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ELITISM VS. POPULISM IN THE WEST AFRICAN EPIC:
THE POLITICS OF 'SUNJATA'

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AFRICANA

Elitism vs. Populism in the West African Epic: The Politics of "Sunjata"[1]

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The epic, in both its universal and African forms, is generally thought of as a political genre, one whose function is to celebrate the power of a masculine warrior aristocracy at the expense of other social groups Auerbach 1953 : 13, 21-3)). This has certainly been the general understanding of the most famous of African grand oral narratives, the West African Mande Sunjata epic. "Sunjata" is a work which manifestly focusses on the conquering founder of the Mali empire, which ruled for several centuries over the medieval Western Sudan (modern Mali and parts of Guinea, Gambia, and Senegal). Moreover the dominant idiom of this epic is drawn from the culture of hunting societies, the one Mande institution which, even today, limits its membership to males who display a capacity for violent confrontation with wild animals.

It would certainly be difficult to present Sunjata as an expression of popular consciousness since its very performance is restricted to a hereditary caste of bards (griots or jaliw (sing. jeli) who depend upon the patronage of elite males. Nonetheless, I wish to argue that the very appeal of the Sunjata epic (and it is one of the very few works of this genre in the entire world that broad modern audiences find engaging) lies in its ambiguous and even subversive relationship to hegemonic political order and patriarchal power. Historically, the epic is not a product of the Mali empire at all but rather an evocation of that empire in the context of very alien successor regimes. Textually, the epic is not about the exercise of power but rather its acquisition and retention, a process which depends primarily upon autonomous females and secondarily on proper relations of male elites with vested clients (nyamakalaw, whether these are jeliw or the other major nyamakala category, numuw (blacksmiths).

In the paper which follows I will deal first with the historical genesis of the Sunjata epic, then with its textual content and finally with some of its modern instantiations and their political/social deployment.

1. Historical genesis: from panegyric to epic

Historical studies of the epic in general have been properly criticized for their use of bad evolutionary models (Johnson, 1982). However, in the case of Sunjata we have enough evidence, from the time of the thirteenth century events it describes

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[1]This paper is in large part drawn from my own and other contributions to a conference at Northwestern University in November 1992 whose proceedings are presently under consideration for publication under the title, "In Search of Sunjata: the Mande Oral Epic as History, Performance and Literature." All citations to such papers will use "SS" in lieu of a date.

through the first records of its performance, to construct a plausible account of when and how it emerged. The evidence is strong enough so that, in contrast to most proponents of African "tradition", the leading Mande students of the Sunjata epic have recognized that its classic form did develop historically not in the time of the thirteenth-century Mali empire but, at the earliest, around the southern Mali Mininjan region in the eighteenth century. Before discussing this critical moment, however, it is necessary to consider how the career of Sunjata was most probably represented in his own time.

The much-disputed assertion by Ruth Finnegan (1970: 108-10) of the rarity of African epics rests upon a valid observation: that most oral heroic poetry on the continent takes the form of relatively brief and highly allusive panegyric rather than the extended narrative of the epic. The evidence of imperial Mali court poetry which we have from the visit of the famous Arab traveller, Ibn Battuta, about a century after Sunjata's death indicates that what he witnessed was panegyric (fasaa in Mande) rather than epic: the griots did not perform over long periods of time; their utterances appear to have maintained a single intensively musical-poetic mode and they referred to many ancestors of the ruler rather than elaborating the career of a single individual.[2] Similarly, the evidence we have about the griot performances from later European travellers in the Mande region again suggests panegyric rather than epic as the genre of heroic recitation.[3]

Panegyric should not, of course, be categorized as a primitive form of epic; it has its own rich aesthetic and social dynamics and remains alive and well in many parts of contemporary Africa, including the Manden. But it is precisely from studies of these contexts (Cope, 1986; Opland, 1983; Barber, 1991; Vail and White, 1991) that we know something of how panegyric works and why it does not easily translate (both literally and figuratively) into written literature. Panegyric generally does have an explicit narrative dimension, since it is, among other things a form of genealogy; however, the details of events are usually evoked only through allusion. The audience (such as that at the medieval Mali court) must therefore have detailed knowledge concerning the events alluded to. This information is derived from some type of informal narrative (oral history as opposed to oral literature) which is communicated in private rather than

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[2]Hopkins and Levtzion, p. 293; for more extensive discussion of this material see Wilks SS.

[3]The best list of these references to griots is Conrad, 1990, p. 4; I have independently examined a very wide but undoubtedly not exhaustive set of the relevant travel accounts.

public settings.[3] 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 discomforting messages to an incumbent ruler.

To those not intimate enough with the context, panegyric verses are thus opaque. If we assume, with Wilks (SS), that some of the poetic fixed text of the contemporary Sunjata epic is retained from the fasaaw of the thirteenth-fourteenth century Mali empire, it is not clear that much of their original meaning is remembered anymore. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind how great a part of this court literature has been totally forgotten: the surviving epic and panegyric refers only to Sunjata, some of his ancestors and a few individuals around him (some partially mythic) whereas the praise names along with the entire history of the rest of the Mali dynasty is lost to the modern jeliw (see Table below). A development like this is hardly surprising since the retention of such a body of literature and its accompanying informal knowledge is only possible if the context within which it developed has survived as well. Fasaaw as genre, still thrive in the Manden but with a few possible exceptions the specific body of Mali court panegyric faded away with the decline of the empire to be replaced, shortly after the Keita dynasty lost its last vestiges of imperial power, with the less contextualized and less poetically dense genre of the epic.

While panegyric provides the richest poetics of the epic as well as its connection to historical memory, the immediate appeal of Sunjata's story rests upon its incorporation of narrative motifs identical to those found in more general Mande tales, particularly stories about hunters and the origins of griot-patron relationships. In contrast to panegyric, there is no documentary evidence for the earliest appearance of such literary genres. However, we can safely assume that they are quite old since they speak to institutions, beliefs and practices which seem deeply rooted in Mande life and culture. These tales in fact constitute the "literary" dimension of the Sunjata epic i.e. that which gives it an appeal to non-initiated audiences and they will be discussed in more detail below.

The patently ahistorical folktales occupy a space within the epic which one might expect to contain fuller accounts of the rulers who preceded and particularly succeeded Sunjata.[4] Yet

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[3]for good examples of the link between narrative and panegyric see Webb and Wright, 1976 (on Zulu materials) and Barber, 1991: 28f. (on Yoruba oriki and itan). I would place in the category of such informal narrative/oral history the only other medieval source for Sunjata, Ibn Khaldun's report discussed in Wilks, infra.

[4]this is the case with the less widely performed epics of the much more recent Segu empire (Conrad: 1990).

the Sunjata epic is distinguished from the epics of hunters' (called by the same general term, maana) precisely by the designation of tarikh, "history" (a term also applied to family or clan histories). This claim to historicity should not be dismissed on the grounds of its empirical indefensibility. It is part of the ethos which maintains the stability of the Sunjata narrative as well as its capacity to integrate the already complex issues of the hunting and griot narratives into a more comprehensive-- and no less complex-- account of the past and present Mande world.

2. The emergence of the epic: the eighteenth-century Niniinian and beyond.

The extended historical development of any oral literature is, by definition, difficult to document. What we have to work with are indirect references, analogies across time, space and culture, and some degree of conjecture from the very absence of data. In the case of the Sunjata epic, we are confronted with a very striking combination of intensive sound and silence which points strongly towards a particular time, place and set of circumstances for its composition.

Let us begin with the silences. The earliest references to any kind of oral Sunjata performances in the Manden occur, to the best of my knowledge, from the first stages in the French colonial occupation of the western Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century.[1] While the same limitations hold for the study of most African oral literature, in the case of Sunjata epic we might expect to find some information in the many Arabic and European accounts for the Manden dating from the middle ages through the nineteenth century. However, with the exception of the medieval North African scholar Ibn Khaldun, none of the Arab documents make any reference to Sunjata. These silences applies particularly to the two great Timbuktu chronicles of the sixteenth-to-seventeenth centuries, Tarikh as-Sudan and Tarikh al-Fattash, both of which do draw extensively on local oral tradition. Likewise most European travellers in the region describe frequent encounters with the jeliw who are the current guardians of the Sunjata narrative but none mentions Sunjata or his epic nor are jeliw even their sources for historical information.[1] This omission stands in stark contrast to the prominence of the Sunjata epic in the repertoire of contemporary jeliw.

Such negative evidence does not suggest that the Sunjata epic only came into existence during the late nineteenth century. However, as with other African narratives discovered at this time (Hunwick, 1991) we should not exclude the possibility of relatively recent composition inspired not by the colonial circum-

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[1]Austen, 1990, pp. 37 f. and Bulman SS; on medieval Arab references to Sunjata (as Mari Jata) see Wilks SS.

[1]see footnote 3 above.

stances of transcription but rather by earlier historical developments within Africa.

The positive indication of the Mininjan as the source for the epic comes from the two closely linked circumstances: first, the celebration every seven years at Kaaba/Kangaba, the capital of the local Kafu (chiefdom), of the major Kamabolon ritual which includes a performance of "Sunjata"; and second, the recognition of the jeliw responsible for this performance, the Jabaté of nearby Kela, as the masters from whom all griots of the region must learn the "correct" version of the epic (Johnson 1986: 25).

This evidence is sufficient to convince some of the leading expatriate and Mande researchers on the Sunjata epic to conclude that it originated at the time the Mininjan Kafu was founded and the Kamabolon ritual first established during the eighteenth century (Person 1962: 464; Niane 1974: 59-60; Camara SS). This identification is perhaps too neat, since the oral traditions of the Mininjan indicate that both the Kamabolon and the Jabaté jeliw moved there from neighboring chiefdoms and that the Jabaté acquired their knowledge of Sunjata from another jeli lineage, the Kuyaté (Camara 1990: 123, 304-11).[1]

Recent research on Kangaba and Kela by Jan Jansen (ms.) raises further questions about some of these earlier conclusions. Jansen has found written evidence that Kangaba was a rather powerful regional state and commercial center in the eighteenth century and nineteenth centuries. He also insists that a reading in normal Mande terms of local oral traditions (which make the first Kangaba ruler a younger brother of the founder of the regional Keita lineage) would suggest that this hegemony was fully recognized among the surrounding Kafuw. The epic, still assuming that it did originate here, thus becomes for Jansen a legitimating "myth" for a later Keita mini-empire if not for that of Sunjata himself. We are thus back to a rather orthodox political interpretation of this work.

What distinguishes the epic from literature which can be understood primarily in such elitist functional terms is, first, its character as an extended narrative rather than panegyric and secondly its omission of precisely the data linking the ruling Kangaba dynasty with Sunjata on a genealogical/historical basis. The grand narrative form derives, I will argue, from confrontation with the new regional dominance of Islam. The absence of more immediate historical information in the narrative also suggests that the power of Kangaba was seen as ultimately insignificant in comparison with the notion of true macro-regional empire represented both by Sunjata in the past and various extant super-states of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Sudan.

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[1]Camara is also more cautious in his dissertation than his present paper about postulating "une ligne de demarcation rigoreuse entre une localité et une centre d'enseignement historique" (1990: 89)

The table on the following page illustrates the chronology of the Keita dynasty founded by Sunjata, its changing regional position, and the various genres of historical record by which it has been remembered. The chronology locates the Minianjan Kandaal of Kaaba/Kangaba (and by analogy, the other surviving Keita chiefdoms) at not only a great distance from Sunjata but also at several removes from Nyaani Musa Mamadu, the last Keita ruler with any real claim to an imperial status. The breaking up of the Keita lineage into these segmented lineages and sub-lineages thus marks the definitive end of an empire which had lost its hegemonic role in the greater Sudan several centuries earlier.

The Sunjata epic, for all its claims to tariku, not only fails to provide us with much information about the empire in its heyday but also omits most of the more proximate history of the Keita dynasty and Kandaal lineage, a history which is quite well-known through other oral genres to the performers and at least their local audience. With the epic, unlike the case of panegyric, we are not dealing with poetic allusion to a body of knowledge which is thus indirectly evoked but rather with the deliberate suppression or exclusion of this knowledge from the entire discourse of literary performance.

In such a process, Sunjata becomes both an ahistorical and a super-historical figure. He is ahistorical for the reasons already noted in discussing what specific narrative information is omitted and included in his story. He is historical since he remains a verifiable human agent from the past and also because the very act of leaping across mundane history to a mythologized dynastic founder is a response to the historical experience of alienation from the sources of material power. I will return to the issue of ambiguous dynastic legitimation in the last section of this paper.

Although the most powerful mythic content of the Sunjata narrative evokes the issues of masculine power and authority derived from the indigenous subculture of hunting, the impulse to formulate the epic appears to be connected with the constitution of the Kamabolon ritual and its complex relationship to Islam.

The Kamabolon unites or at least brings into close proximity, three domains of cosmic force which can otherwise be perceived to operate far more separately within Mande life: the domain of kingship associated with the Keita invaders into the region; the domain of village reproductive power associated in Kangaba with the Camara autochtones; and the domain of Islam associated with local Bereté clerics who are the key intermediaries between the Jabaté jeliw and the shrine. The ritual itself[9] is dominated by the Keita and the Jabaté. The latter are also reported (in accounts by Dieterlen and Meillassoux) to perform here not only the Sunjata epic, with its strong base in

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[9]there is no space here to discuss aspects of the ritual other than narrative recitals, especially the refurbishing of the Kamabolon structure and its connection to initiation groups.

KEITA DYNASTIC HISTORY AND ITS MAJOR SOURCES

Sunjata (founding of Mali Empire vs Soaso [Soninke] ruler Sumanguru	1200's	b. Khaldun, oral epic
Hegemony of Mali	c. 1230-c. 1400	b. Khaldun, b. Battuta, al-Umari
Hegemony of Songhai	c. 1400-c. 1591	Timbuktu Tarikhs[10]
Nyaani Musa Mamadu (last unitary Manea/ Emperor)	late 1500's	oral tradition[11]
3 successor lineages (Namaganei, Kuruei, Kandaai)	c. 1600-present	oral tradition, Timbuktu Tarikhs, European texts
Tenenba-Koman, junior descendent, founds Mininjan subdivision of Kandaai	c. 1700	oral tradition, epilogue to Keis version of the epic[12]
Manaa Sôma s/o Tenenba-Koman settles at Kaaba/ Kangaba, builds Kamabolon	mid-1700's	oral tradition
Mininjan dominated by Segu (Bambara), Tukulor (Jihadist) and Samory (Juula) empires	late 1700's-1887 French occupation	oral tradition, Segu, Tukulor history, European texts.

[10] on the use of the epic and Arabic sources for Malian imperial history see Ly-Tall 1977.

[11] for details of traditions and supporting sources for the rest of this table see Person 1981 and Camara 1990: 100-169, 245-67.

[12] Ly-Tall, et. al. 1967: 71-74 (the recitation of even this small, and very stylized, piece of recent oral tradition required prompting by the researchers).

the idiom of hunting, but also a creation myth which draws entirely upon the very contrasting village idiom of agriculture and sexuality. Jansen (personal communication), who has worked closely with the Jabaté, claims that they have nothing to do with the creation story, which is probably associated with other shrines belonging to the alternate Camara dynasty. In classic Mande fashion the autochthonous Camara function in counterpoint to the invading and politically dominant Keita as the "earth priests" of Kangaba.

Islam remains a secondary yet pervasive element in the ritual as it does in the epic itself. The immediate idiom of Islam is most evident at the beginning of the recital of Sunjata which includes, like most such performances, a prefatory narrative tying its hero to the Prophet Muhammad through his alleged Meccan ancestor, the black servitor Bilal. However some descriptions of the Kamabolon ritual indicate that in this case there are also more extended accounts of the rise of Islam and the life of the Prophet himself.[13]

The more pervasive role of Islam in both the ritual and the epic derives less from specific elements in the aggregate performance than from the formation of these elements into a whole with the kind of structure and universal meaning now imputed to it. The idea of an Islamicized universality is most directly expressed in the alternate name of the ritual site (Kaaba[14]) and the base-seven calculation of its periodicity. A more subtle influence resides in the fact that only in proximity to this shrine is Mande cosmology transformed into a lengthy creation narrative.[15]

By extension, one can postulate a similar Islamic influence upon the genesis of the Sunjata epic. Like the creation myth,

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[13]My information on the Kamabolon ritual is drawn from descriptions of varying emphasis and from different years (Dieterlen: 1955; Meillassoux: 1968; Camara: 1990, 334-49).

[14]One local tradition reverses the history of the original Meccan Kaaba (the central object of the pilgrimage enjoined on all Muslim believers) by claiming that the Mande version had first been a Muslim shrine now converted to "pagan" purposes (Niane 1959: 37)

[15]The story itself is found in Dieterlen 1955; Meillassoux's informants stressed the uniqueness of this aspect of the Kaaba/Kangaba performance although, in the light of Jansen's work, one now wonders exactly what they were referring to (Meillassoux 1968: 178); the Dogon version of the same creation story is, as its subtitle clearly indicates, a product of even more immediate dialogue between local sources and foreign scholars looking for an equivalent of their own canonical tradition (Griaule 1966).

with which it otherwise shares so little,[16] the narrative core of Sunjata is an ensemble of local elements composed into the form which we now know through confrontation with the master narratives of Islam at Kaaba/Kangaba, although undoubtedly not at this site alone. Within the epic, Sunjata rarely takes on a specifically Muslim identity, but his *claim* to transcendant imperial status is tied to the very existence of the narrative as well as its use of varied (in different versions) references not *only* to Meccan ancestry but also to residence in the more Islamicized Mema (the imputed home of the Bereté clerics), the donning of Muslim robes at critical moments and comparison with the generic Mediterranean world-conqueror, Dhu al-Qarnayn (the Quranic name for Alexander the Great).

Such a connection is reinforced by local claims that the oral composition is more like an Islamic text than would appear from either the main body of the narrative itself or its performance. The Arabic-derived generic terms for the epic suggest this quite literally. Tariku, as already noted, is both misleading and revealing about the relationship between the Sunjata story and known Arabic historical chronicles (tarikh pl. tarukh) of the Western Sudan. Maana has equally rich implications; it is a term probably derived from formal Islamic learning (with which the Jabaté jeliw are at least acquainted) referring to the "significance", i.e. accepted understanding, of a primary text. In this case the equivalent of difficult passages from the Quran or Hadith collections might be the *panegyric verses and songs* which have survived from the distant past and now derive their meaning from the maana narrative.[17]

Finally some people in Kangaba *claim* that the "true" version of the epic is preserved in a secret written Arabic text connected with the shrine (Camara: 1990, 31-34). The jeliw are literate and might possibly have such a manuscript; however, the fact that it has never been seen and that Jabaté performances of Sunjata do vary somewhat in content suggests that the claim is mythic.[18] Even if this is the case, like all serious myths, it embodies an important truth: that the establishment of a long, coherent and relatively stable oral narrative of Sunjata could only occur in dialogue with written Islamic narratives.

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[16] one of the central figures in the creation story, Faro, does play a prominent role in the otherwise much less mythic Segu epics (Keatelaot, 1976).

[17] the term maana is also used more generally by jeliw to describe narrative explanations of cryptic poetic texts (Clement Zöbel, Anthropological Institute, University of Vienna, private communication)

[18] Jansen SS; in private communication Jansen suggests that reports of such a manuscript are probably based upon totally unrelated works held in local mosques.

The Kamabolon ritual provides the Sunjata epic with a local context which is not immediately disturbed by either the lacunae in its account of history or the "mixing" of Islamic and local constructions. History is, after all, a subjective concept in any society and Islam had been part of the Mande cultural landscape for centuries by the time the epic came into existence.[19] However, for the epic to become a work of "literature" with a capacity to communicate to a broader Mande audience, to say nothing of a universal one, it was necessary for even this contextual boundary to be breached.

In its Kamabolon version, the epic is neither aimed at such a general audience nor capable of reaching it. The intention is reflected in the aura of secrecy with which jeliw still surround the knowledge which they claim to possess. It is quite probable that in the first century or so after its initial composition the entire formal narrative of Sunjata was considered a secret and not revealed on any public occasion other than the Kamabolon. This secrecy may account for the absence of Sunjata accounts from the kind of griot performances to which precolonial European travellers were exposed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Obviously such total secrecy no longer prevails and quite recently a complete recording was made of the "official" Kela Sunjata performance although not during the Kamabolon ritual (Ly-Tall et al. 1987). However, this version is very difficult to follow in written form because many of the critical episodes are dealt with via allusion rather than explicit narrative. The knowledge assumed here on the part of the audience is not informal sources of historical information, as in panegyric, but rather familiarity with previous performances. But the effect is to produce a similar, or perhaps even more impenetrable, opacity for most hearers/readers since the Kaaba performance has now taken on some of the qualities of a liturgy.[20]

The Kela Jabaté may thus remain the source for a stable version of the epic but its literary development-- and very likely part of its creation-- comes from the diffusion of this work into the repertoire of jeliw addressing much wider, truly "public" audiences. Existing evidence gives no indication of how this process occurred or even whether the Kela version developed in dialogue with jeliw from the Kamabolon shrines which existed in other Kelta chiefdoms before the late nineteenth center.

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[19]For a fuller discussion of the relationship between contemporary griots and the idioms and issues of Islam see Farias 1992.

[20]Jan Jansen has recently recorded a different Kela performance which he claims is more engaging than that of Ly Tall, et al. It has already been translated into Dutch (Diabate 1994) but I await the French version to pass judgement on its literary qualities.

Nonetheless, it is more than probable that it was the reshaping of the narrative in this wider realm which brought into it those folkloric elements which link it most immediately to issues of power and authority in the Mande-- and any other-- world.

3. The Epic as "Subversive" Literature

For the purposes of literary analysis I want to concentrate on four key episodes of the epic. Although not all of these episodes are present in every single version of the epic available to us, the nevertheless occur frequently enough to constitute the stable core of the epic and the repository, I will argue, of much of its meaning.[21] These episodes all deal with power in the context of relations between heroic (or potentially heroic) males and either women or casted Mande groups. The include: (1) the hunt for a buffalo who is the wraith (spiritual double) of Sunjata's future mother; (2) Sunjata's ascension from four-legged/crippled child/animal to erect man; (3) Sunjata's exile from Mali; (4) the seduction of Sumanguru, Sunjata's "evil emperor" opponent.

a. The hunt for Sogolon as Buffalo Woman

Plot summary: a princess of Do is mistreated by her brother and turns herself into a magic buffalo which kills all hunters who pursue it. Two brothers from another Mande region approach the buffalo by way of her female double, now an old woman. Because they treat her generously, the woman explains that in order to kill the animal (herself) they must replace their normal weapons with an egg and a distaff.[22] When they succeed they must accept as their reward not one of the beautiful maidens offered them but Sogolon, an ugly princess with a hump (like a buffalo's) on her back. The hunters follow all these instructions but then cannot achieve sexual intercourse with Sogolon because her wild animal nature resists them. They thus give her to Maghan, king of Mali and the predestined father of Sunjata.

Analysis: this episode is present in almost all versions of the epic despite the fact that it takes place well before the titular hero's birth. It establishes the centrality of a hunting idiom and its complex gender/power implications for the rest of the narrative. At first blush the story seems to subvert the very idea of hunting, an exclusively male enterprise, by subjecting the conquerors of the Buffalo of Do to the commands and the devices of women. Hunters are not only males but also considered in the Manden to represent the epitome of fadenya ("fatherness") a quality of competitive, antisocial behavior located in both conceptual and physical space at the opposite pole from the domestic realm of badenya ("motherness") (Bird and Kendall 1980).

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[21] For a systematic comparison and analysis of a virtually all the recorded Sunjata variants see Bulman 1990.

[22] a stick for spinning cotton, used only by females.

Yet if we examine the local cosmology of hunting it turns out that the divinities governing this realm of Mande life, Sane and Kondolon, are a mother and son couple. Moreover many hunter tales imply that the secrets of the bush are under the control of females who thus determine the outcome of encounters with wild animals (Jackson, 1982 : 213-16). Thus the Buffalo Woman episode expresses a deep ambiguity about the autonomy of male hunters which is already established in the general discourse of hunting. But it does so in a way which sets up Sunjata as a hero whose extraordinary qualities are derived from a particularly potent crossing of the boundaries between genders and between the bush and domesticated space. These same themes are developed farther in the other key episodes.

b. Sunjata Arises

Plot summary: Sunjata, the destined heir of his father, turns out to be a child who cannot walk but instead crawls on all fours. Following their father's death his half-brother thus inherits the throne. The mother of this child insults Sogolon when the latter asks her for baobab leaves, a condiment normally gathered for women by young sons. Sunjata responds to his mother's grief by attempting to rise on his two feet, first with the help of an iron bar forged by the royal smiths and (in most versions) finally with the support of a tree branch cut by Sogolon. The iron bar is bent into a bow and Sunjata instantly becomes a senior hunter.

Analysis: This episode can be read as a generic account of initial handicaps which underscore the eventual triumph of the hero. However Sunjata's specific condition (together with the second part of his name, "Jata" = "Lion") implies both a lack of capacity to walk like a man and an excess of the bush animal power which he inherits from his mother. His transcendence of this state again depends directly upon his mother (how directly is determined by which variant is followed) along with the support of the casted smiths, who are supposed to be the clients of powerful nobles. This event also substitutes for the elaborate initiation rituals which are such a prominent element in the formation of normal Mande adult males. In sum then, the episode emphasizes the extraordinary power of Sunjata, but does so by questioning his qualifications for normal succession to authority and tying his career closely to his relationship with his mother.

c. Exile

Plot summary: Sunjata, his mother and various of his siblings and half-siblings are forced to leave Mali by the new king and his mother. They travel to various other courts and finally settle in Mema, somewhere north of the Niger, where Sunjata becomes a highly regarded warrior. Mali meanwhile is conquered by an alien ruler, Sumunguru Kante, and representatives from the kingdom travel north to find Sunjata so that he can liberate them. Just as Sunjata contemplates their offer his mother dies.

He forces the reluctant Nema ruler to allow her burial there and then begins his return to Mali.

Analysis: These events again follow a classic/generic scheme of heroic biographies where the central figure must undergo an initiation-like journey out of the civilized world into the dangers of the wild (Campbell 1949) but with important particularities. Nema represents not the "bush" but rather the one serious exposure of Sunjata to a more developed Islamic/Mediterranean culture than that of Mali. The constant presence of Sogolon contradicts the defining move in any male initiation process, which is the separation of a boy from his mother. Once again Sunjata's acquisition of powers far beyond those of the ordinary male require precisely that he remain tied to his mother in a way which would "unman" anyone else. He finally becomes an apparently autonomous male with Sogolon's death, which coincides with the beginning of *his* political mission. But, as will be seen, the achievement of this task ultimately depends upon yet another transformation of the hero-female-power complex.

d. <u>The Seduction of Sumanguru</u>

Plot summary: Sumunguru, the conqueror of Mali and its entire surrounding region is a blacksmith who is invulnerable to any iron weapon. Thus Sunjata, despite all his heroic qualifications, cannot defeat him. However one of Sunjata's half-sisters insinuates herself into Sumunguru's bed and there elicits from him the secret identity of his <u>tana</u> (totem), a white cock-espur, the only substance which can destroy him. Sumunguru's mother warns him against telling his secrets to a "one night woman" but he does not heed her and in some versions even cuts off her breast leading her to renounce her ties to him. At this point Sumunguru's fate is sealed and many versions of the epic do not even take the trouble to describe the battle scene in which Sunjata puts the cockespur on an arrow and shoots him down.

Analysis: Sumunguru, as blacksmith, is a caste nyamakala who should not be a ruler but rather a client. He shows this by initially singing his own praises rather than using a jeli and, when he acquires a griot who rightfully belongs to Sunjata, by cutting the jeli's tendon to prevent him from leaving (patrons are mythically presented as cutting meat from their own bodies so as to nourish client griots).

Nonetheless Sumunguru is a very powerful ruler and something of a model for Sunjata (Sumunguru's panegyric, the Jonjon, is eventually appropriated by Sunjata). His downfall comes from violating the code of the hunting cult which insists, on the one hand, that men respect non-nubile women (often their mothers cf. the old woman and hunting divinity of the buffalo episode) as guardians of the occult knowledge upon which power is based. Hunters should simultaneously avoid all sexual contact with nubile women, who may attempt to take this knowledge away from them (Jackson 1982 213-15). Thus the ultimate principle determining the victory of the "good" ruler Sunjata (who is often

shown to act very brutally) over the "evil" Sumunguru is their relationship to women. Moreover this is not a matter of private domestic life, as in a western soap opera versions of history, but rather rests on precisely upon the relationship between women and the sources of the most public, asocial, masculine power.

e. Summary

I am not attempting to assert here that Mande culture is somehow more egalitarian and less sexist than western or any other civilization. In fact, within the domestic sphere where they might be expected to assert the most authority, Mande women are subjugated to very considerable male domination. However, in imagining (and through hunting societies, actually acting out) realms of existence remote from domestic space and the concerns of reproducing ordinary life, the Mande do recognize the limitations of raw masculine power. It is perhaps misleading to call the Sunjata epic subversive, since it operates on the same principles that govern general Mande discourse about power, whether in the sphere of hunting or the very ambiguous position of nyamakala. But at the very least it subverts a more universal notion that epics exalt the elite male and repress awareness of women and subordinate social groups.

4. Postscript: the epic in the modern world.

One of the great strengths of the Sunjata epic is its robust transformation from oral epic into various contemporary media of musical performance, prose literature and political commentary. But the audience for these new renditions, whether Mande or speakers of some other African or non-African language cannot be expected-- unless specially instructed-- to hear or read the work within the specific frame of reference used for the previous analysis. While I have argued that some sense of the complex issues of occult sources of power, gender and status give the epic its broad appeal, I do not think that these issues constitute its contemporary political content. The problem here is not the "ignorance" of the audience as much as the shift of the world in which it lives so that the politics of the epic either focuses upon its "traditional" substance as opposed to its content or its contents have to be reworked to take into account the conditions of twentieth century Africa. At the moment, I am not very well prepared to explore the politics of these new renditions very fully but I want to sketch out a few lines on which they might be explored.

The epic is today best known among both educated Mande-speakers and especially to the public in the rest of Africa and the world through the many prose versions which have been produced in French and English. The most famous of these (Niane 1960/65) has remained in print for over thirty years and constitutes a standard text in schools all over Africa, America and Europe. Niane recorded and edited his version of the text in a form which feels like an epic and appears true to the content of oral performances although it is very far from a transcript of

such a performance.

Niane's Sundiata was aimed at an elite audience insofar as it assumes a level of proficiency in French held by only a small minority of the population of his native Guinea on the eve of decolonization. Nonetheless, as a school text and a very readable work it has reached a wide audience within the range of the literate. The politics of this work are more nationalist than populist, aiming to place African literature within the canon of world class "Great Books" and even to understand it as far more of a positive historical document than it probably is. For this reason the image of its hero is also somewhat softened compared to other versions of the epic and some (but by no means all or even most) of the gender and caste issues are blurred.

Niane's status as the "Milton of the Mande" (in response to Saul Bellow's notorious demand for a "Tolstoy of the Zulus") remains a matter of much debate among scholars and teachers of African literature. Indiana University Press has recently published a paperback version of John W. Johnson's Son Jara (1992), a version of the epic which very closely follows an oral performance and captures a good deal more of its poetics (including brutality and gender politics) than does Niane. However, despite a surprisingly high level of sales (mainly for use in university courses), it highly unlikely that a work like Johnson's-- difficult to understand without consulting its myriad footnotes-- will ever attain popular appeal.

While Niane's version of Sunjata is sometimes referred to as a novel, that term is more properly reserved for a number of subsequent publications. Several of these are juvenile or children's books whose distribution might be an interesting topic of research. One of French-speaking West Africa's most famous writers Camara Laye (1978/80) produced the only true "novellization" of Sunjata but the work was neither a critical nor a popular success. The problem here, I think, is that Camara Laye, in his attempt to create an ideal African hero in a modern literary genre, downplays the moral ambiguities of the original work and inserts far too many projections of his own personal experience. Camara Laye shares with Niane an explicit desire to bring African tradition ("the Wisdom of the Ancients") to a modern audience but because of the date of his work he also introduces-- if only through a few pointed allusions-- the one political issue which would explicitly pervade modern presentations of the epic in truly "popular" form: Sunjata as model for or against postcolonial African rulers.

The most subtle and complex treatments of this relationship in Mande terms occur in the two novels of the Ivoirian Ahmadou Kourouma (1970/81; 1990/93). Neither of these works is anything like a rendition of Sunjata but the second, Monné must certainly be read as a parody of an epic.[2] Kourouma is also very earl-

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[2] I discuss this work for at least a paragraph or two in Austen n.d.

ously concerned with the role in the modern world of gender relations, control over occult power (or the belief in it), and Mande notions of status. Moreover these concepts are at once the foundation and the object of his narrative voice which thus represents perhaps the premier African presence in the international realm of postcolonial, postmodern, magic realism literature. Perhaps such writing is the true contemporary equivalent of the precolonial epic but for present purposes neither its politics nor its relationship to popular consciousness can be summarized in any satisfactory fashion.

At a superficial level at least it is far easier to trace a continuing political and popular role for Sunjata in the form of musical/poetic performance. This is an arena in which African, and particularly Mande, artists have made a great impact upon world culture drawing very explicitly upon their own "traditional" repertoire. Along with the instrumental styles of kora and balaphone, specific songs and episodes from the Sunjata epic (including in some cases extended mixtures of song and narrative) have figured heavily in twentieth century popular Mande music. I am not in a position to provide much analysis of this dimension in the contemporary life of the epic[14]

One change in the performance process relevant to the themes of the epic is the fact that female griots, formerly kept in a subordinate position as instrumentalists and, at most, supporting voices, have now come into their own as vocal soloists (Diawara 1984). They generally do not perform narrative versions of the Sunjata epic but I have experienced at least one renowned female jali, Kandia Kouyaté, produce an extended Sunjata fasa which alluded to many episodes of the epic.

From a political perspective, the obvious issue here is of course the way in which the jeliw now seek patronage among new elites from both the private and public sector. The term griot has, among disaffected citizens of all Francophone African countries, currently taken on a very different meaning than that assigned it by early cultural nationalist such as Niane or even Camara Laye: it now refers to public media sycophants who cannot be trusted to express anything but the official views of governments usually perceived as oppressive, corrupt and incompetent.

In particular, the two first presidents of Mali (both eventually overthrown to great popular acclaim) made extensive use of not only griots in the traditional as well as modern sense but also of the Sunjata epic. The first of these, Modibo Keita bore the same clan name as Sunjata himself and the second, Moussa Traore, that of Tura Magan Traore, hero of a late episode in the epic (not discussed above). Each president was thus proclaimed as the direct descendent of his respective eponymous epic character and various versions of the epic, with special emphasis on

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[14] I am expecting such an analysis for my Sunjata volume from Robert Newton, a University of Wisconsin ethnomusicologist who is [illegible] in the field.

the faasa of the appropriate hero, were regularly played on the radio during the thirty-one years of their collective rule (1960-1991).

Mamadou Diawara (oral commentary to 1994) has recently argued that this kind of praise has a double-edged meaning: because the genealogy of the two presidents (and other public figures in similar situations) is traced directly back to figures from the remote past, the jeliw are also signaling that their immediate ancestors (the normal substance of faasaw) are of no significance i.e that these momentarily powerful men are upstarts with limited claims to legitimacy. There is a parallel here with the original genesis of the Sunjata epic, which similarly obliterates the immediate history of eighteenth and nineteenth century successor Keita dynasties who are the actual patrons of its performance.[25] In terms of literary analysis, this use of panegyric is not perhaps as interesting a form of ambiguity as that contained in the epic's own stories of buffalo women and secrets won by sexual seduction. But it at least suggests that even in electronically emitted modern Mande discourse, the complexity of heroic narrative and its ability to express some reservations about the claims of those in power has not been entirely lost.

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58. "The Historical Transformation of

[25]There is also a parallel to the Judaic practice of naming all converts "ben Avraham" (son of Abraham) in lieu of acknowledging their true but ritually non-existent gentile parents. In one sense this is a form of praise, since Abraham is the supreme patriarch; but the status of convert itself is considered somehow degrading as indicated by the prohibition against mentioning it publicly. Yet, at the very moment when such a person is "honored" by being called up before the congregation to read from the Torah, his* identity is revealed (or at least suggested) by the evocation of his patronymic. *this situation is even more acute in more liberal congregations where women are also called up to read but the Hebrew names used usually include both mother and father, thus giving the unmistakably "convert" appellation of " ben/bat Avraham v'Sarah".

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