

African Epic

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The African continent is home to a broad spectrum of the narrative and performance style that is generally termed epic: an extended narrative in poetic and/or musical form dealing with topics or themes that are central to the cultures in which these epics are produced. These African stories deserve to be better known.

One reason is the light they shed on the development of the epic form itself, that in the occidental tradition is associated with the literary models of Homeric or medieval epic. The African examples illustrate, through their range of forms, how a narrative may develop into the national tradition, and how the form of performance develops into a range of genres; they are also pertinent to considerations of drama, but that would be another topic.

One may divide African epic traditions into two groups: those of the Bantu-language family, documented through examples collected in Cameroon, the Congo, and the western regions of Tanzania; the second group looks to the Niger River basin. The Bantu epics have little historical relationship with each other, and so presumably share a mythical substrate. Their theme, however, is common: the epics of Mwindo¹ and Lianja (of the Ba-Nyanga and the Mongo, both in the Congo river basin) and Jeki² (from the littoral region of Cameroon), revolve around a preternaturally precocious child who overcomes obstacles, avenges the death of his father (or

¹ Biebuyck, D. (1969) *The Mwindo Epic* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

² Austen, R. (1996) *The Elusive Epic: The Narrative of Jeki la Njambe in the Historical Culture of the Cameroon Coast* (Atlanta: African Studies Association Press).

overcomes his father), visits the underworld, and leads his people to glory. These epics are often performed by an ensemble supporting the principal narrator: one can easily see how such performances might develop into the dramatic genre. The theme of the preternatural child is found in western Africa as well, outside the Bantu-language region, and has echoes in the mythical and epic traditions of the Niger river epics and mythical traditions.

The basin of the Niger river is home to a rich, multi-cultural and polyglot tradition of epic performance. This region has been home to a succession of kingdoms and empires over the past millennia: the Soninke empire of Wagadu, the kingdom of the Nyakhate in Nioro, the empire of Mali, with its westward extension into the Gambia, the empire of the Songhay in Niger and eastern Mali, the kingdoms of Kaarta and Segou in Mali, and innumerable other statelets with some claim to recognition in the oral tradition. The rulers of these successive states adopted some of the trappings of their predecessors, and in particular the institution of praise-singing – the function of the griot.

The griot – known locally by a wide variety of names according to the language: *jeli*, *gesere*, *maabo* – knows the genealogies of the nobility, their history, their reputed attributes, and can recall these details at need in the performance of songs that laud the patron or the audience. The songs are often allusive, especially at events such as weddings or naming-ceremonies, but may also become extended narratives: the basis of the epic tradition.

The Manding tradition of Sunjata, founder of the empire of Mali, stands pre-eminent among west African epic traditions: it has attracted the most attention and admiration. It merits this attention; it is a wonderful story, and the available versions demonstrate the artistry of great performers (and writers). But it should not eclipse the interest and vitality of other elements of the

Niger basin traditions. The cycle of narratives associated with the kingdom of Segou (18th- 19th century) is rich and entertaining³; the Fula traditions that seem to have grown up in parallel are thrilling. It seems significant that the Bamana, Fula, and certain Soninke traditions of the area seem to influence each other, but that the Maninka traditions of Sunjata are not subject to this flux. The Bamana epic cycle of Segou is essentially a king list, recounting successions and advents; stories of conquests and antagonist heroes are all assigned to the last king in the series. The Fula epic tradition, particularly rich and delightful, attaches itself to the Segou cycle: one major hero, Silamaka, is defeated by Segou; another, Hamadi Paté (Hama the Red) married a daughter of a king of Segou, and so became known as the ‘Fula of Segou, the Bamana of Massina,’ according to his residence.⁴ New texts of the Fula tradition continue to emerge.

The tradition of Sunjata is reported, in various forms, through Mali, Guinea, Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinée-Bissau. There are, of course, innumerable variants; recorded and published performances very often reflect a local perspective. In the Gambia, the exploits of Tira Magan Traore, a war-leader under Sunjata, are highlighted: Tira Magan led the armies that extended Manding control west into the region that is now the Gambia. In Sierra Leone, the story of Sunjata is remembered as folklore: the conflict of half-brothers in a polygamous household. In the Manding heartland, there are two strands: in Mali, semi-official recognition is given to the tradition narrated by the Diabaté (Jabate) griots at a ceremony in Kangaba, held every seven years⁵; in Guinea, the traditions preserved in Fadama served as the basis of the most influential

³ Conrad, D.C. (1990) *A state of intrigue: The epic of Bamana Segou according to Tayiru Banbera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy).

⁴ Johnson, J.W., T.A. Hale and S.P. Belcher (1997) (eds) *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant voices from a vast continent* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press); Kesteloot, L. and B. Dieng (eds) (1997) *Les épopées d’Afrique noire* (Paris, Karthala).

⁵ Jansen, J. (1998) ‘Hot issues: The 1997 Kamabolon ceremony in Kangaba (Mali)’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31: 253-278.

published version of the epic, that of Djibril Tamsir Niane.⁶ And there is more to be found – Niagassola, in Guinea, is the shrine of the *balafon* of Sumanguru, the only physical artefact connected to the era of Sunjata.⁷

In this context, the story of Sumanguru, as reported from Koulikoro, has a special place. It is, first of all, a tribute to an order that preceded that of Mali: Sumanguru was the king whom Sunjata defeated to establish his empire. In the Maninka tradition (of the victors), Sumanguru receives bad press: he is shown as an oppressive tyrant. But there are countering views: Sumanguru established and ruled a kingdom that preceded that of Sunjata. He was powerful enough to conquer Sunjata's home. This narrative thus stands as a unique counterpoint to the Sunjata-centered history that is now considered standard in Mali and other parts of Francophone west Africa.⁸

The counterpoint is recognized within the Maninka tradition: epics recorded in Kita in the late 1960s often acknowledge that Sumanguru, following his disappearance into the caves in Koulikoro (or his transformation into a stone) was worshipped by the Bamana: the admission recognizes the power represented by Sumanguru, and hints at an etiology for the distinction between Maninka and Bamana, who are 'divided by a common language' (the question of dialectal variations is never admitted).

A new venue for reinterpretation has arisen in Guinea, in the writings of Souleymane Kante, who devised the N'ko alphabet for the transcription of Manding languages and their tonal complexities. He also had the foresight to produce a body of literature to flesh out his writing

⁶ Niane, D.T. (1965) *Sundiata, an epic of old Mali* (London, Longman) (first published as [1960] *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue* [Paris, Présence Africaine]).

⁷ Kouyaté, Mamadou (2016) *L'Épopée de Sunjata* (Saint-Denis, Publibook).

⁸ Bulman, S.P.D. and Vydrine, V. (2017) *The Epic of Sumanguru* (Leiden, Brill).

system. Most influential, certainly, were his translation of the Koran into Maninka (shades of Wycliff) and a compendium of traditional healing practices. He also produced a number of accounts of Maninka history, including one that deals with Sumanguru Kante. The coincidence of *jamu*, the family name, is important: as a Kante, Souleymane challenged the negative image of Sumanguru and attributed to him a number of innovations in governance.

These details suggest the complexity and rich background that underlies the west African oral tradition. Every village, every lineage, has its set of narratives. They often preserve details of history that are lost in the grander, national narratives associated with major figures. They thus compose a mosaic of perspectives: the more of these narratives that can be preserved and presented, the richer will be our understanding of the past and the present. The effort recalls that of the 19th century British folklorists who spread through the hamlets to seek out the tales and songs that were to constitute the British past.

In this context, the narrative of Koulikoro and Sumanguru is especially important. As noted above, it is perhaps the only counter-narrative to the story of Sunjata. It is in some ways a local tradition, but a tradition from a locality with a special claim to authority and continuity. It echoes traditions recorded many years ago, before ‘official’ versions of the Epic of Sunjata gained prominence, and it illuminates a traditional chronology and diction of praise-names and references. We are much richer for the publication of this text.