

# The collection and analysis of the Sunjata epic

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The first record of Sunjata appears in North African historian Ibn Khaldun's *Kitab al-ibar* or Book of Examples, written in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, which mentions a ruler of Mali called Mari Jata, 'Their greatest king, he who overcame the Susu, conquered their country, and seized the power from their hands' (Hopkins & Levtzion 1981: 333). The reference derived from oral testimony that was most probably an early form of the epic. Ibn Khaldun's work was not printed until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and consequently had little impact on Western scholarship before the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, so Europeans had no foreknowledge of Mari Jata or Sunjata when they began to visit West Africa. Growing fascination with the African interior, trade and imperial competition prompted Europeans to increase their direct contact with the West African interior during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after centuries of coastal trade and settlement. From the 1850s the use of quinine to reduce the debilitating effects of malaria became more prevalent and the pace of travel and exploration quickened. It is from this point that African oral traditions started to be noted and then recorded in quantity and the Sunjata epic first came to the attention of Europeans.

German explorer and polymath Heinrich Barth (1821-1865) was an early pioneer. He crossed the Sahara in the early 1850s and made extensive use of oral traditions, although never recording a single legend in its entirety (Masonen 2000). The first sketchy and brief European reference to Sunjata occurs in a Portuguese account of a Senegambian tradition published in 1882, which refers to a 'famous and unforgotten tyrant, whose name was Assinjâta' who had 'violently taken hold of the reins of government' in what became a 'large empire, by the name of Mandih' (I thank Stephan Bühnen for this translation). A few years later, as the French sent marines up the Senegal River and overland to the Niger River with a flat-pack

gunboat, two officers recorded versions of the legend at Koulikoro, on the Niger River in present-day Mali. Lieutenants Hourst and Jaime's accounts from the late 1880s/early 1890s are brief and focus as much on Sumanguru as Sunjata, but are clearly retelling what we know as the Sunjata epic (Hourst 1898, Jaime 1892). Further brief versions were recorded by Captain Quiquandon near Sikasso, and Charles Monteil, near Médine in the Senegal valley in the 1890s (Quiquandon 1890, Monteil 1966). But it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that lengthy accounts – that would lead to it being called an epic – were recorded. An important early source were the griots of Niuro du Sahel, which was the capital of the Tukolor empire from the 1850s until its conquest by the French in 1891. French administrators recorded four closely related versions from this town during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notable for their Islamic frame of reference (see Bulman 1999).

Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), a German explorer-cum-ethnologist, was a singular figure with eccentric beliefs but he had a prodigious literary output, including a marvellous version of the Sunjata epic, recorded in about 1907-09, and first published in 1912, from the bard Kieba Koate (Kuyate) known as 'Korongo'. Frobenius' description of Korongo's performance gives a vivid picture of the griot's style:

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! (Repinecz 2013: 21, translated by Jonathan Repinecz)

Frobenius employs the word epic to define what he's hearing and recording, the first time (to my knowledge) the term was applied to Sunjata.

Franz de Zeltner recorded two accounts of the story in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (de Zeltner 1913), and the colonial administrator and later lecturer of trainee colonial officers,

Maurice Delafosse, recorded and published an account from Nioro in 1913, a supplement to his prodigious *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1912), a three-volume survey that set the dominant paradigm for study into the Manding people's language, history, and culture for the next sixty years.<sup>1</sup>

While de Zeltner offered his versions of Sunjata as *contes* or folktales, many of those who recorded the tradition viewed it as history, in one form or another. Quiquandon claimed to have left out the bits that were too childish or fantastical, revealing unease at the prospect of interpreting such information in an historical frame, but for Delafosse and others, Sunjata was an historical source to lay alongside documentary and archaeological evidence. His outlook predominated in this early period, but the tension between those who treat Sunjata as a primarily literary or creative product - e.g. John William Johnson (1986) and Gordon Innes (1974), in distinction to those who view it as an historical source, albeit one to be treated cautiously, for example Nehemia Levtzion (1973), Stephan Bühnen (1994), David Conrad (1992) or Tal Tamari (1997) - was in evidence from early on in European encounters with the Sunjata traditions.

By Delafosse's time Europeans were aware of the medieval Arabic sources such as Ibn Khaldun describing the ancient empire of Ghana (Wagadu in oral sources) and medieval empire of Mali, and were seeking evidence to corroborate these accounts, including Ibn Battuta's visit to its capital in 1352. Jules Vidal, who recorded a version of Sunjata in 1924 from Kangaba, was intent on locating the capital of medieval Mali; Delafosse, attempted to fit the narrative of Sumanguru's defeat by Sunjata into an historical scheme for the Western Sudan, essentially a sequence of empires, with Ghana replaced by Soso – Sumanguru's state – and then superseded by Sunjata's Mali, ushering in a golden age of peace and prosperity,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Repinecz notes that Delafosse employed the term *épopée* to describe West African oral traditions such as Sunjata in *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, published in 1912 (Repinecz 2013: 17).

underpinned by the gold trade, which gradually faded in the fifteenth century, to be replaced in turn by Songhay, culminating in the emergence of the French Empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From the 1930s West Africans produced their own versions of Sunjata in print and we can begin to trace their attitudes and reactions to Sunjata's legend in documentary sources (see Bulman 2004). Students and graduates from the elite *École Normale William Ponty* in present-day Senegal, which trained French West Africa's first school teachers, were early promoters of Sunjata. Ponty graduate, school teacher and author Abdoulaye Sadju (1911-1961) published a version of Sunjata in a colonial education journal in 1936 (later re-issued in 1985), and is the first sign of interest in this pervasive West African tradition. A group of Ponty students wrote and performed a play at the 1937 school summer *fête* using the Sunjata epic as inspiration. 'La ruse de Diégué', named after Sunjata's sister who discovers the secret of Sumanguru's invulnerability by seducing him, thereby enabling Sunjata to defeat him, was performed in Sébikotane (Anon. 1949). Ponty graduate and Dahomean author Maximilien Quénum (1911-1988), a member of the *Négritude* movement, published an account of the Sunjata story in 1946; and Mamby Sidibé (1891-1977), a Fulani from the Kita area of what is today Mali, an earlier Ponty graduate, and a school teacher in Bamako in 1930s, wrote a detailed and scholarly version of Sunjata in 1937, showing an in-depth awareness of the richness and variation of the tradition, as much as an interest in its meaning and significance (Sidibé 1959).

The prominence of schoolteachers in this flowering of interest in Sunjata demonstrates the tradition's educational value. What's clear is that Sunjata was by this date already an important text for the education of African youth in colonial era classrooms, and it was from the pen of one of these schoolteachers that our most famous rendition of the epic came.

Djibril Tamsir Niane (b.1932) came from the Siguiri area of what is today NE Guinea. His

mother was Manding, his father a Tukolor. He trained as a teacher at Conakry and in the late 1950s, as a history teacher in Upper Guinea, was introduced to Mamoudou Kouyate, a griot or *jèli* (later a *Belen Tigi* or master bard) from the village of Djeliba Koro. Niane recorded episodes of the tradition over several weeks, then conflated them into a single narrative which he published as *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue* in 1960.

Niane's book about the creation of a nation appeared at an auspicious moment: Africa's first ex-colonial state became independent in 1957 (Ghana) and 1960 saw some fifteen African states gain independence, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Mali's first president was a Keita (the same patronymic as Sunjata) and its name was a conscious harking back to the glory of medieval Mali. Niane's novella-length account, on a scale that dwarfed earlier published accounts, extolled the role and significance of griots as the traditional custodians of Africa's history, and appeared to form a bridge between that dimly perceived past and the future of independence, at the same time confirming that Africa was no stranger to great leaders who could shape history. Niane's account skilfully smoothed over the excesses and clearly ahistorical elements of *jèli* accounts, presenting an acceptable, plausible, historical narrative, albeit with a pervasive sense of mystery and majesty.

Eighteen years later, in 1978, fellow Guinean author Camara Laye followed suit, publishing a reconstructed novelistic narrative of Sunjata based upon the words of Babu Conde, a griot from Fadama, Guinea. His *Le Maître de la parole* speaks to the souring of hopes enshrined in African independence in the intervening period, excoriating African rulers who 'turn politics into a bloody massacre' (1980: 32). Sékou Touré, Guinea's ruler, imprisoned, tortured and killed thousands of political opponents during his twenty-six years in power. He gaoled Camara's wife for eight years causing Laye to go into self-imposed exile in protest, and the dictator also imprisoned Niane from 1961-64, after the latter continued to record African traditions during Touré's 'demystification program' which aimed to destroy all traditional

cultural elements, and discouraged scholars from engagement with them, and finally drove him into exile in 1971.

If the early optimistic dreams of independence that had spurred African and world-wide interest in the Sunjata epic faded, the late 1960s marked a watershed of another kind in this tradition. In 1967 Lassana Doucouré and Mme Marta recorded a version of Sunjata from a griot at Mourdiah, in Mali, called Tiemoko Kone, published in 1970 as *Soundiata* (Kone 1970). What marks out this publication was the use of a line-by-line transcription of the Bamana narrative, together with a line-by-line translation in French. It marks a sea-change in the production of written accounts of Sunjata, followed during the 1970s onwards with numerous publications, each more or less exact renditions of specific performances, clearly highlighting the performative and context-specific aspects of each rendition, such as Gordon Innes's translation and publication of three Gambian versions (1974).

The key figure to bring Sunjata to the attention of an American audience was the linguist Charles Bird who recorded a performance by Kita bard Kele Monson Jabate (the son of Mamby Sidibé's main informant) in 1968 which became the basis of five publications including a brief extract published in 1972 (Bird 1972). Bird's position at Indiana University led to two more significant linear translations from fellow Indiana scholar John William Johnson: Magan Sisoko's *Epic of Sun-Jata* in 1979, and Fa-Digi Sisoko's *Epic of Son-Jara* in 1986, which became the standard American university edition until David Conrad's *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* in 2004. Johnson's texts came with rich annotations and introductions to the social context within which the epic should be understood, and, along with Bird and Kendall (1980) introduced their readers to vital Manding concepts such as *fadenya* ('father-childness') and *bandenya* ('mother-childness'), which framed family dynamics within polygamous marriages.

One of the debates of this period was over the use of the label ‘epic’ in an African context. While Ruth Finnegan in an early survey of African oral literature in 1970 averred that Africa was not the home of epics, several scholars, most notably Isidore Opekwho (1975) and John Johnson (1980), argued convincingly that she was mistaken. Sunjata became a primary piece of evidence in that argument; many of the translations that appeared in the decade were effectively refutations of her stance (Ruth later withdrew her claim) and many of the interpretive treatments from the period are couched in that frame of reference: self-conscious attempts to measure African oral productions against European norms of ‘the epic’.

Linear translations produced other effects on our understanding of Sunjata. This format clearly foregrounded the individual artistry of the bards, demonstrating that, rather than passive purveyors of time-hallowed traditions, griots were individual artists with their own aims and ambitions, albeit operating within a given tradition. They also highlighted the considerable variation between accounts of the same story, and thereby compromised naive attempts to fix a standard version of the narrative as official or authoritative, and undermined older histories based upon a narrow knowledge of the tradition. In general terms the growth of multiple variants has coincided with a decline in enthusiasm for the Sunjata epic’s employment as an historical source.

By the mid- to late-1980s two surveys of the Sunjata tradition attempted to encompass the wealth and diversity of the Sunjata epic into a single interpretive frame (Belcher 1985, Bulman 1990). Both demonstrated the broad reach of the tradition across much of West Africa, and its stability as a recognisable tale for over a century. Their studies showed that the Sunjata epic maintained a consistent overall shape, while at the same time written testimony gave witness to a multiplicity of variations which had existed across time and space. At one level, the tradition appeared to resist fixity and continually assert its unique variability, although the causes of these variations in general evaded any clear-cut interpretation.

Bulman's 1989 study of the buffalo-woman tale identified superimposed layers of legend employed to create an origin tale for Sunjata and Mali that united both disparate Manding families and chiefdoms and appeared to be based upon a deep strata of hunter folklore – in itself a specialist category of oral tradition in Manding culture – which had domesticated various cross-cultural themes.

A milestone in this era of reconsideration was the Sunjata epic conference at Northwestern University in 1992, which heard papers from a wide range of scholars, appearing as *In Search of Sunjata* (Austen 1999). This volume, like the conference that spawned it, considered multiple frames of reference and vantage points, and created no clear consensus on either the origins and genesis of the Sunjata tradition or how it should best be interpreted. Rather, it revealed that multiple viewpoints existed, and that, as an old and widely disseminated tradition, it served different purposes in different contexts.

In general, historical readings became more sophisticated. Earlier accounts from Delafosse, or even Levtzion (1973), which attempted to copy across bardic narrative into historical text wholesale, were replaced by complex surveys of multiple variants with potentially historical dimensions, such as the study of traditions relating to the epic hero Fakoli by David Conrad in 1992. Others saw in the epic a clue to the historical development of the region. Tal Tamari attempted to understand the genesis of West Africa's system of inherited artisan status, or 'castes' – griots, blacksmiths and others -- through a reading of the Sunjata epic narrative as encapsulating an historical transformation from Sumanguru's blacksmith-king figure to that of Sunjata's Mali empire, where artisans were valued but restricted to non-leadership roles (1991; 1997). Rod McIntosh deployed the Sunjata Epic in his archaeo-historical studies of the early history of the Middle Niger Valley, arguing that a deep strata of hunter folklore found within the epic reflected early colonisation of new territory, often in response to climate change, and that Manding heroes like Sunjata embodied the culture's necessary response to

periodic crises that afflicted the marginal zones of the Savanna/Sahel regions during repeated climatic oscillations (1988, 2000, 2005). George Brook's *Landlords and Strangers* (1993) tracked the growth of the Manding diaspora across West Africa in the six hundred years since 1000 AD, perceiving two waves of expansion, the first spreading Manding secret societies or power associations such as *Komo*, exemplified by Sumanguru, the second introducing the tripartite social structure of noble, *nyamakala* and slaves, typified by Sunjata's Mali. As Brooks put it:

In the sahel and savanna zones Mandekalu horse warriors imposing the Mande tripartite social order prevailed over power associations... Essentially Sundiata and Sumanguru represent the two basic and conflicting principles of Mande society and of groups in western Africa generally (1993; 100).

The Sunjata epic represents for Brooks a microcosm of this conflict, albeit having transformed reality through a 'recasting and telescoping of numerous strands of historical development that took place over several generations or perhaps longer' (1993: 100).

While these studies focused on grand themes reflected in the epic, other scholars have considered the methods and agendas of the epic storytellers themselves, the griots. Paulo Farias' analysis of Wâ Kamissoko's lengthy oeuvre from the 1970s (1993), which the griot published in multiple volumes through the SCOA Foundation with the scholar Y.T. Cissé (Cissé and Kamissoko 1975, 1988, 1991) was ground-breaking. Rather than viewing Wâ as a passive recipient and passer-on of ancient traditions, Farias brought an appreciation of the inherent creativity involved in the act of retelling Manding oral tradition. He sought to get behind the theatre of bardic performance to comprehend its dynamics, and begin to understand how the Sunjata tradition maintained and renewed itself from generation to generation as a homogeneous corpus with no apparent centralised or coordinated activity. Farias foregrounded the strategies griots use when interacting with audiences, and making

claims to knowledge of authoritative or secret versions of tradition. Commenting on the apparent paradox of revealing 'secret' knowledge to the participants of the SCOA seminars Wâ Kamissoko spoke at, at the same time as urging that it remain hidden, he wrote:

In the Manden, the saying and the said of oral tradition ground their authority on hinted-at unsaids, and on demands that what has at last been said should not be transmitted any further. The transmission of tradition by the 'griots' negotiates between the duty to pass it on and the duty to hold it back. One is repeatedly warned that behind every corpus of acquired information there may or must lurk another, and that the meaning of the first will be changed if and when the second is revealed (1993: 31).

He also speculated that a supposedly hidden core of traditional knowledge may serve a function in the process by which tradition must renew itself to maintain its relevance. He suggested that a supposedly secret core of tradition

may...provide 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).

Jan Jansen has also sought to understand the Sunjata epic narratives within the frame of reference of griots, their work, and the strategies they employ. Jansen began his work by embedding himself in the Jabate griot village of Kela, Mali, who had the important role of reciting the Sunjata epic at the re-roofing ceremony at Kangaba every seventh year. Jansen's anthropological method allowed him to analyse how Sunjata formed a part of the 'toolkit' of present-day griots. He has emphasised the griot's multiple roles beyond storyteller or praise-singer, highlighting his diplomatic functions as negotiator and mediator between communities and families, and interpreted bardic narratives, such as Sunjata, within this framework, as part of a repertoire of strategies for diplomacy within specific contemporary contexts. 'For griots' Jansen claims, 'history and diplomacy are the same activity,' as 'the Sunjata epic serves ... as [the griots'] template for diplomacy' (2016: 43-44).

Viewed from this perspective, secrets, but also bardic narrative clichés such as younger brothers, forgotten ancestors and Muslim wives and mothers, all take on meanings beyond that which are obvious from the narrative, and are revealed as loaded symbols which, in certain contexts can become tools to achieve political ends. So, for example, the epithet ‘younger brother’ contains a paradoxical claim to superiority in a Manding context, denoting external action and military leadership (1996). Hence a family’s or a communities’ claim to be descended from a junior branch of a leading family is thus replete with overtones of dominant status. ‘Secrets’, Jansen suggests, are a strategy for cooling down heated situations by introducing through them new perspectives on an issue. The strategy is open to elders who claim that there are deeper layers of knowledge that should not be shared with the young (2000). ‘Forgotten groups’ (or even forgotten ancestors, see Jansen 2000, Chapter III) can be brought into a contentious issue or debate in this way, as a means of re-setting the terms of the agenda. In sum, griots manipulate and re-emphasise elements of traditional narratives such as Sunjata (within certain limits of credence), in response to the needs of community and family politics.

Closer study of Manding oral tradition in the last twenty-five years has also revealed how aspects of it have become more prominent in response to political, social or cultural changes. Jansen has noted the recent growth in interest in hunters, linked to Mali’s need for a civic society (2008), the Charter of Kurukan Fugan, a local response to growth of the human rights agenda among governments and NGOs, and the Soso Bala, or balafon of Sumanguru, representing a counter-narrative in an era of scepticism towards ruling elites and their monopolisation of the Sunjata epic since independence (2011a), linking growing interest in an epic of Sumanguru to this last phenomenon (Bulman and Vydrine 2017, Introduction).

Viewing the narrative as a whole, Jansen envisages one of the Sunjata epic’s functions in the past have been embodying the ‘social code of political elites in the Western Sudan’ (2016:

25), offering templates or guides for successful rule. For contemporary Manding individuals, Jansen has stressed the role of the epic in identity formation, noting, as others have done before him, how the Sunjata epic situates all Manding peoples in relation to each other via the *jamu* or patronymic they bear, and arguing that ‘Sunjata is the image through which one can act as a *citizen* in multi-ethnic Mali as well as feel grounded as a *person* in a region and a social network’ (2011b: 120).

Karin Barber has written that

Anthropology has always had an intuition, sometimes an uneasy one, that verbal texts have the capacity to shed light, in a way nothing else can, on the inner life of societies (2007: 2).

Their ability, in her words, to be simultaneously ‘social facts’ and at the same time ‘commentaries upon, and interpretations of, social facts’, and to be ‘part of the apparatus by which human communities take stock of their own creations’ - ‘a community’s ethnography of itself’ seems to me a most apt way of understanding the Sunjata epic and its function within Manding culture and societies, today and in the past.

The Sunjata epic is the common currency of discourse within Manding culture, the stage upon which individuals of different genders, families, members of patronymics, groups (such as blacksmiths, griots, hunters or nobles) and inter-ethnic relations are envisaged, described and negotiated; Sunjata, his sister and mother, Sumanguru, Fakoli, Tira Maghan and other epic characters are figures who express and embody idealised behaviours, to emulate or avoid, for rulers but also any and all who claim a place within, and a stake in, Manding culture. They are a common set of ancestors and archetypes which express Manding ‘identities’ as husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, hunters, blacksmiths, bards and nobles and serve as reference points to anchor today’s ideals, norms and behaviours within the perceived ideals, norms and behaviours of the distant past. As is sometimes the case with Westerners’

views of their own pasts, the picture of the past that the Sunjata epic evokes is of an ever-changing constant, a supposedly fixed picture of a past that in fact can – indeed must -- flex and bend to reflect that culture's changing perspectives, values, and needs.

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