

THE EPIC OF SUMANGURU KANTE

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Narrated by Abdulaye Sako, edited by Stephen P. D. Bulman and Valentin F. Vydrine.

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Fragments of the Mande narrative featuring Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mali empire, began appearing in French colonial accounts by the end of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the 1960s that the ‘Epic of Manden’, as it came to be known, circulated widely outside of West Africa. Djibril Tamsir Niane framed and published the epic, based on an oral narrative that he collected in Guinea-Conakry, as a novelette geared for a popular audience. He titled it *Sundiata* after the central character.¹ In the decades that followed, other variants became available, mostly formatted to reflect some level of Mande oral performance values. All of the legendary figures in the epic carrying the names of present-day Mande people are regarded by the latter as ancestors, and as other variants appeared, the roll call of forebears lengthened with the emergence of characters not mentioned in the earlier Niane version. In the collective discourse of bards from across the Mande landscape, new episodes also emerged, enlarging the overall epic narrative that was by then firmly established as ‘The Sunjata epic’, with a score of different spellings for the name of the central hero and variant names for many of the supporting cast.

As generations of griots (*jeliw*) from various bardic lineages conveyed details from alternative reservoirs of traditional knowledge, the composite identities of several ancestral characters became increasingly complex, and they emerge as major, multi-dimensional players. The hero’s mother Sogolon Condé develops from the vulnerable bride of Niane’s story to a formidable sorceress and matriarch. Kamissa of Dô ‘the Buffalo Woman’, goes from murderous shape-shifter to nurturing guide who helps unlock the doors to Mali’s future greatness. Sogolon, Kamissa, Sumanguru’s sister Kosiya, and other heroines emerge as classic paradigms of Mande power women (*musofadiw*).² Fakoli Koroma, ridiculed as a dwarf and cuckolded by his uncle in Niane’s account, is at the nexus of crucial events and alliances in other versions; he is lauded as a great general, ancestor of blacksmith clans and sorcerers, and — with a father from Manden and a mother from Soso — as a link between opposing sides.³ As for Sumanguru the Soso king and *Sundiata*’s nemesis, he is limited in Niane’s book to being a villainous tyrant sartorially inclined to garments of human skin. But as the post-1960s corpus of the

1 D.T. Niane, *Soundjata ou l’épopée mandingue* (Paris, 1960); *Sundiata: An epic of old Mali*, G.D. Pickett (trans.) (London, 1964).

2 D. Conrad, ‘Mooning armies and mothering heroes: female power in Mande epic tradition’, in R. Austen (ed.), *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington, IN, 1999), 189–229.

3 *Sundiata*, 42; D. Conrad, ‘Searching for history in the Sunjata epic: the case of Fakoli’, *History in Africa*, 19 (1992), 147–200.

Mande epic gradually emerged, the blacksmith king gained depth in episodes that described his mischievous youth, his obsession with musical instruments, his tragically flawed relationships with his sister Kosiya and his nephew Fakoli, his face-to-face encounters with both Sunjata and Sogolon, and his fretful consultations with his Komo oracle.⁴

Now, thanks to the book under review, we have a translation dedicated entirely to Sumanguru, with previously unknown episodes contributing important additional dimensions to his life, and to the overall corpus of the Mande epic. This volume is edited by Stephen Bulman and Valentine Vydrine, and is based on the telling (in Bamana, with English translation) of Abdoulaye Sako, the griot who narrated the tradition that was recorded by Bulman at the village of Kamiko, Mali, in February 1997.

In this engaging, previously unknown oral text in the corpus of Mande epic, some of the episodes present tropes that beg for comparison with other variants. One significantly expanded story describes how Sumanguru eventually acquired the Soso Bala, a traditional xylophone (*bala*) still revered as a sacred icon in Mande culture. In this case, Sumanguru acquires it after living with a group of *jinew* (genies) for seven years (86, 102–14). In other unusual aspects of this variant, Sumanguru follows a pattern previously seen in the perambulations of both Sunjata and Fakoli, as he distributes power objects throughout the Bamana landscape (87–90, 91n68). Then, in an encounter with Sunjata's old nemesis, Jolofin Mansa, instead of the usual confrontation involving the theft of horses, Sumanguru is captured in a slave raid (93). Finally, the character of Sumanguru's sister Kangu (often referred to in other versions as Kosiya) — one of the most prominent heroines of the overall epic — is significantly expanded. Here, instead of sacrificing herself to the *jinew* in exchange for the Soso Bala, as she does in another version of the epic, she enlists the help of those forces to secure her brother's release from Wolof captivity (93ff.).⁵ The *jinew* themselves acquire new dimensions in Sako's rendering, as they convey esoteric secrets to both Sumanguru and his sister in episodes detailing complex rites of passage (94–115). Sako expands on motifs found in other variants by adding color to the *jeli* ancestor Nyankuma Duga and providing additional clues to the meaning of famous praise lines to Sumanguru (116–18; 108–09). Sako also enlarges the scope of legendary Mande geography, augmenting it with reference points for the kingdom of Soso, and battlefields in its war with the Mande chiefdoms (108–11; 132n164).

The addition of the Sako text to a corpus that has been primarily identified with Sunjata is an auspicious event for everyone with special interest in Mande epics. Bulman has been a determined pursuer of obscure variants of the Sunjata narrative, so it is gratifying to see him score the *coup de recherche* of recording Sako's discourse on Sumanguru.⁶ The revelation of an epic text dedicated to a single individual from among Sunjata's major

4 Y. T. Cissé and W. Kamissoko, *La grande geste du Mali des origines à la fondation de l'Empire* (Paris, 1988), 127–29, 133–35, 190–211; *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*, D. Conrad (ed.), (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 91–94, 97–106; *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions*, G. Innes (ed.), (London, 1974); J.W. Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington, IN, 1986); *L'histoire du Mande d'après Jeli Kanku Madi Jabaté de Kela*, M. Ly-Tall et. al. (eds.), (Paris, 1987); *L'épopée de Sunjata d'après Lansine Diabate de Kela*, J. Jansen et. al. (eds.), (Leiden, 1995).

5 D. Conrad (ed.), *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* (Indianapolis, IN, 2004), 110–11.

6 S.P.D. Bulman, 'A checklist of published versions of the Sunjata epic', *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), 71–94; S.P. D. Bulman, 'Sunjata as written literature: the role of the literary mediator in the dissemination of the Sunjata epic', *In Search of Sunjata*, Austen (ed.), 231–251.

supporting characters is intriguing, but given the episodic structure of the most comprehensive variants, it is also not altogether surprising. Sumanguru is just one of several major characters to have starred in definitive versions of the narrative. Indeed, on the distaff side of the epic, a conspicuous sub-theme features powerful women as facilitators of legendary careers, male or female, good or bad: Sogolon Condé for Sunjata, Kosiya (Kangu) Kanté for Sumanguru, Tènènba Condé for Fakoli, Kamissa the Buffalo Woman for Sogolon, and Kolonkan (Sako's 'Siga') for Manding Bori (Bukari).

A notable thematic departure in Sako's discourse is that the name of Sumanguru's famous nephew Fakoli is not mentioned. In variants of the Sunjata epic, there are several important episodes recounting the deeds of Fakoli, who is claimed by several prominent blacksmith lineages as their collective ancestor; his significance in the overall epic arguably rivals that of the title character. But in Sako's version, Fakoli is replaced by the motif of the 'atrocious story'.⁷ In this case, Sumanguru is told that the way he can defeat Sunjata is to have a mother kill her only child by crushing its head with a mortar and pestle. The chosen victim is the unnamed infant of Sumanguru's own sister, so in this case Fakoli is reduced to serving as the anonymous victim of infanticide. Ironically, the child's death ultimately results in Sumanguru's downfall via the mother's vengeance.

This book raises an intriguing question: might there be oral narratives featuring other major characters in what we know as 'The Sunjata epic'? Elsewhere, Bulman seems to hint at the possibility in an analysis of fifteen versions of the Buffalo Woman episode which he describes cumulatively as 'an origin tale for the [Mali] empire'.⁸ If a researcher had stumbled across the right informant, perhaps there would now be a translation of 'The epic of Sogolon and the Buffalo Woman'.

In felicitous support of the engaging narrative devoted to Sumanguru, the Introduction, written by Bulman, provides essential historical and cultural context, along with summaries of the ten episodes of the Sako performance, all of which suggest the book's possible utility for classroom adoption. In copious footnotes (kudos to the editors and publishers for putting them at the bottom of the pages where translation notes ideally always should be), Bulman provides insightful background on esoteric matters raised by Sako, involving music and performance values as well as social and religious systems. A good example is Bulman's reasoning on the thorny problem of pinpointing the territorial extent of precolonial Manding (or Mande) polities: 'Soso and Manding/pre-imperial Mali may have in essence existed in the same or largely overlapping areas, and been in effect identity labels attached to populations on the basis of who was acknowledged as leader' (29n103). But open to question is a note about a *jine* whose 'crippled state connotes powerlessness' in light of evidence for Mande belief that physical deformities 'signal the secret presence of occult powers' (95n78).⁹ Elsewhere, the effectiveness of the book's exegesis would improve

7 P.F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg history* (Oxford, 2003), lxxxviii.

8 P.F. de Moraes Farias, 'The Buffalo-Woman tale: political imperative and narrative constraints in the Sunjata epic', in K. Barber and P.F.D. Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham, UK, 1989), 181.

9 Conrad, 'Mooning', 198.

with documented sources instead of citations that refer to personal communication (43n154; 75n16; 83n41; 95n79; 96n81).

The book benefits greatly from the co-editorship of Valentin Vydrine, whose vast knowledge and rigorous standards are unparalleled in the field of West African linguistics. The Brill series 'African sources for African history', in which the Bulman and Vydrine volume features as the fifteenth publication, boasts the commendable distinction of requiring that translations of oral texts be accompanied by the original African language transcript. Vydrine contributes a special note on Bamana language and transcription, and the technical detail in his transcript of the original language text is extraordinary. The translators (Vydrine, Bulman, and Amadou Togo) skated through the usual technical difficulties of translation with aplomb, and they have produced easy-flowing English while retaining some sense of the bard's style. Their abandonment of quotation marks — using colons to introduce spoken phrases — conveys the sense and rapid delivery of *jeli* discourse and might be something to emulate. During Sako's performance, the bard played no less than six different traditional melodies, and the consistently high editorial standards maintained throughout this book are exemplified by the inclusion of musical transcripts of those six tunes, provided in a special section by Sam Dickey. In a brief Introduction, the series editors (Dmitiri van den Bersselaar, Michel Doortmont, and Jan Jansen) make several evocative observations. They refer to 'the new stories about Sumanguru' and suggest that they emerged because of 'dramatic political changes that occurred during the 1990s in the Republics of Mali and Guinea' resulting in 'a conceptual space in the popular imagination [that] had been created for a powerful leader who was not in Sunjata's clique and whose message was music to the ears' (x). This is the sort of bold commentary that should stimulate future debate about African oral epic.

This reviewer is pleased to see that the editorial and production values of the book are high and that it includes, very importantly, a proper index.¹⁰ In both substance and presentation, it reflects the high standards one has come to expect of other Brill publications.

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GUNS AND SOCIETY IN COLONIAL NIGERIA

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¹⁰ There are some minor errors and omissions. The editors' reference to Brett-Smith lacks citation (*viii*, xi); Sasuma Berete is identified as 'Sunjata's mother' (77n26); McIntosh citation should be 2000: 168 (89n58); Bühnen index entry should be 96n81 (165).