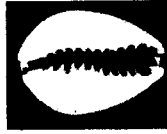


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*Oral Tradition & Perceptions of History
from the Manding Peoples
of West Africa*

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The past in the present: living with the ancestors

Who are the Kanté around here?
Are there any Kanté here?

These questions were asked by a bard (*jeli*) of the Maninka people of Northeastern Guinea. Performing away from home in a village where he was unable to recognize everybody in the audience, the *jeli* was being careful not to embarrass or offend anyone whose family name was Kanté. The epic narrative on which the *jeli* was basing his performance describes events that are alleged to have occurred in the first half of the thirteenth century, but the people of Manding¹ societies still identify closely with characters of that era whom they believe to be their ancestors. The *jeli* asked if there were any Kanté present, because in Manding epic tradition the king of Soso, Sumaworo Kanté, was defeated in a climactic battle that led to the foundation of the Mali Empire. Prior to asking these questions, the *jeli* had been describing the battle but suddenly said,

I will stop here.
I cannot describe the rest.

¹ Within the broad Mande family of languages, the branch called 'Manding' includes, among others, the Maninka (Guinea and Mali), Bamana (Mali), Dyula (Côte d'Ivoire), and Mandinka (Gambia). These terms describe both the people and their languages, which have a high degree of inter-intelligibility. The core area or 'heartland' of the Manding peoples which lies in southern Mali and northeastern Guinea, is called 'Manden'.

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He then went on to talk about how the Kanté ancestors' weapons and clothing were captured, but stressed that no harm came to the Soso king. It was at this point that he asked if there were any Kanté in the audience or living in the village, and when he was told there were none, he expressed his relief by saying 'Praise God, His blessings are upon us'.² The *jeli* had not wanted to describe the rest of the story involving Sumaworo's fate, out of concern that if he were to dwell on the defeat and death of the Soso king, it would be humiliating for any local people named Kanté. Most Manding *jeliw* who describe Sumaworo's defeat avoid stating that this king was actually killed.³ Our primary goal in this chapter will be to explore how legendary West African ancestors, whose very existence has been questioned according to strict Eurocentric standards of historiography, can remain so vital in Manding village society more than 700 years after the era that is attributed to them.

Manding *jeli* perceptions of what is important in the distant past do not always correspond to those of European historians. Moreover, the *jeliw's* methods for recalling the people and events of long ago do not adhere to European standards of scholarship. Historians from outside Manding society are very cautious in their use of oral tradition as a source of information, and this is a fundamental difference between the local African point of view and the perspectives of foreign academics. On the most fundamental level, foreign scholars question the usefulness of Manding epic as a reliable source of historical evidence simply because stories that have been passed on by word of mouth for several generations are bound to be problematic according to European ideas of historical accuracy. Manding epic as narrated by the *jeliw* includes detailed dialogue between characters that were conversing centuries before there was any way of recording their words. The *jeliw* also employ raw folklore, supernatural beings, improbable feats of magic, and mythological elements in ways that provide insight into their beliefs and values, but which clearly defy scientific credibility. Some historians labor to analyse Manding oral sources in the belief that they can yield evidence that has at least a reasonable degree of historical probability, with many years spent scrutinizing every available version of the

² Mamadi Condé in David C. Conrad (ed.) *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era: Oral Tradition from the Maninka of Guinea*. (Madison, WI: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.147.

³ Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965), pp. 67, 94; Gordon Innes, *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1974), p. 79; John W. Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) p. 176.

tradition in search of useful clues. Such endeavors require thorough knowledge of all aspects of the culture, including the social and spiritual values underlying the deeply ingrained sense of a shared history expressed through oral epic.

In many rural West African communities, traditional social values and customs have not been submerged by foreign influence, as has been the case in capital cities and other urban centers. In agricultural villages and market towns of the countryside, notions of what happened in the distant past are still expressed through oral traditions that provide part of the framework for the way people live from day to day. The deeds of ancestral heroines and heroes are described in narratives that are passed down from one generation to the next in chains of oral communication that can be measured in periods of time ranging from several generations to many centuries. In some cases, the discourse rises to the level of epic that is filled with rich and colorful imagery in both narrative and song, reflecting the values of the cultures that produced them. Epic narratives vary in length, content and complexity depending on the desires and composition of the audience, and on the knowledge, purpose, and momentary whim of the performer. They tell the stories of village communities, kingdoms and empires that were peopled by charismatic leaders both male and female, who founded family lineages and accomplished momentous deeds during periods that are recalled as defining moments of the past. Here is the way one of the great *jeliw* of Mali expressed his feelings about those glorious times:

In those days the world was not like it is now.
They bent the world like a scythe and unrolled it like a road,
They walked the four directions of the world and settled at its center.
In those days the word of every human being could be relied upon.
There was nobility then.⁴

In this chapter we explore the importance of oral tradition in West Africa's Manding culture, where musicians and narrative specialists are responsible for preserving and performing oral narratives that have evolved through many generations. We shall examine prominent themes that demonstrate which aspects of life are most valued by the people of the culture in question, how genres of oral tradition function

⁴ Tayiru Banbera of Ngoin, Mali in David C. Conrad (ed.), *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu According to Tayiru Banbera*, Union Académique Internationale, Fontes Historiae Africanae, Series Varia VI (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1990), p. 63.

as the voices of the people who created them, and how these texts provide avenues to understanding the rich fabric of the brilliantly creative cultures from which the traditions emerge. West African oral tradition rarely reveals facts about the past that can be accepted according to strict European historiographical standards, because the past existence of people and events that is described in the narratives usually cannot be confirmed by independent evidence such as written documentation involving contemporary eyewitnesses. Nevertheless, oral tradition does convey useful information, both literally and metaphorically, about African perceptions of the past and how those perceptions affect today's cultural values.

The bards of Manding culture

One of the most impressive bodies of oral tradition in all of sub-Saharan Africa has emerged from the heartland of the vast West African Mande cultural complex which includes the Bamana of Mali, the Maninka of northeastern Guinea, the Mandinka of Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau, the Dyula of northern Côte d'Ivoire, and many other groups located between southern Mauritania, western Burkina Faso, northern Liberia, and the Atlantic coast of Senegambia. The seat of the Mali Empire that flourished from the mid-thirteenth to the fifteenth century was located in present-day northeastern Guinea and southern Mali. Among the Bamana, Maninka and related peoples of the Mande heartland, oral tradition is the domain of *jeliw* that were born into specialized occupational groups collectively known as *nyamakalaw*.⁵ The *nyamakalaw* are blacksmiths and potters (*numuw*), leatherworkers (*garankéw*), *jeliw* specializing in Islamic texts (*funéw* or *finaw*),⁶ and *jeliw* who are musicians, oral traditionists and public speakers. The *jeli* occupation is most closely associated with music and the oral arts, but any *nyamakala* with verbal or musical gifts and the opportunity to profit by them could and would engage in those activities. For example, some of the greatest musicians who specialize in singing the praises of hunters have come from blacksmith (*numuw*) families.

⁵ David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (eds), *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁶ For details on the *funé* occupation see David C. Conrad, 'Blind Man Meets Prophet: Oral Tradition, Islam, and *funé* Identity', in David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (eds), *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*, pp. 86-7.

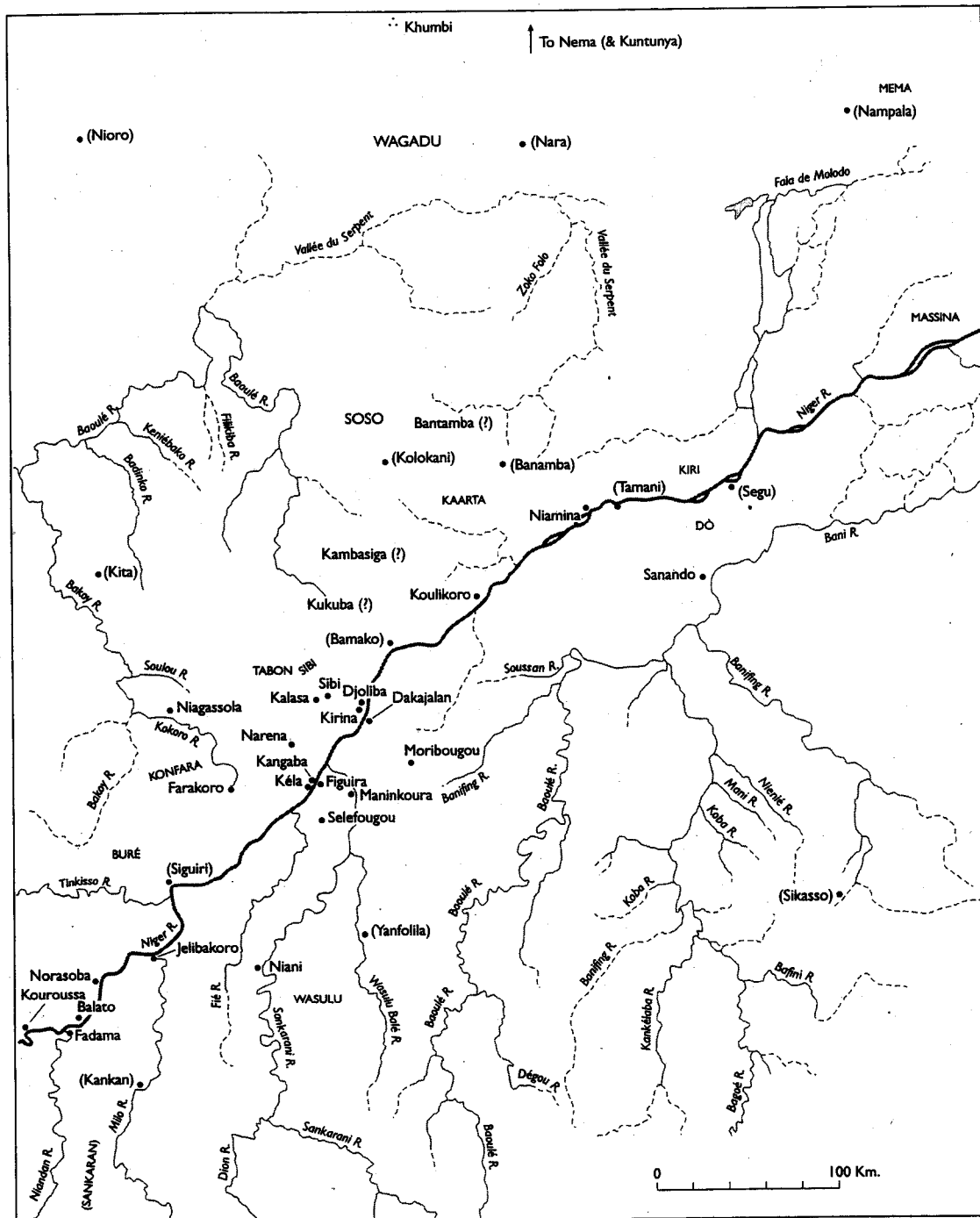


Fig 4.1 The Mande heartland and related *Jamanaw* according to oral tradition

(Source: David C. Conrad, ed., *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People*, Cambridge and Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004, pp. xl-xli. Reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved)

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The *jeliw* that we shall focus on here are the *jeliw*, who are popularly known by the generic term 'griot'.⁷ For many centuries the *jeliw* have served as genealogists, musicians, praise-singers, spokespersons and diplomats.⁸ As the principal narrators of oral tradition, they have been responsible for preserving the cultural record of what Manding peoples believe to have happened in the distant past. The spoken word is their domain, and they are famous for the manner in which they use metaphorical language to express the attitudes and values of the Manding peoples, using proverbs such as:

If you live at a time when roosters are used as horses,
You must attach the saddle to your own thighs.⁹

Individual *jeli* families were traditionally attached to patron families in mutually beneficial relationships, which in some cases endured for centuries. In return for their services as spokesmen, advisers, entertainers, family historians, and political negotiators, the *jeliw* lived with the patron family and were provided with food, clothing, shelter, and other basic living requirements. In cases where leading *jeliw* served powerful rulers in prosperous states like the Mali Empire or Bamana Segu, they were very richly rewarded. Therefore it was naturally to a *jeli*'s advantage to do everything possible to promote his patron's reputation and success. In ordinary day-to-day life this could mean performing duties like helping to settle a dispute with a neighboring farmer or negotiating an advantageous marriage for one of the family's sons or daughters. More dramatic examples include known instances where the patron conquered a neighboring people or was otherwise elevated to a position of political leadership to which he had no legitimate claim, according to local standards of authority. In these

⁷ The Mande-specific term *jeli* (var. *jali*) is preferred to the very broadly used 'griot' (pronounced 'gree-oh'), which describes bards of many cultures from the Senegambian coast to the Republic of Niger. For a discussion of the origin of this word see Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 105-14.

⁸ During a visit to the Mali Empire in the years 1352-3, the North African traveler Ibn Battuta described *jeliw* at the court of Mansa Sulayman; see Nehemia Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.293.

⁹ Demba Kouyaté of Dinli in Conrad, *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era*, p.163. This proverb reminds people that they must live according to the customs of their day, and make do with what they have. An American equivalent would be the expression, 'play with the hand you're dealt'. For a large collection of Bamana proverbs see Kassim Koné, *Mande Zana ni Ntalen Wa ni kò: Bamanankan ni Angilèkan na (More than a thousand Mande Proverbs in Bambara and English)* (West Newbury, MA: Mother Tongue Editions, 1995).

cases the *jeli* might well fabricate a genealogy or alter the narrative to legitimize his patron's claim to authority. If parts of the legend of Sunjata and his contemporaries have at least some basis in historical fact, most of it will have inevitably experienced great distortion through centuries of oral transmission so that what survives may have little resemblance to the original. The intentional embellishment of patrons' reputations and the exaggeration of their accomplishments by the *jeliw* have undoubtedly contributed to the distortions.

Clearly, the Manding peoples' ideas of what is important in the past are quite different from the kinds of history that are studied and appreciated by people of European descent. In Manding society where matters involving kinship are of supreme importance, people are identified by their *jamu*, which is the family name or patronymic associated with one or more famous ancestors who are remembered for important deeds that are alleged to have occurred in the first half of the thirteenth century. There are no written records from that time, though in the following century the respected Arab historian Ibn Khaldun collected informative oral historical traditions from Malian scholars.¹⁰ A general awareness of the heroes and heroines of ancient times enters the people's consciousness in childhood and remains there throughout their lives. This occurs because the ancestors are constantly evoked in praise songs and narrative episodes that professional *jeliw* sing or recite on virtually any occasion that calls for entertainment.

In the customary elaborate greetings that are tendered during social encounters, friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike salute each other with reference to their respective *jamuw*, that is to say, family names extending back to distinguished ancestors of the heroic past. In the case of strangers meeting, they quickly learn each other's *jamuw* or patronymics, thus establishing their relative places in the cultural landscape. Travelers meeting far from home soon establish relationships through their *jamuw* because of links that were formed between their ancestors during encounters that are described in the epic narrative. Strangers arriving in distant towns or villages form immediate connections with 'related' families and find comfort and security with their hosts. When elders meet in village council, the ancestral spirits are felt to be present because, according to tradition, it was they who established the relative statuses of everyone present, as well as the administrative protocols to be followed and the values underpinning every decision. It is no exaggeration to say that, regardless of gender, the ancestors described in *kuma koro*, or 'ancient speech', define the

¹⁰ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, pp. 317, 333.

identity of virtually everyone of Manding origin.

The most gifted and popular *jeliw* are often invited to private homes to entertain the host's invited guests. On these special family occasions, a *jeli* might appear alone, personally performing the instrumental accompaniment to his narrative. Most public ceremonies such as marriages, circumcision feasts, funerals, and seasonal celebrations will include *jeli* performances involving music, praising, and fragments of narrative performances. On these larger occasions, the principal artist will often arrive with a supporting cast of other musicians and one or more female vocalists, depending on the size of the event. One of the accompanists will probably function as a *naamu*-sayer,¹¹ encouraging the performer with approving sounds or comments like 'yes!', 'we hear you!' and 'it's the truth!'. In any gathering, whether private or public, the host will usually be the first to hear himself praised through references to his ancestors in song or narrative.¹² However, the *jeliw* take pains to know the names of everybody attending the event, so they can maximize their profits by structuring the performance according to the identities of the people in the audience. As the performance progresses and various members of the audience hear their *jamu* mentioned, they come forward to reward the *jeli* with gifts of cash.

The substance of Manding discourse

The Bamana Empire of Segu, which flourished from the late seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, is the subject of one Manding epic tradition.¹³ The nineteenth-century empire builders Al-Hajj 'Umar Tal and Almami Samori Touré have epic narratives devoted to their memory.¹⁴ However, the epic narrative that provides the fundamental framework for Mande cultural values and social organization is the one that is popularly known by the name of one of

¹¹ More specifically, *naamu namina*, or *naamutigiw* (*naamu* 'owner'). The term probably originates from the Arabic *na'am*.

¹² For an example see Conrad, *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era*, p. 57.

¹³ See Conrad, *A State of Intrigue*.

¹⁴ For Al-Hajj 'Umar Tal, see Samba Diop (ed.), *The Epic of El Hadj Umar Taal of Fuuta* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin African Studies Program, 2000); and the definitive historical study by David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Epic traditions of Almami Samori Touré are collected in David C. Conrad, *Almami Samori: Nineteenth-Century West African Conquest in Maninka Epic Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin African Studies Program, forthcoming).

its principal heroes, Sunjata. The longer versions of that tradition can run to many thousands of lines, and virtually all of the most prominent old family names or *jamuw* of Manden are represented by a charismatic ancestor who appears somewhere in the story.

The Sunjata epic comprises a series of episodes, some of which form the core of the narrative and are the most frequently performed. These are more or less familiar to most people of traditional Manding societies, and the basic storyline and characters have become known to the outside world through both popular and scholarly publications. Other, less familiar episodes of the epic are known to relatively few of even the most knowledgeable *jeliw*, and these are rarely performed publicly. In any case, depending on the type of occasion, the time available and the make-up of the audience, most performances mention only a few of the episodes. At one end of the spectrum, in the course of a brief street performance for example, a female *jeli* (*jelimuso*) might simply evoke the name of Sunjata, Fakoli, or another of the epic heroes in one of her songs. At the other extreme, *jeliw* have been known to narrate one episode after another for five hours or more without stopping, and to continue at that rate for several days.¹⁵

As the occupational specialists who preserved these traditions, the *jeliw* have had enormous influence in establishing the identities or *jamuw* of each of the descent groups. In village society, people and events described in the epic are accepted as fundamental elements of the historical record, as they explain kinship patterns and the social relationships of today. For example, popular etymologies abound, wherein statements made on particular occasions are said to have become people's names. One of the best-known examples of this occurs in the Sunjata epic's buffalo episode that will be described below: just after the younger brother, Danmansa Wulanni, kills the great beast, his excited older brother begins to praise him, thereby recognizing the courageous younger sibling's superiority. This is believed to have resulted in two descent groups of different status: descendants of the brother who killed the buffalo are said to be of the 'noble' Traoré *jamu*, while the offspring of the hunter who sang his brother's praises became *jeliw* who go by the name of Diabaté.

It was partly through stories like these that *jeliw* exercised the power of 'the word', and part of that power accounts for the ancient speech

¹⁵ In the author's experience such *jeliw* include the late Tayiru Banbera, see Conrad, *A State of Intrigue*, and the late Djanka Tasseý Condé, in David C. Conrad (ed.), *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People* (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2004).

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known as *kuma koro*. The basis of this power lies in the Manding peoples' perceptions that *jeliw* know the secrets of the past. Esoteric knowledge gives them the ability to create or destroy the reputations of key people through public performance of praise songs and narrated texts. The best thing that could happen to a political leader, and by extension to his descendants, was to have a praise song composed specifically for him. Following the death of a popular *mansa* (king) of memorable accomplishments, poetic praises would lament his passing and contribute to the glory of his memory, as in the following lines that metaphorically describe a troubled and confused world left behind by Monzon Diarra of Segu (c. 1787–1808):

The goat is sick,
The goat owner is ailing.
The knife is dull,
The goat's throat is tough.
The day is drawing to a close,
The ground is hot.
We have no basket to sit on,
While we tell our troubles to the angels of God.¹⁶

Praise songs and glory

An incident that occurs in a variant of the epic of Almami Samori Touré illustrates how seriously praise songs were regarded, both by the *jeliw* who composed them and by those who were honored by them. Almami Samori Touré was a Maninka conqueror who, between 1861 and the 1890s, established an empire in what are today Guinea, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire. Although Samori is a historic figure whose deeds are well documented through eyewitness descriptions and even a few photographs, he is also a legendary figure in his own society, and versions of his story are told in traditional narrative form by Maninka *jeliw* of Guinea. One of the episodes in this narrative is about a praise song, which Samori sends to his brother Kèmè Brèma, who is one of his best commanders, on a military campaign. Along with the troops, Kèmè Brèma is accompanied by many *jeliw*, including some who are from Samori's household. According to the Mande system of power and authority, the entire contingent is meant to represent Almami Samori, performing all deeds in his name. However, during the course

¹⁶ Tayiru Banbera in Conrad, *A State of Intrigue*, p. 171.

of the campaign, the accompanying *jeliw* collaborate in composing a song to praise Kèmè Brèma. This behavior was condemned by Mamadi Condé, the *jeli* who told the story in the late 1980s. He stresses that all the troops including Kèmè Brèma owe total allegiance to Samori because it is 'his war', and all praise songs should be for him: 'The song was bad', says Mamadi Condé, 'because Kèmè Brèma was carrying firewood for his brother, not for himself'. Indeed, to celebrate the success as if it were Kèmè Brèma's campaign instead of Samori's is regarded as an act of treachery. When Kèmè Brèma returns to his brother's headquarters, Samori expresses outrage that his brother has accepted the *jeliw*'s praise as his own:

The *jeliw* sang that this was your war.
You never said, 'It is my brother's war'.
Do you have a war?

Samori then strips Kèmè Brèma of his horse and weapons and sends him home to work on the family farm, and it takes an emotional intervention by their father to eventually reconcile the two great men. Even so, once the quarrel is ended, Samori makes a final demand on the *jeliw*:

Sing a song for me that will never be sung to anybody else.
I do not want to hear anybody else's name in that song.
Sing a song for me like the one you made for Kèmè Brèma.
You will not go home until you sing my song.¹⁷

The *jeliw* then realize that all the great praise songs they know are for other heroes, and they are finally forced to compose a new song, 'Almami Bolo', for Samori. Nevertheless, to this day in Mali, Guinea, Gambia, and other parts of the Mande world, the song 'Kèmè Brèma' is one of the most famous in the *jeli* repertoire. Relatively few great praise songs were ever composed, and in those cases it guaranteed the fame of those they honored, and brought ongoing distinction to people claiming to be their descendants.

The spiritual dimension

In Manding societies there are still people who follow the old, pre-Islamic spiritual practices of the ancestors, involving sacrifice and other

¹⁷ Mamadi Condé in Conrad, *Almami Samori*.

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forms of ritualized communication with a variety of spirits believed to inhabit secluded groves, rock formations, or bodies of water found everywhere in the countryside. However, the majority of the Manding peoples are either Muslims or they practice a mixture of the Islamic faith and the indigenous system of belief. Thus, the oral performances sometimes begin with a blessing in the local manner of speaking Arabic, such as:

May God bless our master Muhammad,
Grant peace to him and his family,
Peace to our master Muhammad.¹⁸

Some peoples of the broader Mande cultural family have been exposed to Islam since at least the tenth century when Muslim traders crossed the Sahara desert to conduct trade with the Soninke of the Ghana Empire, which was locally known as Wagadu.¹⁹ At some point the Soninke and other Mande branches, including the Manding, began to conceive of Islam as a source of significant spiritual power that could be added to the indigenous power sources that they already possessed. During the centuries when Islam was being integrated into Manding societies and becoming an African religion, Manding *jeliw* assimilated elements of Islamic tradition. Pilgrims returning from Mecca told stories that appealed to Manding audiences, and some of these were borrowed by the *jeliw* and woven into the fabric of previously existing narratives. Among the Islamic ideals that were absorbed by Manding peoples was the notion that direct ancestral links to the prophet Muhammed and his followers were especially desirable sources of prestige, and therefore Islamic forebears began to appear in family descent lists.

Creating identities and establishing values

Performances of the Sunjata epic often include genealogies of some of the most prominent characters. As noted earlier, one of the main occupational responsibilities of the *jeli* was to establish or maintain his patron's status by recalling the latter's ancestors in song and story and praising the most distinguished among them. If, on occasion, genealogies were completely fabricated for political leaders needing to

¹⁸ Tayiru Banbera in Conrad, *A State of Intrigue*, p. 43.

¹⁹ The Soninke are a northern branch of the Mande peoples. Their ancient empire was Wagadu, but it was known to the Arabs as Ghana, a name that might be derived from the Soninke ruler's title.

have their claims to authority legitimized, there were also instances where previously established lines of descent were adjusted to accommodate changes in the culture's socio-political needs, or its religious values. In the Soninke legend of Wagadu, the great snake Bida that protects the kingdom against all evil and guarantees its prosperity is included in some versions of the royal genealogy.²⁰ In the traditional genealogy of the Keita lineage of ancient Mali's founding hero Sunjata, most of the names that *jeliw* recite clearly stem from non-Islamic times. However, when it became desirable to claim distinguished Muslim ancestors, some of them were borrowed from Islamic tradition and added to Sunjata's descent list. This is why a character that the *jeliw* call Bilali Bounama often appears in the lists of Sunjata's ancestors.

Bilali originates in Islamic tradition as Bilal ibn Rabah,²¹ a black slave from Abyssinia and early convert to Islam who became the first muezzin (Ar. *mua'dhadhin*) or caller to prayer. Bilal is described as 'a faithful Muslim, pure of heart' whose master tortured him by forcing him to lie on his back under the sun during the hottest part of the day with a heavy stone on his chest, in a vain effort to make him renounce Islam. Ransomed and freed by Abu Bakr, a fellow-convert who was impressed by the strength of the slave's conviction, Bilal is said to have joined the company of Muhammad. According to tradition, when one of the other companions sees in a dream how the faithful should be called to prayer, Bilal is chosen as the first muezzin because of his penetrating voice. Bilal becomes Bilali in Manding tradition, where in one variant the *jeli* claims Bilali was born the day after Muhammad's birth, and that at the famous battle of Kaybara²² he held the bridle of the prophet's camel and blew the trumpet to assemble the army. Other *jeliw* tell how one of Bilali's offspring wanders for many years until he settles in the ancient land of Manden and engenders the Keita lineage, eventually producing the epic hero Sunjata, who is credited with founding the Mali Empire in the early thirteenth century.

²⁰ David C. Conrad and Humphrey J. Fisher, 'The Conquest that Never Was: Ghana and the Almoravids, 1076, II. The Local Oral Sources', *History in Africa* 10 (1983), p. 63.

²¹ Rabah was Bilal's father, but he was sometimes called Ibn Hamana after his mother, which is the case in Bamana tradition where he is known as Bilali Bounama, a shortened form of Bilali Boum Hamama, in David C. Conrad, 'Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata', *Journal of African History* 26 (1985), p. 37. Local custom tends to identify the son with the mother rather than the father as in the case of Sunjata, whose name derives from Sogolon's Jara (*jara* = 'lion': So'olon Jara, Son-Jara).

²² Kaybara is the Maninka pronunciation of 'Khaybar' which was the site of a battle remembered as one of the most important fought by Muhammad's supporters.

Some famous episodes

The most familiar or core episodes of the Sunjata epic include one about Kamissa, a shape-shifting sorceress of the land of Dò, also known as Buffalo Woman.²³ Her story illustrates the influence of hunters' lore and tradition in Manding discourse, as well as the importance of divination and the notion that physical deformity is a sign of great spiritual power. Kamissa is denied her share of the family legacy by her elder step-brother, the *mansa* of Dò. She seeks revenge by transforming herself into a buffalo that lays waste to the countryside and kills every hunter who tries to stop her. Two brothers, Danmansa Wulanba and Danmansa Wulanni, arrive from a distant land and befriend Kamissa in her human form. She reveals the secret of how to kill her buffalo wraith in exchange for a promise that they will deliver her younger sister Sogolon to Maghan Konfara (*mansa* or 'king' of Konfara), the man she is destined to marry. A diviner has prophesied that the Konfara *mansa's* son, who is to be the future leader of an empire will be born to a wife he has not yet married. The younger of the two hunters kills the buffalo, and their reward is the choice of any unmarried girl of Dò. Keeping their promise to Kamissa, they choose the ugly, deformed Sogolon and after some misadventures finally deliver her to Maghan Konfara, who will be the father of the hero.

The next major episode familiar to most Manding illustrates the popular notion that a hero receives his power from his mother, and that both mother and son must endure various humiliating and painful ordeals on the road to eventual glory. In this story we learn of Sogolon's problems in giving birth to Sunjata, future founder of the Mali Empire. Sogolon and her co-wife Sansuma Bèrètè, mother of Sunjata's step-brother and rival Dankaran Tuman, are both characterized as powerful sorceresses, as are many female characters in the Sunjata epic.²⁴ Sansuma and the other co-wives conspire against Sogolon, using their sorcery to delay her son's birth by many months, and then causing him to be born lame. After years of suffering as a cripple, Sunjata eventually gains his feet and becomes an accomplished hunter along with his

²³ See Stephen Bulman, 'The Buffalo Woman Tale: Political Imperatives and Narrative Constraints in the Sunjata Epic' in Karin Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (eds), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Centre of West African Studies, 1989).

²⁴ David C. Conrad, 'Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in Mande Epic Tradition' in Ralph A. Austen (ed.), *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Epic as History, Literature and Performance*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 195.

brother Manden Bori. However, the elder, rival step-brother Dankaran Tuman inherits their father's position of power, and it becomes clear that Sunjata's life is in danger. The hero's mother Sogolon leaves Manden for exile in the distant land of Nema (or Mema), accompanied by her sons and her daughter Kolonkan who is another of the epic's important female characters.

Another well-known episode involves the kingdom of Soso, ruled by the great sorcerer king Sumaworo²⁵ Kanté. This story reinforces the connection between music and the spirit world, and demonstrates the importance of master *jeliw* in the lives of powerful rulers. While Sogolon and Sunjata are in exile, Sumaworo conquers Manden and subjugates its people. Sunjata's *jeli*, Bala Fasaké Kouyaté, who had remained in Manden, goes on a diplomatic mission to Soso and is detained there by Sumaworo. One day, in the king's absence, Bala Fasaké enters the sacred grotto and sees for the first time a great *balafon* (traditional xylophone) called the Soso Bala, which Sumaworo had acquired from the king of the genies. It is taboo for anyone but the Soso *mansa* to touch the instrument, but Bala Fasaké finds it irresistible and sits down to play it. Sumaworo hears the music from a distance and returns intending to kill the trespasser, but is enchanted by Bala Fasaké's playing. Sumaworo takes such pleasure in hearing his own praises sung that he spares the *jeli*'s life and claims him as his own *jeli*.

One of the most famous and influential of the epic characters is Fakoli, who is claimed as the ancestor of several Mande blacksmith lineages, including both the Koroma and the Dumbia.²⁶ This man's story provides another example of the identification of physical flaws with spiritual power and also reflects the close relationship between blacksmithing and sorcery. Fakoli is recalled as one of the greatest of sorcerers and as one of the most important generals in Manden's war with Soso. He is usually described as being of dwarf-like stature and is praised as 'Big-headed Fakoli, big-mouthed Fakoli'. One of the most complex characters of the Sunjata epic, Fakoli is prominent in several episodes, two of which are better known than the rest. In one of these, Fakoli is ridiculed by other elders, because he stoops to enter the doorway of the council hall even though the top of the door-frame is far above his head. Reacting to the elders' ridicule, Fakoli proves to them that his small size is no indication of his power. Using his sorcery he causes the elders to flee

²⁵ This, or a variant of it, is how the name is pronounced by the Maninka of northeastern Guinea. The Bamana *jeliw* of Mali pronounce it as Sumanguru, or a variant thereof.

²⁶ David C. Conrad, 'Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic: The Case of Fakoli', *History in Africa* 19 (1992), pp. 174-5.

from the building as he inflates his size until he fills the entire council hall, towering above it and wearing the thatched roof as a hat.²⁷

Both divination and filial devotion to a mother motivate the action in an episode where the people of Manden learn from a seer that the only man who can deliver their land from Soso oppression is Sunjata. The mission to find the hero and bring him back to liberate his homeland is so important that many *jeliw* still recite the names of the delegates who were sent. After a long search the delegates arrive at Kuntunya, the capital of Nema, and Sogolon hears that her eldest son is invited to return to Manden and take command. Sogolon realizes that she is too old to make the journey home, and she explains to her children that they must return without her. Sunjata refuses to leave before his mother dies, and she passes away before her frailty can delay their departure. Sunjata requests a burial plot from their host Faran Tunkara, the *mansa* of Nema, but the king rudely refuses. The hero sends Tunkara a message consisting of some broken pieces of pottery and calabash containing dust and a few bird feathers. A wise man correctly interprets this as a metaphor symbolizing the future ruins to which Kuntunya will be reduced if Sunjata is not given a burial plot for his mother, so Faran Tunkara grants the request.

In Manding epic narrative where warfare is concerned, one rarely encounters detailed descriptions of actual fighting. The *jeliw* and their audiences are more interested in the human relationships, political dynamics, and interaction with the spirit world that lead to conflict. Some *jeliw* do describe a series of battles between Manden and Soso that were fought in various locations,²⁸ but most variants emphasize a deciding battle at a place identified as either Kirina or Dakajalan, in which Manden defeats Soso and Sumaworo is finally vanquished by Sunjata's troops. As with all episodes of the Sunjata epic, details vary considerably depending on the performer, but the Dakajalan/Kirina battle episode often concludes with Sunjata pursuing Sumaworo as the sorcerer king disappears into the mountain at a place called Kulikoro, which is downriver from Bamako, the capital of present-day Mali. Some *jeliw* have been known to describe the death of Sumaworo, but the Kouyaté and Diabaté *jeliw* are normally quite careful not to say that Sumaworo was slain by Sunjata, Fakoli, or anybody else. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, these things are taken seriously in modern times because Manding peoples identify with the ancestors whose names they carry. To give details of a humiliating defeat, even

²⁷ For details of this episode see Conrad, 'Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic', pp. 162-6.

²⁸ For example, Jeli Mori Kouyaté in Conrad, *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era*, p. 631.

one alleged to have occurred more than seven centuries ago, could evoke bad feelings between the descendants of the victors and the vanquished.

Great heroines stand tall with the heroes

An important distinguishing feature of Manding epic tradition is that, along with recounting the deeds of great men from the past, it also describes the deeds of many important women. The same cannot be said of the conventional written documentation of the Mali Empire that is contained in Arabic sources. There, descriptions of prominent women who are actually identified by name are extremely rare. One instance where a woman is highlighted in the written sources is provided by the North African traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited the royal court of Mali in 1352-3. He describes an attempted coup d'état by Kasa, a wife of Mansa Sulayman. Kasa apparently believed that the army of Mali was prepared to abandon her unpopular emperor husband if she called on their backing for a government takeover. Unfortunately, we have only enough details to know that she must have been an extremely interesting person whose full story deserved to be told but was not.²⁹

In contrast to such scarcity, Mande epic tradition from the era of Sunjata to stories of nineteenth-century heroes is greatly enhanced by descriptions of many powerful, independent women.³⁰ The epic that is generally identified with Sunjata, which has many prominent male heroes, is also particularly rich in colorful portrayals of mothers, sisters, and wives, who played pivotal roles in crucial events. The Condé identity or *jamu* is particularly well represented by three women who comprise a fountainhead of Mande social identity. The force of their combined impact on legendary events leading up to the foundation of the Mali Empire is enormous, and it all begins with Dò Kamissa the buffalo woman. She is responsible for the fate of her younger sister Sogolon Wulen Condé, who is destined to be Sunjata's mother. Sogolon is the best known of the three, but the third, Ma Tènènba, plays a very significant role in her own right. Her complete name is Sumansa Sona Tènènba, the first part of which, *sumansa*, praises her as a formidable sorceress.³¹ The identification of Ma Tènènba with occult powers is appropriate, because she is both a sister of Dò Kamissa, the buffalo

²⁹ Levstzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, pp. 295-6.

³⁰ Conrad, 'Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes'.

³¹ *Sumansa* is from *subaga* (*suba*) *mansa*, meaning 'sorcerer king'.

woman, and foster-mother of the great sorcerer and war leader Fakoli.

The episode describing Fakoli's early life offers a useful example of how extensive the network of powerful ancestral relationships can be, as manifested in the Mande epic. It also illustrates degrees of closeness within the nuclear family between co-wives, on the one hand, and brothers and sisters, on the other. These stand in contrast to stories of deadly step-brother rivalry which characterizes, for example, the relationship of Dankaran Tuman and Sunjata. Also demonstrated here is the characteristic Manding reverence for music and musical instruments, and perceptions of how the business of everyday life interacts with the spirit world.

Fakoli's father was Mansa Yèrèlenko of Nègèbòriya. The oral evidence indicates that Nègèbòriya was an important iron-producing region of Manden, which helps to account for the tradition of Fakoli being the ancestor of more than one blacksmith lineage.³² Mansa Yèrèlenko's senior wife is Ma Tènènba Condé, sister of Sunjata's mother Sogolon and of Dò Kamissa, the buffalo woman. Ma Tènènba is childless, so she encourages her husband to get a second wife. He eventually marries Kosiya Kanté, sister of Sumaworo the *subamansa* (sorcerer king) of Soso. This marriage, which produces Fakoli, forms an alliance between the greatest blacksmith family of Manden and the Kanté blacksmith lineage that rules Soso. In the story of how Sumaworo acquires the Soso *bala* (xylophone) from Jinna Maghan, the king of the genies, Kosiya discovers that the genie *mansa* demanded that Sumaworo sacrifice a close family member in exchange for the Soso *bala*. Determined to have her brother acquire the Soso *bala*, Kosiya entrusts the infant Fakoli to her co-wife Tènènba Condé, and sacrifices herself to the genies. Fakoli remains with Tènènba Condé, who takes him on an initiation pilgrimage to all the great power sources of Manden to acquire his *dalilu* (occult power) and to prepare him for his role as spiritual 'ancestor' of all later sorcerers. On this pilgrimage the infant Fakoli receives protective medicine, magic, and instruction from the most powerful pre-imperial *mansaw* (kings) of Manden, including Kamanjan Kamara of Sibi, Tanan Mansa Konkon of Kirina, Faran Tunkara of Nema, and Nyèmogo Diarra of Dò and Kiri.³³ Thus, as virtual godson of all these powerful *mansaw*, as nephew of Sumaworo of Soso, and as one of Sunjata's most important military commanders, Fakoli stands at the core of the Mande power structure.

Great as Fakoli is, Sunjata is the hero consistently acknowledged as the leader who liberates Manden from Soso oppression and becomes

³² Conrad, 'Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic', pp. 174-80.

³³ Conrad, 'Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes', p. 205.

mansa of the unified chiefdoms that subsequently expand into the Mali Empire. For that reason, in today's Manding societies the Keita *jamu* carries special distinction, even for those not directly connected to village chiefs who base their claims to authority on direct descent from Sunjata's lineage. However, at modern-day *jeli* performances, members of many other families bask in the reflected glory of early kings, because the *jeliw* like to say that there were no less than seven *mansaw* who ruled individual chiefdoms in Manden during the period leading up to imperial unification. The *jeliw* do not always list the same *mansaw*, so more than seven are actually named, and this has the effect of extending the reflected glory to the alleged descendants of additional ruling ancestors.

Relationships real and imagined

For the Maninka, Bamana, and other peoples of traditional Manding culture, the epic's greatest importance clearly lies in the descriptions of how the ancestors behaved in relation to one another during the period that saw the Mali Empire in its infancy. Underlying the surface distinction of prominent names from Mande epic tradition is an ongoing awareness of significant relationships between different *jamuw* that charismatic ancestors of ancient times founded. Interactions between characters in the Sunjata epic still influence the social relations between people of today, establishing the boundaries of their behavior towards one another. Joking relationships or *senankuya* are based on popular notions of what happened between ancestors, with perhaps only vague awareness of what actually led to the customary jokes. For example, when people named Traoré and Condé are introduced to each other, one of them will almost invariably announce that the other is his 'slave'. This will be followed by humorous banter about whose ancestor enslaved the other, but the chances are that neither of the two can explain how this custom began.

Sibling rivalries, marriages and political alliances, individual adventures, spiritual power, humiliating experiences and heroic deeds of ancestors both male and female, are what establish the identities of all later generations of the core families of Mande society right up to the present time. Clearly, everybody named Keita cannot actually be descended from Sunjata or his brother Manden Bori; not all Traoré are legitimate descendants of Tiramakan; and the same applies to the relationship of Kamara people to Kamanjan Kamara, the Koroma and Dumbia to Fakoli, the Condé to Sogolon Wulen, the Tunkara to Faran

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of Nema, and so forth. There are certain branches of the Keita lineage that are regarded as having the most legitimate claim to descent from the Mali Empire's founder or members of his family. They remain in positions of authority as chiefs of historically significant towns like Kita and Nana-Kènièba in Mali, and Niagassola, Niani, and the Hamana region in Guinea.³⁴ Nevertheless, anybody of the Keita *jamu* enjoys at least a faint aura of distinction owing to their nominal association with Sunjata.

The same is true of anybody named Traoré and their nominal association with Tiramakan, the general who insisted on leading the campaign against Jolofin Mansa. Anybody named Koroma or Dumbia, among others, will be praised in *jeliw* performances by being called 'Fakoli', the legendary hero recalled as ancestor of sorcerers and several blacksmith lineages. When anybody with these and other names associated with ancestors of the Sunjata epic hear the praise music specially dedicated to their ancestral heroes, they clearly appreciate the public distinction as they step forward to hand money to the performer. When performing a narrative that includes recitation of a descent list, a *jeli* will acknowledge the 'honored lineage' believed to be the branch that genuinely produced the charismatic ancestor in question. However, on these occasions social convention allows all people of that name to share in the glory.

The musical dimension

If the deeds of Sunjata and his contemporaries as described in epic tradition are deeply woven into the Maninka social fabric, how is this apparent in day-to-day life? One area in which the modern consciousness of the ancestors is most evident, is in the extremely rich music of Manden. Many of the oldest and most famous songs that are played on the *bala* are associated with specific ancestors of Manding oral tradition. One of the oldest, 'Janjon', is often associated with Fakoli, 'Tiramakan' praises the hero of that name, 'Boloba' is dedicated to Sumaworo Kanté, and several songs including 'Sunjata fasa' and 'I bara kala ta', praise Sunjata. Some famous musical pieces are dedicated to more than one subject, as in the case of 'Dugha', which honors both

³⁴ According to one tradition, the Keita were late-comers to power in Kita. It is said that after the defeat of Soso, Sunjata's army marched on Kita though it should not have done so, because it was ruled by Kamara and Tunkara from leading families of Wagadu who had sent troops to aid in the war against Soso. The Kouyaté *jeliw* who serve the Keita of Nana-Kènièba now live in Niagassola (Cheick M. Chérif Keita, pers. comm. 5/6/01).

the Kamara and Condé ancestors. Some heroes of nineteenth-century Manding history are among ancestors who are honored with songs. We saw earlier that 'Kèmè Brèma' is sung for the brother of the famous conqueror Almami Samori Touré, and Samori's own song is 'Almami Bolo'. 'Taara' is dedicated to the great Tukulor conqueror Al-Hajj 'Umar Tal, and 'Tutu Jara' is dedicated to a king of the Bamana Empire of Segou.³⁵ Many of these pieces are played in both traditional and modern musical repertoires, so Manding audiences are constantly reminded of the ancestors associated with them.

Certain indigenous musical instruments form direct links with the past, not just by the music played on them, but also through stories of their association with charismatic ancestors. This is especially true of the famous xylophone known as the Soso *bala*, which is said to have been originally acquired from the king of the genies by Sumaworo Kanté. According to the legend, when Sumaworo was finally vanquished, the Soso *bala* became the possession of Sunjata's *jeli*, Bala Fasaké Kouyaté. Bala Fasaké's direct descendants are said to be the Kouyaté *jeliw* of the town of Niagassola in northern Guinea. This branch of the Kouyaté is still the official *jeliw* of a branch of the Keita family that claims direct descent from Sunjata. The eldest male member of that branch of the Kouyaté patrilineage is still the official guardian of the Soso *bala*, which is now regarded as a sacred relic, symbol of the great days of the Mali Empire. An unusually large old *bala* that is claimed to be the original one, stands today preserved under a white shroud, enshrined in its own special building in Niagassola.³⁶

Ancestral influence today

One of the best examples of how the Sunjata tradition plays out in today's world derives from the more detailed variants of the episode in which the exiled Sunjata is asked to return to lead his people in the struggle against Soso. After Sunjata's sister Kolonkan encounters the delegation from Manden in the market and brings them to her mother Sogolon, she finds that there is no meat in the house for the stranger's

³⁵ See Charry, *Mande Music*, pp. 152-5.

³⁶ It seems unlikely that the instrument currently in the shrine at Niagassola has actually survived from the thirteenth century, because wooden objects in West Africa are extremely vulnerable to termite damage and are eventually destroyed. Whatever the true provenance of the present-day Soso *bala*, it is proudly regarded with sincere veneration and is a genuine symbol of the glorious days of ancient Mali. In fact, in 2001 it received official UNESCO designation as a relic of the world cultural heritage.

welcoming meal, which it is her responsibility to prepare. Sunjata and his brothers Jamori and Manden Bori are away in the bush hunting, so Kolonkan goes into the bush and finds a slain antelope that the brothers have left to collect later. Using her powers as a sorceress she removes the heart and liver without leaving a mark on the carcass, and as she cooks the visitors' meal, her brothers return from the hunt. In the Manding value system, sisters are expected to have great influence over the fate of their brothers, and to be respected by them. However, the hotheaded brother Manden Bori violates this custom by angrily accusing Kolonkan of showing off for the visitors. Apparently upset that in practicing her sorcery she has diminished the impact of his hunting accomplishments, he denounces her for removing parts of their kill before they can bring it home. Manden Bori humiliates Kolonkan by chasing her and handling her roughly, causing her wrapper to come off in front of the guests. Kolonkan then pronounces a curse on Manden Bori, a deed that has far-reaching consequences. Kolonkan reacts to Manden Bori's behavior by condemning him and his branch of the Keita royal lineage with a curse that is said to explain the troubles of later generations, and whose effects remain evident in today's Manden:

Because you have done this to me, (Naamu)
The *mansaya* will be passed on to you, (Naamu)
But your descendants will never agree on one *mansa* until the trumpet
is blown.³⁷

In local society this kind of curse from a woman is still taken very seriously. As one researcher explains it, 'a woman can damn a man forever by removing her *pagne* [wrap-around skirt] pointing to her sex, and cursing the offender with its power'.³⁸ A man who is cursed in this way is said to be ostracized forever by both men and women unless he begs forgiveness and persuades the offended woman to revoke her oath.³⁹ There is no tradition that Kolonkan's brother ever begged for forgiveness, and men of today's Manden continue to discuss the effects of her curse on the Mansaré lineage that is descended from Manden Bori. The *jeli* is emphatic on this point, and his audience replies enthusiastically:

³⁷ Conrad, 'Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes', pp. 211-12. The excerpt is from Djanka Tasse Condé in Conrad, *Sunjata*.

³⁸ Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 122. This has been confirmed by Kassim Koné in Conrad, *Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era*, p. 213 (n. 22).

³⁹ Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture*, p. 123.

Even up to tomorrow
The curse will be there.

(The curse will be there!)
(It's true!)⁴⁰

Rural (and many urban) Maninka of Upper Guinea retain the traditional world view, and the curse leveled by Kolonkan on Manden Bori serves as a convincing explanation for the lack of continuity in Mande royal succession from the fourteenth century to the post-colonial era. In conversation resulting from this performance, the learned elders of Fadama mentioned that results of Kolonkan's curse are manifest in the cases of weakness among *mansaw* of the Mali Empire. The consequences they remember correspond in kind to various thirteenth- and fourteenth-century disruptions mentioned in the Arabic sources, including various usurpations, the insanity of one Malian emperor, and the tyranny of another.⁴¹ For modern times, the elders cite the 1968 overthrow of the Republic of Mali's first President Modibo Keita, as well as recent power struggles among candidates and regimes of other countries containing large Mande populations.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the West African Manding peoples' collective view of what is worth remembering from the distant past is considerably different from European notions of historically significant events. According to European academic standards, the very existence of ancestors who, according to Manding perceptions, performed empire-building deeds is scarcely credible. Nevertheless, owing to the richly textured imagery and poetically narrated stories of ancient heroes and heroines passed along by generations of specialists in the oral arts, the ancestors maintain an ongoing presence in the everyday consciousness and affairs of local villagers and townspeople. Indeed, all people who are known by the ancient family names derive their fundamental identities from characters described in the epic traditions. The legendary deeds performed by larger than life forebears interacting with formidable denizens of the spirit world provide an idealized paradigm for social relationships and behavior in today's Manding societies.

⁴⁰ Conrad, 'Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes', p. 214.

⁴¹ Ibn Khaldun in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, pp. 333-5.

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