, depuis, resta le lieu de ralliement de tous ceux qui disent non à l'oppression, non au renoncement devant l'adversité, et qui n'entendent obéir qu'à des autorités qui émanent de leur confrérie ou qui ont son approbation. (Cissé 1994: 25-6)

The resemblance between the passages from Kourouma and Cissé is striking. Each text includes a comparison to Freemasonry,<sup>144</sup> very similar examples of the notion of fraternity, and allusions to resistance, rallying, and adversity that are phrased in similar language. Even the double “no” of protest against oppression is here, rooting this ethnographic description in a clearly political pro-democratic agenda, even though the specifics of it are left vague. Kourouma’s recycling of Cissé’s language reframes the ideological nature of the *donsoton* in a way that links it to the intrinsically ideological nature of anthropology as well. Just as Kourouma parodies the category of the “paleonigrific” as an invention of colonial ethnography located in the need to dominate and control, so is Cissé’s idealized interpretation of the *donsoton* marshaled in order to self-consciously construct a counter-narrative of cooperation and mutual aid that refuses the authoritarianism of colonialism and its grotesque imitator, the postcolonial dictator. By referring to Cissé, an expert on the *donsoton*, and reproducing his voice for a few sentences, Kourouma implicates—perhaps even rescues—anthropology in his own ideological project of imagining a more egalitarian Africa, even as he critiques this discipline once again as always implicated in an ideological project of some kind.

Thus, Kourouma’s practice of fiction takes on a multifaceted set of tasks. It excavates hegemonic discourses and dominant myths—nationalist, colonialist, ethnographic, traditionalist—in order to draw attention to their inventedness, their fictionality. It proposes not one, but many counter-narratives, told from a variety of perspectives, no one of which can claim to be a completely “truthful” representation of history (Semunjaga 2006), but all of which contribute to a “représentation de l’histoire comme le droit et la liberté de formulation et de récupération de la réalité” (Gbanou 2006: 75). While the closed discursive regime of imposed, unquestionable truth belongs to dictators, single-party rule, hyperprimitive societies, and anyone paralyzed by nostalgia for the past, a sense of adaptability and openness to the other is imagined as the defining characteristic of the democratic hunters’ association and its narrative form, the *donsomana* or epic. Traditionality operates on both sides of this divide, being capable of both “closed” and “open” manifestations. The reader is invited to make sense of these conflicting narratives by participating in Kourouma’s vision of the traditional democracy, a fiction which privileges tolerance and creativity, and which can perhaps serve as a new, more salutary kind of communal guiding myth than the “unwelcome hero.” In this sense, the most significant parallel between the *Bilali* text, with which I began, and Kourouma’s novels may not be their dependence on heroes as such, but their use of the hero as a device through which to refract representations of collective experience and historical change.

---

<sup>144</sup> The intersection between European and African esoteric beliefs and initiation systems was a particular area of interest for Amadou Hampâté Bâ (Kesteloot 2005); Bâ himself became involved in Freemasonry because he saw it as one such intersection (Devey 1993: 64, 120, 161).

## Conclusion

### *“The Tales of Tomorrow”: Toward a Futurist Vision of Tradition*

In this dissertation, I have studied mobilizations of West African epic in French writing. Though an imported and invented category, the idea of an African epic has provided a paradigm from the colonial period onward that makes the continent legible in comparison to Europe. Although much literary theory, especially studies of the novel, has imagined epic either as the novel’s other or its predecessor, oral heroic narratives in the West African context continue to exist as living, evolving traditions whose critical reflexivity has inspired and shaped francophone literary writing. The novel is neither a replacement nor a successor to forms of traditional oral narrative, but rather overlaps with them by sharing their function of social criticism. The work of Ahmadou Hampâté Bâ and Amadou Kourouma illustrates this vision of traditionality as a dynamic concept that has continued to be relevant through changing colonial and postcolonial contexts. More than this, their multifaceted deployment of traditional epic forms in their writing makes room for questioning the authority of tradition itself and to opening it up to outside influences.

As a conclusion to this study, I offer an initial analysis of a final, contemporary writer, Boubacar Boris Diop of Senegal, who pursues to an even further extent the practice of questioning tradition from within a traditionalizing register. Diop’s work—specifically the novel *Doomi Golo* (2003), originally written in Wolof and adapted into French as *Les Petits de la guenon* (2009)<sup>145</sup>—simultaneously fits within and challenges the arc that I have traced through francophone writing, while looking toward an uncertain future. Like Ahmadou Kourouma’s trilogy, the novel in question monumentalizes the great oral narratives and heroes of the past at the same time as it relativizes, delegitimizes, and de-essentializes them. As I have argued, the key to this paradoxical project lies not only in the desire of the contemporary artist to reinvent, to rethink, or to reimagine the heritage of the past in a creative way, but also, in the intrinsic ability of traditions themselves to adapt to new situations and to reflect critically on changing historical realities—that is, to reinvent themselves. But Diop’s work enables us to carry our reflection on the adaptability of tradition one step beyond the other authors I have studied here. While Amadou Hampâté Bâ highlights the infinite political usability of tradition as one kind of cultural code among others, and Ahmadou Kourouma shows how uses of tradition can be open to historical change rather than closed off from the world, Boubacar Boris Diop opens this category up more radically, showing that traditions, defined as any cultural item which claims transmission from past generations, can actually be more oriented toward the future than toward the past. Oral traditional narratives are sprinkled throughout this novel, recontextualized in such a way as to emphasize the inventedness of the past and forwardness of their heroes’ thinking. For Diop, the most important lesson we can take from traditional heroes is the fact that they are

---

<sup>145</sup> I use the word “adapted” rather than “translated” because the French version contains significant differences from the Wolof original. Passages are deleted or reordered, details are added, an occasional name or setting is changed, and the direct address that the narrator Ngiraan uses to speak to his absent grandson in Wolof often becomes a third-person descriptive style in French. A paratextual note in *Les Petits de la Guenon* states that it is the “version française de *Doomi Golo*” and that “la traduction en a été librement assurée par l’auteur lui-même.” Where possible, I quote both versions of the novel together so that my reader may compare them, but occasionally an element I want to reference is only present in one version or the other. In-texts citations refer to *Doomi Golo* as *DG* and *Les Petits de la guenon* as *PG*, followed by the appropriate page number.

products of the storytelling imagination: their entanglement in a complex web of plotlines, diegetic levels, and allusions to historical events and other kinds of texts displaces the centrality of the hero and debunks traditional stories' claims to authenticity. As such, heroic models are sites on which to imagine new heroisms—embodied, as we shall see, in the marginalized figure of the little girl whose youth and gender bear the promise of a more egalitarian future, rather than the authoritarian old man who demands continuity with the power structures of the past. For these reasons, I see Diop as paving the way for rethinking traditionality in what we might call “futurist” terms.<sup>146</sup>

### *The Power of the Burning Library*

The stakes of this realignment of tradition toward the future become visible when we consider the famous maxim of Amadou Hampâté Bâ: “En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.” This saying has taken on a proverb-like life of its own to the point of becoming a kind of commonplace in African letters.<sup>147</sup> It embodies what we usually think of when we think of traditionality: an attitude of reverence toward the past, incarnated in the elders, especially elderly men (“vieillards”). It also carries a tone of urgency, reiterating the metanarrative that traditional knowledge is on the verge of death and needs to be saved—Bâ was, after all, trying to secure funding for formal research and documentation efforts in the area of oral tradition. But the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf focuses on the power structures to which this formula seems to allude. He draws a sharp contrast between what he perceives as Bâ's romantic, patriarchal fantasies of tradition and a set of active women heroes drawn from African novels by other authors:

Contre l'ordre patriarcal puissamment peint par la phrase si communément répétée d'Amadou Hampâté Bâ, “un vieillard, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle,” les récits romanesques opposent une vérité insurrectionnelle et un appel au démantèlement de l'ordre commandé par la génération et l'inégalité de genre. Contre la célébration toute romantique de la tradition africaine, se dresse les figures de Mama, Jaja et Kambili empoisonnant lentement mais sûrement Eugen<sup>148</sup> et la figure de

---

<sup>146</sup> James Clifford's exploration of “traditional futures” (2004) takes a different approach from what I am conceptualizing here. For him, “[t]he language of ‘articulation’” of traditions through difference, contact with other cultural forms, and identity politics “gets at the practical deconstructive, *and* reconstructive, activities of indigenous traditions better than the demystifying discourse of ‘invention’” (2004: 158). This turn away from “invention” also alludes to the debate over discursive authority provoked by scholarship on invented traditions: the authority of the Western academy to delegitimize people's claims to traditional authenticity by calling them invented was itself put into question (Briggs 1996). Nonetheless, the “demystifying discourse of ‘invention’” is apt for Boubacar Boris Diop's writing. The specific process by which historical figures become remembered in new, often distorted, ways through traditional discourse is a major concern of his fiction.

<sup>147</sup> Konaté (2005) discusses the provenance and proverb-like quality of this sentence, which Bâ expressed in different variations on different occasions, yet which has come to be generally remembered in this form I quote here. According to Konaté, Bâ first used the formula in a speech before the executive board of UNESCO in 1962: “Apprenez que dans mon pays, chaque fois qu'un vieillard meurt c'est une bibliothèque qui a brûlé” (quoted in Konaté 2005: 58). However, an even earlier variant appears in a speech that Bâ delivered to UNESCO's Programme Commission in December 1960: “Pour moi, je considère la mort de chacun de ces traditionalistes comme l'incendie d'un fonds culturel non exploité” (Bâ 1960: 16'43). Throughout his work representing Mali at UNESCO, which lasted from 1960 to 1970, Bâ called for international aid to countries like his own for the purpose of preserving oral traditional knowledge.

<sup>148</sup> From Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2006).

la *lingeer* [princesse] exécutant à bout portant, fusil à l'épaule, poitrine découverte, le marabout, dans le film d'Ousmane Sembène, *Ceddo* [1977]. (Diouf in *Afriques-Créatives* et al. 2012: 28)

Diouf's reading interprets Bâ's veneration of tradition as an attempt to disguise power as patrimony. In this view, traditional discourse enshrines and protects the domination of youth by elders and of women by men; these forms of control overlap and are tightly intertwined (Diouf in *Afriques-Créatives* et al. 2012: 30-2). To romanticize the past is to protect the ancient distribution of power of adult men over both women and young men. Against this vision, characters like Sembène's Dior Yacine (*Ceddo*) or Adichie's Kambili (*Purple Hibiscus*), both mentioned in the quote above, represent the necessary path of change by which women can become agents and citizens as opposed to the foundations of the patriarchal edifice. Meanwhile, given that Diouf's comments were made in Dakar in the context of a public discussion,<sup>149</sup> the very fact of seeming to rebuke Amadou Hampâté Bâ, a grandfather-like figure in francophone West African literary history, ensured that these comments would be controversial and disseminated in the press. The news site *Seneweb* reported, in a noticeably sensationalist tone, the following quotation of Diouf from the debate following his presentation:

[...] [L]a plus grosse bêtise qui est jamais sortie en Afrique, c'est de dire qu'en Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle. Parce que tout simplement, on ne peut pas compter sur le pouvoir gérontocratique pour penser le futur. [...] Si on ne change pas les mentalités, on n'avancera pas. Si on ne règle pas nos rapports avec la tradition, on n'avancera pas. (quoted in Kante 2012)

Sensationalism aside, this statement is interesting because it makes the temporal stakes of traditionality explicit. The inequalities which tradition protects are linked to the past, which is fetishized by the gerontocracy, while the citizenship that is needed for the future requires something new and different—a break with that past. While Diouf's specific reading of Amadou Hampâté Bâ can be questioned,<sup>150</sup> his larger point is certainly worth considering. If tradition's privileging of the past enables ancient structures of domination to inhibit the creation of more egalitarian social relations—which he sees as the social good—how can change become possible? How can we move beyond tradition in order to think a more democratic future?

### *The Ongoing Dialogue*

Boubacar Boris Diop's work seems to address this challenge quite directly. It illustrates the possibility of a traditionality that is not only open but oriented toward the future, for at the heart of that openness is youth. A particular episode in *Doomi Golo/Les Petits de la guenon*

<sup>149</sup> Specifically, Diouf's presentation was part of a workshop held in January 2012 on the research results of a study entitled "Participation politique des jeunes femmes d'Afrique de l'ouest francophone," conducted by *Afriques-Créatives* and several other organizations. His presentation is documented in the final report of this event (see *Afriques-Créatives* et al. 2012: 24-35).

<sup>150</sup> I have argued that, as a whole, Bâ's work is far more complex than a mere romanticization of patriarchal power (*infra* ch. 3); moreover, we might temper Diouf's critique by remembering to situate Bâ's powerful image of the burning library in the context in which it was often spoken, namely at UNESCO conferences and other international events in the 1960s, in an attempt to obtain funding for ethnographic research and to make African culture legible on the stage of world politics. However, if we consider Diouf's critique to be directed at the way Bâ's saying is often understood by people who repeat it, then I wholeheartedly agree that it risks being interpreted in a flattened way.

makes this agenda clear. Full of digressions, dream sequences, and intertwining subplots, this novel consists of a series of notebooks written by an elderly grandfather in Senegal, Ngiraan, to his absent émigré grandson, Badu; upon Ngiraan's death, the narration is taken over by the local madman, Aali Kébóoy. An important theme is the novel's celebration of a specifically Wolof literary heritage: references to that language's oral traditions and written heritage abound, deliberately constructing a concrete, Afrocentric literary canon within which Diop can intervene as a Wolof-language writer today while remaining in dialogue with contemporary literature worldwide. In particular, the novel elaborates its vision of traditionality in the context of a wider reflection on the relationship of history to the present by juxtaposing two specific narratives from Wolof oral tradition:

(1) One legend involves the figure of Kocc (pronounced "Kotch") Barma Fall, a character in Senegalese oral literature who is credited as a hero—not as a warrior hero, as one would expect from epic, but rather as a hero of the mind. Kocc is a sage to whom many Wolof proverbs are attributed. The prominent Guinean historian D.T. Niane believes that Kocc Barma was a real person who lived in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in the precolonial kingdom of Kajoor<sup>151</sup>; in Diop's novel, he belongs to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, specifically to the year 1619 (*PG* 346). Whether or not Kocc really existed, he is a major figure in Wolof traditional knowledge. One proverb attributed to him that has special significance for Diop is "Mag mat naa bàyyi cim réew," that is, literally, "Elders are worth keeping in the community" (*DG* 32)<sup>152</sup>; Diop translates this proverb into French in a somewhat roundabout way, giving "Malheur au peuple qui ne sait plus écouter ses vieillards" (*PG* 37). This maxim embodies what we usually think of when we think of traditionality: a veneration of the authority of the past, embodied in the elders, symbolizing the weight of patriarchy and gerontocracy. Elders, specifically elderly men, are the memory and decision-makers of the community.

(2) The second traditional narrative in question concerns the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of an emblematic wise man, we now have a battle narrative known as *Talaatay Nder*, that is, the "Tuesday of Nder." In the precolonial kingdom of Walo, located in what is today northern Senegal, it is said that the capital village of Nder was raided by a group of neighboring Moors one Tuesday around 1820—in Diop's novel, March 5 (*PG* 34). But since the Wolof king and his entourage were absent from Nder at the moment of the raid, there were only women present in the village. Not wanting to be taken as slaves, the women dress up as men and ride into battle to defend the village. They defend it so well that the Moors retreat, but one of the women's helmets falls off, revealing her braids, and their gender is discovered. The Moors, embarrassed at having nearly been bested by women, redouble their efforts and force the women to retreat back to Nder, where they take refuge in the royal hut. Still refusing to face capture, the women, led by a royal servant named Mbarka Ja, decide to commit collective suicide, burning the hut down with themselves in it. The women allow one of their number to escape so that their story can be remembered by posterity: depending on the version, this survivor is either a pregnant

---

<sup>151</sup> See issues 2 and 3 of the Senegalese review *Demb ak Tey* ["Yesterday and Today"] (1975 and 1976), directed by Djibril Tamsir Niane, which are devoted specifically to oral traditions surrounding Kocc Barma. Niane argues that Kocc's historical existence is certain.

<sup>152</sup> See Kesteloot and Mbodj (2006 [1983]: 172-7) for a published version of the well-known story from which this proverb is drawn.

adult or a little girl.<sup>153</sup> In Diop's version, it is the latter: Mbarka Ja orders a little girl named Sadani Caam (pronounced "Cham") to escape.

The significance of the *Talaatay Nder* story certainly lies in part in its ready usability by 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminist discourses. The theme of the androgynous woman warrior, as we have already seen (*infra* ch. 2), comes up again and again in West African oral narrative, particularly in epic. It speaks to a certain way of gendering power: women can, under certain circumstances, appropriate and wield male power. When one encounters the story of the women of Nder today on the Internet or in a book, it is inevitably associated with contemporary Senegalese women's demands to participate more fully in public life by grounding these demands in Senegalese traditional narrative, that is, by traditionalizing and heroicizing those demands.<sup>154</sup>

But in addition to this ready-made feminist reading, the *Talaatay Nder* story also lends itself to the interpretation proposed by Boubacar Boris Diop, which emphasizes the creativity and forward-thinking promise of youth, as opposed to a backward-looking respect for the authority of elders. For him, the most important aspect of the legend is the fact that the royal servant Mbarka Ja sends a little girl to escape from the burning village in order to transmit the memory of the event to posterity. Diop's novel portrays this act as constituting a challenge that the women of Nder are posing to the traditional wisdom of Kocc Barma, who had said that "Elders are worth keeping in the community." The novel claims that what Mbarka Ja has done is to rewrite Kocc's proverb, essentially declaring that "Youth are worth keeping in the community." For comparison, I quote both the passage in its Wolof original from *Doomi Golo*, with an English translation of my own alongside it, and the author's French adaptation in *Les Petits de la guenon*:

Kocc Barma Faal de, dafa ne woon:

**-Mag mat naa bàayi cim réew.**

Ni Mbarka Ja doxale de, safaanoo na bu baax ak kàddu yu siiw yooyu. Mbarka Ja, Yàlla mayoon na ko fit, may ko xel. Dékku na saay-saay ya songoon Ndeer. Te ba dara desul lu dul génn addina, sóoru na Kocc Barma Faal, boroom xam-xam bi kenn masul sañ a weddi. Ndax ni Mbarka Ja rawalee Sadani Caam, lii rekk a tekki:

**-Gone mat naa bàayi cim réew...**

Lu cee sa xalat, Badu? Sunu ñaari ponkal yooyu, koo ci àndal? Mbarka Ja walla Kocc Barma Faal? (DG 32)

Kocc Barma Fall used to say:

**-Elders are worth keeping in the community.**

Mbarka Ja's leadership directly contradicted those famous words. God gave Mbarka Ja courage and brains. She confronted the brutes who had attacked Nder. And when nothing was left for her but to leave this world, she braved Kocc Barma Fall, the sage whom no one had ever dared to contradict. For the way that Mbarka Ja saved Sadani Caam meant only this:

**-Children are worth keeping in the community...**

What do you think of that, Badu? Of our two luminaries, which one do you agree with? Mbarka Ja or Kocc Barma Fall? (my translation)

<sup>153</sup> See Seye (2003: 152-6) and Serbin (2004: 158-63) and for published versions of the *Talaatay Nder* story. Alioune Badara Beye dramatized the incident as a play entitled *Nder en flammes* (1990). The notebooks of the colonial Senegalese functionary Yoro Dyao, which were written between 1902 and 1908 and published in pieces in colonial publications by Raymond Rousseau and Henri Gaden, contain a brief account of the *Talaatay Nder* story amid other historical information on the kingdom of Walo (Rousseau 1929: 142).

<sup>154</sup> This is the case, for example, of Serbin (2004) as well as Diaw (2010).



Tu connais Kocc Barma Fall, notre subtil et insolent philosophe. ‘Malheur au peuple qui ne sait plus écouter ses vieillards,’ a-t-il dit un jour. Combien de fois as-tu entendu cette maxime que notre peuple répète depuis des siècles avec respect? Peut-être du reste que ce drôle de Cayorien, qui ne prenait personne au sérieux et surtout pas lui-même, aurait-il été amusé de voir que nous continuons à le tenir tant de siècles plus tard, pour un homme quasi infallible. Mais voilà: il s’est trouvé dans l’histoire de notre pays quelqu’un pour affronter avec panache ce tortueux et agaçant dialecticien. Car, en vérité, Mbarka Dia a-t-elle fait autre chose en ordonnant à Sadani Thiam d’être l’unique survivante et la mémoire de cette journée? Au milieu des flammes, avant d’être réduite en cendres, elle a trouvé la force de proclamer, contre Kocc Barma Fall: ‘Malheur au peuple qui ne sait plus écouter ses petites filles. (PG 37)

This passage is striking for a number of reasons. First, it is clear that the two versions are different. The French adaptation adds details that are absent in Wolof: most importantly, Kocc is characterized as playful, even unserious; therefore excessive respect for his seemingly “infallible” authority is ridiculous. Despite this key addition, the overall thrust of the passage is the same in both languages. The text calls for a move away from what we might call a rigid or conservative traditionality, that is, one that is focused on maintaining normative social roles and power relations based on age and gender. Mbarka Ja is erected as the hero of the day not so much because of her pride in choosing death over capture, but for her courage in flouting the prestige of Kocc Barma’s sayings—in a way reminiscent of how Mamadou Diouf erects Sembène’s Dior Yacine and Adichie’s Kambili as heroines who defy the supposedly patriarchal traditionality of Amadou Hampâté Bâ. Mbarka Ja’s strength of character is portrayed as having defied Kocc’s authority with “panache,” especially, it is implied, because she is a woman. Moreover, the community’s hope for remembering her female comrades’ act of heroism is embodied not, say, in the performance of a male griot, but in the testimony of a young girl. The prestige usually reserved for men and which increases with age is swept away. This point is driven home more explicitly in French, reducing the status of Kocc himself to a sort of annoying rambler, a “tortueux et agaçant dialecticien.” Diop’s strategy of deflating age and masculinity in order to privilege youth and womanhood suggests a rejection of the use of tradition to maintain authoritarian, patriarchal, and gerontocratic power structures.

And yet, this rejection is itself inscribed in a traditionalizing discourse. Rather than claiming that Kocc Barma is somehow irrelevant to the modern age, the authority of the philosopher is merely relativized, opened up to new meanings. According to the French version of the passage, Kocc himself wasn’t as rigid or conservative as people tend to imagine. Reimagining the severe sage whom no one can contradict, Diop reads Kocc’s utterances almost as a kind of language game, as the product of someone “qui ne prenait personne au sérieux et surtout pas lui-même.” This description suggests that so-called traditional wisdom requires more than one strategy of interpretation: Kocc’s proverbs have a kind of ironic quality, that is, multiple possible meanings, including playful or context-dependent ones. They cannot be taken as infallible truths—which is exactly how Kocc is classically portrayed in the oral traditional tale of his “four truths,” of which the proverb honoring elders is the third. Diop’s revisionist portrayal of the philosopher as subtle, insolent, and irritating underscores the multiplicity of meanings of traditional utterances like Koccian proverbs, while the use of descriptors like “tortueux” and “dialecticien” point toward the potentially self-contradictory character of such sayings—yet another illustration of Kesteloot and Mbodj’s convenient formula that “Proverbe n’est pas dogme” (2006 [1983]: 166). In fact, it is worth noting that Kesteloot and Mbodj make that

assertion precisely while reflecting on the misogynistic and prejudiced nature of Kocc's four truths:

[1] Benn: jigéen soppal te bul wóolu	One: Love your wife but do not trust her.
[2] Ñaar: doomu jiitle du doom.	Two: An adopted son is not a son.
[3] Ñett: mag mat naa bàyyi cib dëkk.	Three: Elders are worth keeping in the village.
[4] Ñeent: buur du mbokk. (Kesteloot and Mbodj 2006 [1983]: 173)	Four: A king is not family. (my translation)

Kesteloot and Mbodj take special exception to the first two of these sayings. About the story from which the Koccian truths are drawn, the authors write:

[Le récit] prend la force d'une démonstration péremptoire: alors qu'il n'est fondé que sur des exemples et que l'exemple n'est pas un argument, vu qu'on peut toujours trouver un autre exemple qui contredit le premier. Dans ce recueil même, on trouve au moins deux récits où il est prouvé que la femme est digne de confiance! [...] Ceci ne met point en cause la subtilité du sage de Kayor, mais il faut le comprendre dans son époque, et ne pas accorder aux proverbes une valeur absolue et éternelle. (Kesteloot and Mbodj 2006 [1983]: 165-6)

Self-contradiction is, according to these scholars, an intrinsic quality of traditional discourse, for one can find examples anywhere in it to support whatever argument that one is trying to make. There are stories to prove that women are trustworthy, and others, such as Kocc's, to prove that they are not. Boubacar Boris Diop seizes precisely on this potential for contradiction and makes it the key to his analysis of traditionality in *Doomi Golo/Les Petits de la guenon*. Rather than portraying Kocc as an authority figure whose decrees are timeless, the sage is in this novel a lover of enigma, someone whose "truths" are context-dependent, partial, and therefore able to be contradicted.

Within the novel, the *Talaatay Nder* story performs the exact work which Kesteloot and Mbodj describe: to demonstrate, against the idea that elders are the best guides of society, that women and children are also necessary to guarantee its survival. The only difference is that while Kesteloot and Mbodj are drawn to contest Kocc's first two truths using the tales in their collection, Diop's novel can be read as a long challenge, which nevertheless remains grounded in traditional narrative, to truth number three: the novel serves as an attempt to dissociate oral tradition from gerontocratic and masculinist power. Indeed, while the first section of the book is introduced by the epigraph of "Gone mat naa bàyyi cim réew" (DG 10) or "Malheur au peuple qui ne sait plus écouter ses petites filles..." (PG 9), the second and final section bears an epigraph which rewrites the same proverb yet again:

Dof mat naa bàyyi cim réew. (DG 286)	Crazy people are worth keeping in the community. (my translation)
--------------------------------------	---

Malheur au peuple qui ne sait plus écouter sa part de folie. (PG 323)

Here, madness becomes a sign of daring to speak truth to power: the neighborhood's eccentric wanderer, Aali Këbóoy, gains respect as a kind of prophet, and is even compared to Patrice Lumumba (DG 271-7, PG 330-4), because he is unafraid to give voice to uncomfortable realities that irritate the authorities. Again, a marginalized social group is brought to the fore and given

the prestige reserved by Kocc's proverb to elders. The fact that Aali Këbóoy is a legendary Robin Hood-type figure who remains part of the urban folklore of Dakar drives home the point: Diop challenges the traditional wisdom of Kocc's proverb by contrasting it with other pieces of oral tradition.

This reflection on the nature of traditionality as contradictory and malleable through the example of Kocc Barma serves to reinscribe his sayings in an explicitly dialogical context: rather than a one-way transmission of messages from the past to the present, the authority of the proverb is relativized as an utterance in an ongoing conversation—that is, an utterance that can be repeated, echoed, modified, or replied to. The image of the ongoing conversation is, in this analysis, the best way to understand traditional discourse itself. In Diop's novel, the placing into dialogue of several different orally transmitted narratives offers a new way to understand all of them. The maxim enshrining respect for age, attributed to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Kocc, can be answered by an androgynous female warrior in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who changes one word—"mag" to "gone" in Wolof or "viellards" to "petites filles" in French—in order to put young girls on the pedestal usually reserved for old men; and it can be answered yet again by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century urban legend of Aali Këbóoy, who is made to valorize the figure of the "dof" or madman who provides society its "part de folie." And all the narratives which are juxtaposed in this dialogue remain part of the Wolof oral tradition, whose very dialogical capacity for self-contradiction and, might we say, ironic distance from itself becomes a source of inspiration for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century novel.

Finally, Diop's emphasis on the discrepancy between the figure of Kocc himself and his use by posterity highlights the inventedness and, indeed, a certain arbitrariness of traditional discourse. Whereas Kocc is remembered by society as an authority figure whom one must cite with reverence, the living character comes off in both French and Wolof as a freethinker, a lover of equality and trust in oneself. When encouraged by the narrator Aali Këbóoy to stop defying the king of Kajoor and to behave with the deference expected of him, Kocc declares:

Ba léegi xamoo ni man maay sama Buuru  
bopp? (DG 286)

Do you still not know that I am my own king?  
(my translation)

Quand donc comprendras-tu, Ali, que mon seul maître se nomme Kocc Barma Fall? (PG 350)

The novel's argument that there exists a gap between the "actual" life of the hero—as imagined by Diop—and the hero remembered by society gives the novel license to rewrite the ancient traditions as it sees fit.<sup>155</sup> Another key character in the novel echoes this theme: the narrator Nguiraan believes his ancestor Maam Ngóor Fay to be a heroic figure, but upon searching for his tomb discovers him to be hated by the village where he lived. Nguiraan comes to the conclusion that searching for an authentically heroic ancestor is futile, and that the ancestor must be brought into being *in the future*. This is Nguiraan's advice to his absent grandson:

Maam Ngóor mi nu jur nun ñépp, amaana ki ko    Maam Ngóor, who brought us all into the

<sup>155</sup> The theme of the invented hero whose feats are remembered differently from how they actually happened is a recurring one for Boubacar Boris Diop. In *Le Cavalier et son ombre* (1997), a government committee is forced to invent a national hero from thin air, the "Cavalier," since no historical figure is authentic or flawless enough to serve in that role. The imaginary Cavalier's statue comes to life but is eventually killed and replaced by a lowly functionary named Dieng Mbaalo, who then occupies the position of hero. For Diop, heroes of the past are only heroic because they are imagined as such.

jur judoogul. Ñàkkul sax ne yow mii, Badu, bés dina ñëw nga juri Maam Ngóor, ni sa ndey Biige Sàmb sukke jur la. (*DG* 120)

world—perhaps the person who is to bring him into the world is not yet born. No doubt, the day will come when you, Badu, will give birth to Maam Ngóor, just as your mother Biige Sàmb knelt to give birth to you. (my translation)

Le temps est un cercle et l'aïeul n'est pas encore né. Il t'appartient de le mettre au monde toi-même. (*PG* 126)

The search for authentic heroes and origins need not be abandoned, but the temporal structure of the search must be inverted: rather than inventing an origin story around a flawed figure from the past, the heroic model must allow us to found new origins and new heroisms in the future. The ancestor, if he is to be found, must be found in the future.

This necessary act of reinvention is made possible and plausible by the constructedness of tradition itself, which is thematized in a dispute between Yesterday and Today:

[X]ew-xewi Démb ya, niti Tey yeey mujjee nettali gi. Ñi ko fekke woon ñèpp ñu nga tëdd barsàq, kenn du ci jóg sa bammeel di am looy weddi walla looy dëggal. [J]ëfi tey, léebi ëllëg. (*DG* 35-6)

As for the events of Yesterday, the people of Today always finish the story. Those who were present [at the events] are all resting in the land of the dead, and no one will rise from the grave to disprove or confirm anything. [...] The feats of today are the tales of tomorrow. (my translation)

Et c'est vrai qu'aujourd'hui n'en finit pas de tripoter hier, de le modeler et le façonner à sa guise. [...] Il bricole vite fait, comme en se jouant, un destin et une âme à son alter ego. Quel témoin va se réveiller d'entre les morts pour l'accuser de plagier le réel? (*PG* 40)

Yesterday is only knowable insofar as it is interpreted—narrated (“nettali”), “modeled,” “fashioned,”—by Today. Objective knowledge of the past is impossible. More than this, the pithy Wolof line, “[J]ëfi tey, léebi ëllëg,” absent in French, suggests that the events of today are already inseparable from their inevitable narration as story in the future, the “tales of tomorrow.” Therefore, since tradition depends on an act of interpretation in the present, and since the referential content of narrative is inseparable from narrative itself, then why not reimagine traditional stories according to one’s own vision of the needs of the future? In this novel, Diop offers a reinvention of Senegalese oral traditions that calls for greater freedom of the individual from dominant structures of power based on age and gender—an agenda very close to that articulated by Mamadou Diouf in his critique of Amadou Hampâté Bâ. The fact that the novel is written in an extremely scholarly and literate Wolof, and therefore available in its original form to a very limited readership, reveals the groundedness of this critique in a future temporality. As Tobias Warner puts it, the Wolof-language novel addresses a “public yet to come” (2012: 84). Even though Diop himself argues that the futureness of assembling a public is a characteristic of all literary writing (Warner 2012: 84), this awareness of reordering the past for the sake of the future is especially well thematized in *Doomi Golo*. The impossibility of an authentic past requires the imagination to invent one, which nonetheless recognizes itself as invented, and from which inspiration for change in the future can be found. In this case, liberation from entrenched structures of domination is imagined via the recuperation of female heroic models (Mbarka Ja

and Sadani Caam) and a recontextualization of the figure of the old man with a library in his head (Kocc Barma). The novel has recourse to what we might call tradition-as-narrative in order to imagine a liberation from what Mamadou Diouf might call tradition-as-power.

In opposition to Mbarka Ja, an emblem of female resistance, the novel's character of Yaasin Njaay slavishly imitates the former colonial master. Her love of the French language, her alienation from her Senegalese neighbors, and above all her desire to transform, with the aid of dangerous occult magic, into the white woman of her dreams seal her fate: she is forced to flee back to France and abandon her children, who seem to have turned into monkeys, the very symbols of imitation. The work's location of salutary identity models in traditional narrative may be invented and always somehow inauthentic, but it also serves as an important alternative and challenge to the continuing weight of Europhilic self-colonization—a classic theme of postcolonial writing made famous by Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952).

Meanwhile, *Les Petits de la guenon*, which came out six years after the Wolof original, makes this potential for liberation and the idea of a future Wolof-language reading public imaginable to a wider audience for the time being. Yet its many noticeable differences from the Wolof original are important. A salient example, namely the particular rereading of Kocc Barma as insolent and playful, which is carried farther in French than in Wolof, only serves to incorporate the issues surrounding flexible interpretation of traditional narrative into this text itself. Diop's self-translation from Wolof to French is not an exercise in word-for-word fidelity to a sacred original, but rather expounds in a later utterance themes left implicit in a prior one. The published text itself becomes a kind of performance which channels the capacity of traditional narrative to change over time, while eschewing mimicry as a mode of linguistic identity.

### *Conclusion: Tradition and Creativity*

The idea of creative reinterpretation, based on a careful analysis of how oral tradition works, forms the foundation of Boubacar Boris Diop's creation of a futurist aesthetic. He relativizes the authority associated with oral tradition by emphasizing that the act of constructing it as authentic and taking it with reverent seriousness—what we might call the process of traditionalization itself—is already an instance of interpretation which can be challenged and imagined differently. More than this, he places specific traditions in an ongoing conversation not only with present-day concerns, but also with each other. In a sense, none of this is really new, since so much anthropological work has been done on the dialogical, performative, interpretive, self-referential, and critical dimensions of traditional discourse, which I have brought to bear throughout this dissertation on oral heroic narrative and on francophone writing's use of it. But by paving the way for increasingly creative uses of tradition as a tool for thought, Diop associates oral tradition with the possibility of imagining a more just future. In doing so, he offers one possible answer to Diouf's call to “settle our scores with tradition” in order to “think the future.” More importantly, his work challenges the reification of tradition as backwards, a theme which connects all of the chapters in this study, and upsets the binary of tradition and modernity as radically separate entities.

## References

- Afigbo, Adiele. 1993. "Colonial Historiography." *African Historiography: Essays in honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*. Ed. Toyin Falola. Essex (UK): Longman. 39-51.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2006. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Afriques-Créatives et al. 2012. "Rapport final: Atelier régional de partage des résultats de recherche du projet de recherche 'Participation politique des jeunes femmes d'Afrique de l'ouest francophone' (Dakar, Sénégal, 9-11 janvier 2012)." Internet. <[http://www.afriquescreatives.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport\\_Atelier\\_Regional\\_de\\_Partage\\_PPJF.pdf](http://www.afriquescreatives.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Atelier_Regional_de_Partage_PPJF.pdf)>. Accessed 1 August 2013.
- Aggarwal, Kusum. 1999. *Amadou Hampâté Bâ et l'africanisme: De la recherche anthropologique à l'exercice de la fonction auctoriale*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Amadi, I.R. 1989. "The Northern Factor in the History of Sub-Saharan Africa: The Hamitic Hypothesis revealed." *Transafrican Journal of History* 18: 80-89.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup. 1990. *Logiques Métisses: Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*. Paris: Payot.
- . 1998. "Maurice Delafosse: un africaniste ambigu." *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870-1926)*. Ed. Jean-Loup Amselle and Emmanuelle Sibeud. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose. 122-36.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup, et al. 1979. "Littérature orale et idéologie. La geste des Jakité Sabashi du Ganan (Wasolon, Mali)." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 19.73-76. 381-433.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup and Emmanuelle Sibeud, ed. *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870-1926)*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.
- Anonymous. 1949. "La ruse de Diégué." *Présence Africaine* 5: 769-809.
- Appiah, Anthony. 1992. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Apter, Andrew. 2007. *Beyond Words: Discourse and Critical Agency in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arnaud, Robert. 1912. *L'Islam et la politique musulmane française*. Paris: Comité de l'Afrique Française.
- Atlas, James. 1988. "Chicago's Grumpy Guru: Best-Selling Professor Allen Bloom." *New York Times Magazine*, 3 Jan.: 23-5, 28.

- Austen, Ralph. 1986. "Criminals and the African Cultural Imagination: Normative and Deviant Heroism in Pre-Colonial and Modern Narratives." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 56.4: 385-398.
- . 1990. "Africans Speak, Colonialism Writes: The Transcription and Translation of Oral Literature before World War II." *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* 28: 29-53.
- . 1995. *The Elusive Epic: Performance, Text, and History in the Oral Narrative of Jeki la Njambè (Cameroon Coast)*. African Studies Association Press.
- . 1999a. "Editor's Introduction." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1-7.
- . 1999b. "The Historical Transformation of Genres: *Sunjata* as Panegyric, Folktale, Epic, and Novel." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 69-110.
- . 2007. "Who was Wangrin and Why Does it Matter? Colonial History 'from the Middle' and its Self-Representation." *Mande Studies* 9: 149-64.
- Bâ, Amadou Hampâté. 1960. "Discours de Hamadou Hampâté Ba à la commission Afrique de l'UNESCO." Audio recording. Internet. <<http://www.ina.fr/audio/PHD86073514/discours-de-hamadou-hampate-ba-a-la-commission-afrique-de-l-unesco-audio>>. Accessed 18 August 2013.
- . 1980. "La Tradition vivante." *Histoire générale de l'Afrique I: Méthodologie et pré-histoire africaine*. Ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo. Paris: Unesco.
- . 1991. *Amkoullel l'enfant peul*. Paris: Actes Sud.
- . 1992 [1973]. *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*. Paris: Editions 10/18.
- . 1994. *Oui mon commandant!* Paris: Actes Sud.
- . 1999 [1973]. *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Tr. Aina Pavolini Taylor. Bloomington : Indiana UP.
- Bagayogo, Shaka. 1987. "L'Etat au Mali: Représentation, autonomie, et mode de fonctionnement." *L'Etat contemporain en Afrique*. Ed. Emmanuel Terray. Paris: L'Harmattan. 91-122.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Tr. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Bakhtin, Mihail. 1986. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Tr. Vern McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- . 2002 [1981]. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barber, Karin. 2007. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP.
- Barber, Karin and P.F. de Moraes Farias. 1989. "Introduction." *Discourse and its disguises: The interpretation of African oral texts*. Ed. Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias. Birmingham (UK): Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham.
- Bauman, Richard. 1971. "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 331: 31-41.
- . 1986. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- . 1992. "Contextualization, Tradition, and the Dialogue of Genres: Icelandic Legends of the Kraftaskáld." *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Ed. Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP. 125-145.
- Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs. 1990. "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 59-88.
- . 2003. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- Baumann, Hermann and Diedrich Westermann. 1957 [1940]. *Les Peuples et civilisations de l'Afrique Suivi de Les Langues et l'éducation*. Tr. Liliás Homberger. Paris: Payot.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 1993 [1990]. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. London: Longman.
- Bayart, Jean-François et al. 1997. *La Criminalisation de l'état en Afrique*. Brussels: Editions Complexe.
- Beebee, Thomas. 1994. *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Belcher, Stephen. 1994. "Constructing a Hero: Samba Gueladio Djegui." *Research in African Literatures* 25.1: 75-92.
- . 1999a. *Epic traditions of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.



- . 1999b. "Sinimogo, 'Man for Tomorrow': Sunjata on the Fringes of the Mande World." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 89-110.
- Ben-Amos, Dan. 1980. "Isidore Okpewho. *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*." *Africana Journal* 11.1-2: 68-70.
- . 1983. "Introduction." *Research in African Literatures* 14.3: 277-282.
- . 1999. "Book Review: *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 36.3. 259-264
- Bèye, Alioune Badara. 1990. *Nder en flammes: théâtre*. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- Biebuyck, Daniel. 1976. "The African Heroic Epic." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13.1: 5-36.
- Biebuyck, Brunehilde and Boniface Mongo-Mboussa. 2004. "Introduction." *Africultures* 61. Online. <<http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=3618>>. Accessed 14 September 2010.
- Bird, Charles, ed. 1974. *The Songs of Seydou Camara*. Bloomington: African Studies Center.
- . 1999. "The Production and Reproduction of *Sunjata*." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 275-95.
- Bisanswa, Justin. 2007. "The Adventures of the Epic and Novel in Ahmadou Kourouma's Writings." *Research in African Literatures* 38.2: 81-94.
- Borgomano, Madeleine. 1998. *Ahmadou Kourouma: Le "Guerrier" griot*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- . 2000. *Des hommes ou des bêtes: Lecture de En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bowra, Cecil Maurice. 1952. *Heroic Poetry*. London : McMillan.
- Boyer, Pascal. 1982. "Récit épique et tradition." *L'Homme* 22.2: 5-34.
- . 1984. "La Tradition comme genre énonciatif." *Poétique* 58: 233-51.
- . 1988. *Barricades mystérieuses et pièges à pensée: Introduction à l'analyse des épopées fang*. Paris: Société d'ethnologie.
- . 1990. *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A cognitive description of traditional discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

- Briggs, Charles. 1996. "The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the 'Invention of Tradition.'" *Cultural Anthropology* 11.4: 435-69.
- Briggs, Charles and Sadhana Naithani. 2012. "The Coloniality of Folklore: Toward a Multi-Generational Practice of Folkloristics." *Studies in History* 28.2: 231-70.
- Bulman, Stephen. 1997. "A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic." *History in Africa* 24: 71-94.
- . 1999. "Sunjata as Written Literature: The Role of the Literary Mediator in the Dissemination of the Sunjata epic." In *Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 231-251.
- . 2004. "A School for Epic? The 'Ecole William Ponty' and the evolution of the Sunjata epic, 1913 - c.1960." *Epic Adventures: Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*. Ed. Jan Jansen and Henk M. J. Meier. Munster: Lit Verlag. 34-45.
- Busch, Annett and Max Annas, ed. 2008. *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press.
- Calmettes, Joël, dir. 2003, 4 April. *A mi-mots*. Television program. [Interview with Ahmadou Kourouma.] Arte.
- Camara, Laye. 1971. *Le Haut Niger vu à travers la tradition orale: Kuma Lafoloo Kuma, Kuma Koro, Kuma Korootoola, Kuma*. Diss. 2 vol. Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar.
- . 1978. *Le Maître de la parole: Kouma Lafôlô Kouma*. Paris: Plon.
- . 1980 [1978]. *The Guardian of the Word: Kouma Lafôlô Kouma*. Tr. James Kirkup. London: Fontana.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1949. *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Cashion, Gerald Anthony. 1984. *Hunters of the Mande. A Behavioral Code and Worldview Derived from the Study of their Folklore*. Diss. Indiana University.
- Césaire, Aimé. 1955. *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Chadwick, Hector Munro. 1967 [1912]. *The Heroic Age*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Chadwick, Hector Munro and Nora Kershaw Chadwick. 1932-1940. *The Growth of Literature*. 3 vol. Cambridge: University Press.

- Chailley, Marc. 1961, 3 March. "Présentation d'ouvrages." *Comptes-rendus mensuels des séances de l'Académie des sciences d'outre-mer* 21: 135-137.
- Chemla, Yves. 1999. "En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages ou le donsomana: Entretien avec Ahmadou Kourouma." *Notre Librairie* 136: 26-9.
- Cissé, Youssouf Tata. 1994. *La confrérie des chasseurs malinké et bambara: Mythes, rites et récits initiatiques*. Ivry: Editions Nouvelles du Sud.
- Cissé, Youssouf Tata and Wâ Kamissoko. 1991. *Soundjata: la gloire du Mali (La Grande Geste du Mali – Tome 2)*. Paris: Karthala and Arsan.
- . 2000 [1988]. *La Grande Geste du Mali: Des origines à la fondation de l'Empire*. Paris: Karthala and Arsan.
- Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist. 1984. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.
- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Culture, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . 2004. "Traditional Futures." *Questions of Tradition*. Ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet. Toronto: U of Toronto Press. 153-67.
- Comaroff, John. 1975. "Talking Politics: Oratory and Authority in a Tswana Chiefdom." *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*. Ed. Maurice Bloch. London: Academic Press.
- Conklin, Alice. 1997. *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Conrad, David. 1984. "Oral Sources on Links between Great States: Sumanguru, Servile Lineage, the Jariso, and Kaniaga." *History in Africa* 11: 35-55.
- . 1985. "Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata." *The Journal of African History* 26.1: 33-49.
- . 1989. "'Bilali of Faransekila': A West African Hunter and World War I Hero according to a World War II Veteran and Hunters' Singer of Mali." *History in Africa* 16: 41-70.
- . 1990. *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu according to Tayiru Banbera*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- . 1999. "Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in Mande Epic Tradition." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 189-229.

- . 2002. *Somono Bala of the Upper Niger: River People, Charismatic Bards, and Mischievous Music in a West African Culture*. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2008. "Almami Samori in Academic Imagination: Constructing Epic Adventures to Realize Ambitions and Dreams." *Mande Studies* 10: 175-214.
- . 2010. "Bold Research During Troubled Times in Guinea: The Story of the Djibril Tamsir Niane Tape Archive." *History in Africa* 37: 355-78.
- Conrad, David and Barbara Frank, ed. 1995. *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Corbie, Albert. 1908. *L'Épopée africaine*. Paris: Société générale d'imprimerie et d'édition Levé.
- Cornevin, Robert. 1962. *Histoire du Togo*. Paris: Berger-Levrault.
- . 1966. "Les poèmes épiques africains et la notion d'épopée vivante." *Présence Africaine* 60 n.s.: 140-145.
- . 1967. "François-Victor Equilbecq (1872-1917): Initiateur de la littérature orale africaine et fondateur du théâtre africain." *France Eurafrique* 181: 48-50.
- Delafosse, Maurice. 1912. *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*. 3 vol. Paris: Emil Larose.
- De Loppinot, A. 1919. "Souvenirs d'Agibou." *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 2.1: 24-61.
- Derive, Jean. 2002a. "Introduction." *L'épopée: Unité et diversité d'un genre*. Ed. Jean Derive. Paris: Karthala, 5-8.
- Derive, Jean. 2002b. "Le Cas de l'épopée africaine." *L'épopée: Unité et diversité d'un genre*. Ed. Jean Derive. Paris: Karthala. 75-93.
- Devey, Muriel. 1993. *Hampaté Bâ: L'Homme de la tradition*. Abidjan: LivreSud.
- Dia, Mamadou. 1985. *Mémoires d'un militant du tiers-monde*. Paris: Publisud.
- Diabaté, Massa Makan. 1986. *Le Lion à l'arc: récit épique*. Paris: Hatier.
- Diagne, Mamoussé. 2005. *Critique de la raison orale: Les pratiques discursives en Afrique noire*. Paris: Karthala.
- Diaw, Amadou Bakhaw. 2010, 9 March. "Talatay Nder et le radeau de la méduse: Deux destins tragiques liés." Internet. <[http://www.avomm.com/Talatay-Nder-et-le-radeau-de-la-meduse-Deux-destins-tragiques-lies\\_a11181.html](http://www.avomm.com/Talatay-Nder-et-le-radeau-de-la-meduse-Deux-destins-tragiques-lies_a11181.html)>. Accessed 3 June 2013.

- Diawara, Mamadou. 1996. "Le griot mande à l'heure de la globalisation." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 144: 591-612.
- Diawara, Manthia. 1992. "Canonizing Soundiata in Mande Literature: Toward a Sociology of Narrative Elements." *Social Text* 31/32: 154-68.
- . 1997. "The Song of the Griot." *Transition* 74: 16-30.
- Dieng, Bassirou. 1993. *L'Épopée du Kajor*. Paris : Agence de coopération culturelle et technique.
- . 2003. "L'épopée et l'islamisation des traditions de l'Ouest africain." *Ethiopiennes* 70. Online. <[http://www.refer.sn/ethiopiennes/article.php?id\\_article=56&artsuite=0](http://www.refer.sn/ethiopiennes/article.php?id_article=56&artsuite=0)>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2011.
- . 2008. *Société wolof et discours du pouvoir: Analyse des récits épiques du Kajor*. Dakar: Presses Universitaires de Dakar.
- Dieng, Bassirou et al. 2004. *L'épopée de Boubou Ardo: L'islamisation des traditions de l'Ouest africain*. Amiens: Presses du Centre d'études médiévales, Université de Picardie - Jules Verne.
- Dieng, Samba. 1984. *L'Épopée d'El Hadj Omar: Approche littéraire et historique*. Diss. (Doctorat de troisième cycle.) Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar.
- . 1989. *La Geste d'El Hadj Omar et l'islamisation de l'épopée peule traditionnelle*. Diss. (Doctorat d'état.) Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar.
- . 2005. "L'Oralité et l'écriture dans l'oeuvre littéraire d'Amadou Hampâté Bâ." *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse: Mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Ed. Amadou Touré and Ntji Idriss Mariko. Bamako and Paris: Nouvelles Editions Maliennes and Karthala. 163-178.
- Dieterlen, Germaine. 1951. *Essai sur la religion bambara*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- . 1955. "Mythe et organisation sociale au Soudan français." *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 25: 39-76.
- Dimitrijevic, Dejan, ed. 2004. *Fabrication des traditions, Invention de modernité*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. 2006. "Genre as World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents." *Narrative* 14.1: 85-101.
- Diop, Boubacar Boris. 1997. *Le Cavalier et son ombre*. Paris: Stock.

- . [Jóob, Bubakar Bóris.] 2003. *Doomi golo*. Dakar: Editions Papyrus Afrique.
- . 2009. *Les Petits de la guenon*. Paris: Phippe Rey.
- Diouf, Mamadou. 1991. "L'invention de la littérature orale: les épopées de l'espace soudano-sahélien." *Etudes littéraires* 24.2: 29-39.
- DiVanna, Isabel. 2011. "Politicizing national literature: the scholarly debate around *La chanson de Roland* in the nineteenth century." *Historical Research* 223: 109-134.
- Dirks, Nicholas. 1990. "History as a sign of the modern." *Public Culture* 2.2: 25-32.
- Duchet, Michèle. *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières*. Paris: Maspéro.
- Dumézil, Georges. 1968. *Mythe et Epopée I: L'Idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Equilbecq, François-Victor. 1913-16. *Essai sur la littérature merveilleuse des Noirs, suivi de Contes Indigènes de l'Ouest-Africain Français*. 3 vol. Paris: Ernest Leroux.
- . 1972. *Contes populaires d'Afrique occidentale*. Ed. Robert Cornevin. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.
- . 1974. *La Légende de Samba Guélâdio Diêgui, Prince du Foûta*. Ed. Robert Cornevin. Dakar and Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia UP.
- . 1991. *Time and the Work of Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1971-1991*. Chur (Switzerland): Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 1970. *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Clarendon Press.
- . 1988. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2012 [1970]. *Oral Literature in Africa*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge (UK): Open Book Publishers.
- Fontalirant, William. 1900. *L'épopée africaine: Loango, Fachoda, Djibouti*. Paris: Société Générale française de dioramas et panoramas.
- Froelich, Jean-Claude. 1964. "Les Problèmes posés par les refoulés montagnards de culture paléonigritique." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 15: 383-99.

- . 1968. *Les Montagnards paléonigritiques*. Paris: ORSTOM, Berger-Levrault.
- Frobenius, Leo. 1911. *Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis*. Berlin-Charlottenburg: Vita, Deutsches Verlaghaus.
- . 1913. *The Voice of Africa: being an account of the travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the years 1910-1912*. London: Hutchinson & Co.
- . 1921-28. *Atlantis*. 12 vol. Jena: E. Diederichs.
- . 1924. *Der Kopf als Schicksal*. Munich: K. Wolff.
- Fusillio, Massimo. 2006. "Epic, Novel." *The Novel*. Vol. 2. Ed. Franco Moretti. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 32-63.
- Garnier, Xavier. 2005. "L'énergie épique: Réflexions a propos d'un texte de Christiane Seydou." *Paroles nomades: écrits d'ethnolinguistique africaine en hommage a Christiane Seydou*. Ed. Ursula Baumgardt and Jean Derive. Paris: Karthala. 91-98.
- Garett, Jean-Wilfrid (producer). 1977. *Archives sonores de la littérature noire 4-5: Amadou Hampâté Bâ*. Sound recording. Booklet by Jacques Chevrier. RFI and Club des lecteurs d'expression française.
- Gbanou, Sélom Komlan. 2006. "En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages ou le roman d'un 'diseur de vérité.'" *Etudes françaises* 42.3: 51-75.
- Ghosh, Amitav and Dipesh Chakrabarty. 2002. "A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe." *Radical History Review* 83: 146-72.
- Goody, Jack. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- . 2006. "From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling." *The Novel*. Vol. 1. Ed. Franco Moretti. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 3-36.
- Goody, Jack and Ian Watt. 1968. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Ed. Jack Goody. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- Gorman, Susan. 2003. *Generic Ideologies: The Intersection of Empire, the Epic, and the Novel in French West African and Latin Literatures*. Diss. University of Michigan.
- Graham, Colin. 2000. "Epic, Nation, and Empire: Notes toward a Bakhtinian Critique." *Bakhtin and the Nation*. Ed. Barry Brown et al. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell UP. 84-100.
- Griaule, Marcel. 1966 [1948]. *Dieu d'eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemméli*. Paris: Fayard.

- Hale, Thomas. 1990. *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Handler, Richard and Jocelyn Linneken. 1984. "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious." *The Journal of American Folklore* 385: 273-290.
- Hannoum, Abdelmajid. 2003. "Translation and the Colonial Imaginary: Ibn Khaldûn Orientalist." *History and Theory* 42.1: 61-81.
- Hardy, Georges. 1921. *Les Eléments de l'histoire coloniale*. Paris: La Renaissance du livre.
- . 1929. *Ergaste ou la vie coloniale*. Paris: Editions Larose.
- Harootunian, Harry. 2007. "Remembering the Historical Present." *Critical Inquiry* 33.3: 471-94.
- Hartog, François. 2012 [2003]. *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2007 [1899]. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Cosimo.
- Hellweg, Joseph. 2011. *Hunting the Ethical State: The Benkadi Movement of Côte d'Ivoire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Herksovits, Melville. 1946. "Folklore after a Hundred Years: A Problem in Redefinition." *The Journal of American Folklore* 232: 89-100.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger, ed. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- Hountondji, Paulin. 1996 [1977]. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Tr. Henri Evans and Jonathan Rée. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Hourst, Émile-Auguste-Léon. 1898. *Sur le Niger et au Pays des Tuaregs: La mission Hourst*. Paris: Plon.
- Horton, Robin. 1993 [1967]. "African Traditional Thought and Western Science." *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West : essays on magic, religion, and science*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press. 197-258.
- . 1993 [1982]. "Tradition and Modernity Revisited." *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West : essays on magic, religion, and science*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press. 301-46.
- Irele, Abiola. 2006. "In Search of Camara Laye." *Research in African Literatures* 37.1: 110-127.



- Jahn, Janheinz. 1975. *Leo Frobenius: The Demonic Child*. Tr. Reinhard Sander. Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, UT Austin.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1990. "Langue and Parole: Code and Message." *On Language*. Ed. Linda Waugh and Monique Moneville-Burston. Cambridge UP. 80-109.
- Jansen, Jan. 1996. "Kinship as Political Discourse: The Representation of Harmony and Change in Mande." *The Younger Brother in Mande: Kinship and Politics of West Africa*. Ed. Jan Jansen and Clemens Zobel. Leiden: Research School CNWS. 1-7.
- . 2002. "A Critical Note on 'The Epic of Samori Toure.'" *History in Africa* 29: 219-229.
- . 2004. "The Adventures of 'The Epic of Samori' in 20th-century Mande Oral Tradition." *Epic Adventures: Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*. Ed. Jan Jansen and Henk M. J. Meier. Munster: Lit Verlag. 71-80.
- Johnson, John. 1980. "Yes, Virginia, There Is an Epic in Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 11.3: 308-26.
- . 1982. "On the Heroic Age and other Primitive Theses." *Folklorica: Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas*. Bloomington, Ind. : Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 121-38.
- . 1992 [1986]. *The Epic of Son-Jara: a West African Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, John et al. 1997. *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Julien, Charles-André. 1946. *Les Techniciens de la colonisation (XIXe-XXe siècles)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises.
- Julien, Eileen. 1992. *African Novels and the Question of Orality*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP.
- Kabanda, Théopliste. 2000. "Théâtralité et formes parodiques dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* d'Ahmadou Kourouma." *L'Imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma: Contours et enjeux d'une esthétique*. Ed. Jean Ouédraogo. Paris: Karthala. 245-67.
- Kane, Mohamdou. 1982. *Roman africain et traditions*. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- Kante, Adama Aïdara. 2012, 17 Jan. "L'Historien Mamadou Diouf recadre l'écrivain Amadou Hampâthé Bâ: 'La plus grosse bêtise qui est jamais sortie en Afrique, c'est de dire qu'en Afrique quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.'" *Seneweb*. Internet. <[http://www.seneweb.com/news/Culture/l-rsquo-historien-mamadou-diouf-recadre-l-rsquo-ecrivain-amadou-hampathe-ba-laquo-la-plus-grosse-betise-qui-est-jamais-sort\\_n\\_57699.html](http://www.seneweb.com/news/Culture/l-rsquo-historien-mamadou-diouf-recadre-l-rsquo-ecrivain-amadou-hampathe-ba-laquo-la-plus-grosse-betise-qui-est-jamais-sort_n_57699.html)>. Accessed 1 March 2012.

- Kavwahireri, Kasereka. 2004. "La littérature orale comme production coloniale: Notes sur quelques enjeux postcoloniaux." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 176: 793-813.
- Keita, Cheick Mahamadou Chérif. 1988. "Jaliya in the Modern World." *Ufahamu* 17.1: 57-67.
- Kelly, Gail. 1984. "The Presentation of Indigenous Society in the Schools of French West Africa and Indochina, 1918 to 1938." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.3: 523-542.
- Kesteloot, Lilyan, ed. 1993. *L'Épopée bambara de Ségou*. 2 vol. Paris: Harmattan.
- Kesteloot, Lilyan and Bassirou Dieng. 1997. *Les Épopées d'Afrique Noire*. Paris: Karthala.
- Kesteloot, Lilyan and Chérif Mbodj. 2006 [1983]. *Contes et mythes wolof*. Dakar: IFAN and Enda Tiers-Monde.
- Kesteloot, Lilyan and R. H. Mitsch. 1993. "Introduction." *Research in African Literatures* 24.2: 7-11.
- King, Adele. 1980. *The Writings of Camara Laye*. London: Heinemann.
- . 2002. *Rereading Camara Laye*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Konaté, Yacouba. 2005. "Le Syndrome Amadou Hampâté Bâ ou comment naissent les proverbes." *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse: Mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Ed. Amadou Touré and Ntji Idriss Mariko. Bamako and Paris: Nouvelles Editions Maliennes and Karthala. 49-68.
- Kourouma, Ahmadou. 1970 [1968]. *Les Soleils des Indépendances*. Paris: Seuil.
- . 1990. *Monnè, outrages et défis*. Paris: Seuil.
- . 1998. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Paris: Seuil.
- Kyoore, Pascal Kyiiripuo. 2000. "L'humour satirique dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* d'Ahmadou Kourouma." *L'Imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma: Contours et enjeux d'une esthétique*. Ed. Jean Ouédraogo. Paris: Karthala. 225-44.
- Labouret, Henri. 1931. *A la recherche d'une politique indigène dans l'Ouest africain*. Paris: Comité de l'Afrique française.
- Lanrezac, Henri. 1907a. "La Légende soudanaise." *La Revue Indigène* 13: 163-173.
- . 1907b. "Légende et chants de guerre soudanais." *La Revue Indigène* 14: 210-215.

- . 1907c. “Au Soudan: La Légende historique.” *La Revue Indigène* 16-19: 292-297, 380-386, 420-430.
- . 1907d. “Légendes soudanaises.” *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie commerciale de Paris* 29.10: 607-619.
- . 1908. “Essai sur le folk-lore au Soudan.” *La Revue Indigène*, offprint.
- Latour, Bruno. 1991. *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Le Chatelier, Alfred. 1899. *L'Islam dans l'Afrique Occidentale*. Paris: G. Steinheil.
- Le Renard, Thibault and Comi Toulabor. 1999. “Entretien avec Ahmadou Kourouma.” *Politique Africaine* 75: 178-83.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1962. *La Pensée sauvage*. Paris: Plon.
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. 1922. *La Mentalité Primitive*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.
- Levtzion, Nehemia. 1973. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. London: Methuen.
- Lord, Albert Bates. 1960. *The singer of tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lovejoy, Paul. 1993. “The Ibadan School of Historiography and its Critics.” *African Historiography: Essays in honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*. Ed. Toyin Falola. Essex (UK): Longman. 195-202.
- Lukács, Georg. 1968 [1920]. *The Theory of the Novel*. Tr. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Lunn, Joe. 1999. *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Madelénat, Daniel. 1986. *L'Epopée*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Mariko, Ntji Idriss. 2005. “Amadou Hampâté Bâ: Défense et illustration de la tradition.” *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse: Mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Ed. Amadou Touré and Ntji Idriss Mariko. Bamako and Paris: Nouvelles Editions Maliennes and Karthala. 19-26.
- Masonen, Pekka. 2000. *The Negroland Revisited: Discovery and Invention of the Sudanese Middle Ages*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- McGuire, James. 1999. “Butchering Heroism?: *Sunjata* and the Negotiation of Postcolonial Mande Identity in Diabaté's *Le Boucher de Kouta*.” *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande*

- Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 253-273.
- Meillassoux, Claude and Abdoulaye Sylla. 1978. "L'interprétation légendaire de l'histoire de Jonkoloni (Mali)." *Fonti orali: Antropologia e Storia*. Milan: Franco Angeli Editore. 347-92.
- Méniaud, Jacques. 1931. *Les pionniers du Soudan, avant, avec et après Archinard, 1879-1894*. 2 vol. Paris: Société des publications modernes.
- Mercier, Paul. 1968. *Tradition, changement, histoire: Les "Somba" du Dahomey septentrional*. Paris: Editions Anthropos.
- Mestaoui, Lobna. 2012. *Tradition orale et esthétique romanesque, aux sources de l'imaginaire de Kourouma*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Mokobia, Jiff. 2005. "A Study of Hampâté Bâ's *Etrange Destin de Wangrin* as a Trickster Story." *Ekpoma Journal of Languages and Literary Studies* 11: 54-9.
- Miller, Christopher. 1990. *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, Joseph. 1999. "History and Africa/Africa and History." *The American Historical Review* 104.1: 1-32.
- Monteil, Charles. 1905. *Contes soudanais*. Paris: E. Leroux.
- . 1953. "La légende du Ouagadou et l'origine des Soninké." *Mélanges ethnologiques*. Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire 23. Dakar: IFAN. 359-408.
- . 1968 [1929]. *Les Empires du Mali: Etude d'histoire et de sociologie soudanaises*. Ed. Vincent Monteil. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.
- Moraes Farias, P.F. de. 1993. "The Oral Traditionist as Critic and Intellectual Producer: An Example from Contemporary Mali." *African Historiography: Essays in honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*. Ed. Toyin Falola. Essex (UK): Longman. 14-38.
- Morgan, Lewis Henry. 2000 [1877]. *Ancient Society*. Ed. Robin Fox. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Moretti, Franco. 1996. *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*. Tr. Quintin Hoare. London: Verso.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

- N'Da, Pierre. 2005. "L'Etrange destin de Wangrin, un étrange roman." *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse: Mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Ed. Amadou Touré and Ntji Idriss Mariko. Bamako and Paris: Nouvelles Editions Maliennes and Karthala. 191-208.
- N'Daou, Mohamed Saidou. 2007. "Djibril Tamsir Niane and David Conrad: Collaborative Re-Imagining of the Mande Past Across the Atlantic." *Mande Mansa: Essays in Honor of David C. Conrad*. Ed. Stephen Belcher and Jan Jansen. Munster: Lit Verlag. 144-73.
- . 2008. "Almamy Samori Touré: Politics of Memories in Post-Colonial Guinea (1968-Present)." *Mande Studies* 10: 149-73.
- Niane, Djibril Tamsir. 1960. *Soundjata ou l'Epopée mandingue*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Niane, Djibril Tamsir and Jean Suret-Canale. 1961. *Manuel d'histoire de l'Afrique occidentale*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Okpewho, Isidore. 1979. *The Epic in Africa : Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1992. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Ouolougouem, Yambo. 1968. *Le Devoir de Violence*. Paris: Seuil.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. 2008. *The Columbia Guide to West African Literature in English since 1945*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Paravy, Florence. 2011. "Feu croisé sur l'afropessimisme (E. Dongala, A. Kourouma)." *Etudes littéraires africaines* 32: 60-7.
- Person, Yves. 1968. *Samori: Une révolution dyula*. 3 vol. Dakar: IFAN.
- Pondopoulo, Anna. 2010. "Amadou Hampâté Bâ and the Writer Robert Arnaud (Randau): African Colonial Service and Literature." *Islamic Africa* 1.2: 229-47.
- Petrović, Rastko. 1955 [1930]. *Afrika*. Belgrade: Prosveta.
- Piot, Charles. 1999. *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.
- Pointer, Fritz. 2013. *African Oral Epic Poetry: Praising the Deeds of a Mythic Hero*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Quénum, Maximilien. 1946. *Légendes Africaines: Côte d'Ivoire, Soudan, Dahomey*. Rochefort-sur-Mer: Imprimerie A. Thoyen-Theze.

- Quint, David. 1993. *Epic and empire : politics and generic form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
- Raffenel, Anne-Jean-Baptiste. 1846. *Voyage dans l'Afrique occidentale*. Paris: Arthus Bertrand.
- Raffenel, Anne-Jean-Baptiste. 1856. *Nouveau voyage dans le pays des nègres*. 2 vol. Paris: Imprimerie et librairie centrales des chemins de fer.
- Raglan, FitzRoy Richard Somerset. 1936. *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*. London: Methuen.
- Rao, Sathya. 2007. "L'Etrange destin de Wangrin or the Political Accommodation of Interpretation." *Translating and Interpreting Conflict*. Ed. Myriam Salama-Carr. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 223-32.
- Ricard, Alain. 1995. *Littératures d'Afrique noire: Des langues aux livres*. Paris: Karthala.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1976. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian U Press.
- Rochat, Laure-Adrienne. 2011. *De l'épopée au roman: Une lecture de Monnè, outrages et défis d'Ahmadou Kourouma*. Lausanne: Archipel.
- Rosenberg, Bruce. 1987. "The Complexity of Oral Tradition." *Oral Tradition* 2.1: 73-90.
- Roth, Molly. 2008. *Ma parole s'achète: Money, Identity and Meaning in Malian Jeliya*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2010. "Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de mémoire to Noeuds de mémoire." *Yale French Studies* 118/119: 3-12.
- Rousseau, Raymond. 1929. "Le Sénégal d'autrefois: Etude sur le Oualo: Cahiers de Yoro Dyao." *Bulletin du Comité historique et scientifique de l'AOF* 12.1: 133-211.
- Sadji, Abdoulaye. 1936. "Ce que dit la musique africaine." *L'Education africaine* 94: 119-172.
- . 1985. *Ce que dit la musique africaine*. Paris: Présence africaine.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1987. *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Scheub, Harold. 2012. *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press.
- Schulz, Dorothea. 1997. "Praise without enchantment: 'griots,' broadcast media, and the politics of tradition in Mali." *Africa Today* 44.4: 443-64.

- . 2001. *Perpetuating the politics of praise: jeli singers, radios, and political mediation in Mali*. Cologne: R. Köppe.
- SCOA [Fondation SCOA pour la recherche en Afrique noire]. 1977. *Deuxième colloque international de Bamako (16 février - 22 février 1976). Actes du colloque*. Paris: Fondation SCOA.
- Sembène, Ousmane (dir.). 1977. *Ceddo*. Film. Film Doomireew and New Yorker Films.
- Semunjaga, Josias. 2006. "Des ruses du roman au sens de l'histoire dans l'oeuvre de Kourouma." *Etudes françaises* 42.3: 11-30.
- Sene, Diomaye. 1995. *Epopée traditionnelle et comportements modernes*. Master's thesis. Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. 1977. *Liberté V*. Paris: Seuil.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar and Abdoulaye Sadjji. 1965 [1953]. *La Belle histoire de Leuk-le-lièvre*. Ed. J.M. Winch. London: Harrap.
- Serbin, Sylvia. 2004. *Reines d'Afrique et héroïnes de la diaspora noire*. Saint-Maur-des-Fossés (France): Éditions Sépia.
- Seydou, Christiane. 1982. "Comment définir le genre épique? Un exemple: L'épopée africaine." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 13.1: 84-98.
- . 1988. "Epopée et identité: exemples africains." *Journal des africanistes* 58.1: 7-22.
- . 1998. "Musique et littérature orale chez les Peuls du Mali." *L'Homme* 148: 139-157.
- Seye, El Hadji Amadou. 2003. *Walo Brack*. Dakar: Editions Maguilen.
- Sherman, Mark. 1995. "Problems of Bakhtin's Epic: Capitalism and the Image of History." *Bakhtin and Medieval voices*. Ed. Thomas Farrell. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 180-198.
- Sidibé, Mamby. 1959. "Soundiata Keita, héros historique et légendaire, empereur du Manding." *Notes Africaines* 82: 41-51.
- Soyinka, Wole. 1990. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP.
- Suret-Canale, Jean. 1962. *Afrique noire: L'Ere coloniale, 1900-1945*. Paris: Editions Sociales.

- Tamari, Tal. 1995. "Linguistic History for the History of West African 'Castes.'" *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*. Ed. David Conrad and Barbara Frank. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Tauxier, Louis. 1927. *La Religion bambara*. Paris: P. Geuthner.
- Tedlock, Dennis and Bruce Mannheim, ed. 1995. *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois Press.
- Thiers-Thiam, Valérie. 2005. *A Chacun son griot: Le Mythe du griot-narrateur dans la littérature et le cinéma d'Afrique de l'Ouest*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Thomas, Nicholas. 1996 [1989]. *Out of Time: History and Evolution in Anthropological Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Thiouh, Ibrahima. 2002. "L'école de Dakar et la production d'une écriture académique de l'histoire." *Le Sénégal Contemporain*. Ed. Momar Koumba Diop. Paris: Karthala. 109-154.
- Thoyer, Annik. 1995. *Récits épiques des chasseurs bamanan du Mali de Mamadu Jara*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Touré, Amadou and Ntji Idriss Mariko, ed. 2005. *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse: Mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Bamako and Paris: Nouvelles Editions Maliennes and Karthala.
- Traoré, Karim. 1999. "Jeli and Sere: The Dialectics of the Word in the Manden." *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. Ed. Ralph Austen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 171-88.
- . 2000. "Kourouma's *Monnè* as Aesthetics of Lying." *Callaloo* 23.4: 1349-62.
- Trevor-Roper, Hugh. 1963, 28 Nov. "The Rise of Christian Europe." *The Listener* 70: 871-5.
- Triaud, Jean-Louis. 1998. "*Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, un modèle 'positiviste'? De la coutume à l'histoire: Maurice Delafosse et l'invention de l'histoire africaine." *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870-1926)*. Ed. Jean-Loup Amselle and Emmanuelle Sibeud. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose. 210-232.
- , ed. 1999. *Histoire d'Afrique: Les Enjeux de mémoire*. Paris: Karthala. 235-280.
- Urban, Greg and Michael Silverstein, ed. 1996. *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.
- Vansina, Jan. 1965. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Tr. H.M. Wright. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.



- . 1985. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Van Vollenhoven, Joost. 1917, 18 Aug. "Circulaire au sujet des chefs indigènes." *Journal officiel de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 633: 466-73.
- Vidal, Jean. 1924. "La Légende officielle de Soundiata, fondateur de l'empire manding." *Bulletin du comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique occidentale française*. 8.2: 317-328.
- Vieillard, Gilbert. 1931. "Récits Peuls du Macina et du Kounari." *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*. 14.1-2: 137-156.
- Vološinov, Valentin. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Tr. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.
- Wade, Amadou. 1964. "Chronique du Wâlo sénégalais (1186?-1855)." *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 26.3-4. 440-498.
- Warner, Tobias. 2012. *The Limits of the Literary: Senegalese Writers Between French, Wolof and World Literature*. Diss. University of California, Berkeley.
- Watt, Ian. 1957. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wynchank, Anny. 1991. "Wangrin, A Modern African Epic." *Oral Tradition and Innovation: New Wine in Old Bottles?* Ed. E.R. Sienaert, A.N. Bell, and M. Lewis. Durban, South Africa: University of Natal Oral Documentation and Research Centre.
- Yattara, Elmouloud. 2005. "Les traitements différents des communautés africaines par les Français." *Mali - France. Regards sur une histoire partagée*. Paris: Karthala. 77-90.
- Zabus, Chantal. 2007 [1991]. *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.