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2000

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COMING OF AGE THROUGH COLONIAL EDUCATION: AFRICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS RELUCTANT *BILDUNGSROMAN.*
THE CASE OF CAMARA LAYE

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AH Number 32 (2000)

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Coming of Age through Colonial Education: African Autobiography as Reluctant *Bildungsroman*

The Case of Camara Laye

By Ralph A. Austen

Autobiography—and more particularly the "coming-of-age" narrative—provides a unusually direct insight into the struggles for self-definition of colonial and postcolonial African elites. In content, such works confront very explicitly the movements between the cultural spaces of an African home and a European school. In the act of writing retrospectively about such experiences, Africans also enact a discursive negotiation of the same identity issues: articulating their sense of what it means to be something other than European within a literary genre that has been closely linked to the uniquely Western traditions of Christian self-examination and secular Renaissance/Enlightenment individualism (Gusdorf 1980).

The issues of colonial autobiography extend well beyond Africa and even those other regions of the non-European world that have had European languages imposed upon them via formal colonialism (Schippers 1989:99–101). However, the fact that the dilemmas posed by works of this kind are most easily recognized in Africa does not mean that they have been fully understood there. To demonstrate the kind of inquiries that may extend such understanding, I have deliberately chosen the most widely read African autobiography, indeed, one of the most popular of all modern African literary works, *The Dark Child* (*L'enfant noir*)[1] by the Guinean Camara Laye. This choice is not made in order to refute the considerable body of extant critical writing on *Dark Child* (as an historian by training, I am even more indebted to this work than is evident below) but rather to add to it two perspectives that have not been fully utilized so far: an historical/anthropological sense of how colonialism has inflected our (and Camara Laye's)[2] sense of African "tradition" and a link (or tension) between *Dark Child* and the Mande[3] culture that is Camara Laye's African heritage.

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, citations will be from the English translation; the problems with this translation (as fully noted by Michelman) are discussed below.

[2] I will use both the author's names when referring to him as a writer rather than as a character within his own book, because Camara, while actually his family-lineage name, is always written first. There is no very clear reason for this usage (Laye is a variant on the Muslim given name, Abdoulaye/Abdullah).

[3] I use "Mande" here to cover a somewhat broader region than Camara Laye's "Malinké" (Maninka) so as to include particularly the Bambara (Bamana) of neighboring Mali. For a fuller discussion of the geography and French/Arabic vs. indigenous variants of such terms, see Austen 1999a:5–6.

The European literary model with which I will compare *Dark Child* is not the autobiography in its total scope but rather a narrower version that also blends most commonly into fictional writing, the bildungsroman or coming-of-age narrative.[4] Despite its multisyllabic German etymology and its derivation from specific late-Enlightenment/ early romantic values (to be discussed below), the word "bildungsroman" can now be written comfortably in lower case without italics because it has become a rather general literary term. In fact, many critics have already applied it to African literature (Buma 1997, Mikelsen 1986, Nyatetu-Waigwa 1996, Riesz 1996:18–21). The problem with the concept is that its uses tend to vacillate between extremes. At one end of this spectrum is the very formal tradition of German literary theory, where the works discussed under this rubric have to be about a male German and distinguished from (among others) the *Erziehungsroman* (novel of education) or *Künstlerroman* (artist novel), into both of which *Dark Child* might easily be said to fall (Hardin 1991) On the other hand, there is a very broad, by now somewhat hackneyed, use of bildungsroman that does not specify any conditions other than the stage of life of the subject. The Africanist critics using this concept tend to fall into the latter camp, whether or not they consciously struggle against the German-based model.

I take my own inspiration from studies of Western literature that have extended the idea of *Bildung* across barriers of (European) nationality, time, and gender but link it to the historical issues of individualist subjectivity found in the broader literature on autobiography (Moretti 1987). From this perspective, the bildungsroman always retains a classical modern bourgeois notion of individual self-realization through a process of personalized learning. Bildung thus expresses a concept of initiation into formal high culture and practical adult life that is crucially distinguished from institutional schooling or literal apprenticeship,[5] where the future role and status of the subject are determined by an already established set of norms. In order to take the values of the bildungsroman form seriously, it is not necessary to subscribe to them. On the contrary, some critical distance, whether derived from Marxist or other perspectives, is necessary to appreciate the ideological dimension of the bildungsroman and thus read a comparable work from the colonial world in the political terms relevant to its own project.

The bildungsroman (unlike the full-blown autobiography) characteristically terminates on the threshold of a fully adult career, when the hero or heroine achieves a competence that should enable him or her to take on the challenges of modernity without yet being fully defined by them. Most importantly (and here the German categories are critical) the novel is mainly about "becoming," achieving an inner transformation, rather than about

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[4] I should add that I will not directly engage the theoretical issues that dominated the studies of autobiography in a special issue of *Research in Africani Literatures*, namely "postcolonialism, postmodernism and feminism" (see Geesey 1997:1).

[5] One of the many confusing issues in the use of the term "bildungsroman" is that its prototype is supposed to be Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [apprenticeship], a work not much read in modern times, particularly outside Germany, and also not about formal apprenticeship.

"doing," performing the outward actions that demonstrates the subject's capacity (or lack of it) to lead the self-defined life his Bildung has promised.

In order to bring colonial autobiography into the orbit of this genre, I want to narrow its definition somewhat more, to include a spatial movement from the province or periphery of the world whose culture has to be mastered towards its center. Within the Western canon, this is not an overly restrictive distinction, since it takes in some of the best known examples such as James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*, and (as will be seen) of special relevance to Camara Laye, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Gustav Flaubert's *Education sentimentale.* A secondary and always ambiguous goal of such works (but one that is more clear and central to its African forms) is to inscribe the profile of the provincial starting point into the "library" of the metropolitan goal.

To compare an experience of colonial education to Bildung may seem very much like playing with loaded dice. Colonial education is, by definition, imposed upon its subjects from outside any culture with which they are familiar. Its principal value is as a very formal apprenticeship for entry into predetermined and subaltern (in the British military sense of the term) posts, as junior officials of an alien regime. This is particularly true in French West Africa, the scene of Camara Laye's story, where the Christian missionary station, as at least an alternative from of colonial authority (particularly in the realm of education) was virtually absent. Islamic schooling was available (Camara Laye himself was first introduced to literacy through an elementary Quranic study) but could not provide empowerment within the colonial system other than through rather restricted clerical and merchant careers.[6]

Education in colonial schools does not therefore provide conditions for a great deal of inward reflection and most colonial autobiographies deal with this phase of their subjects' lives in a fashion that is either perfunctory or juvenile-celebratory (tough teachers described and survived) rather than introspective. Camara Laye's book thus belongs to a limited but very critical body of works that at least partially transcend the conditions of colonial education and reveal some of its historical and cultural significance.

The setting and events of *The Dark Child* can be reviewed very briefly. The starting point is Kouroussa, a small town in the savanna region of upper Guinea, where Laye lives in the compound of his blacksmith family, attends primary school, and goes through the early stages of ritual initiation. For secondary school he moves to the territorial capital, Conakry, on the forested Atlantic coast, but returns home for vacations. After passing his secondary exams with top grades, he is offered the opportunity to continue his studies in France and, over the strenuous objects of his mother, finally leaves Africa.

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[6] Kane's semi-autobiographical *Adventure ambiguë* published eight years after *Dark Child* , treats Islamic learning as a mystical process totally incompatible with European culture.

Immediately after its publication, *Dark Child* was criticized by the Cameroonian novelist Mongo Beti as nonpolitical (and thus invidiously compared to Wright's similarly titled *Black Boy*) because of its sentimental portrayal of an Africa in which the author witnessed "not the least little imposition by the colonial administration" (A.B. 1954). Most probably Camara Laye did present an accurate account of this aspect of life in Kouroussa, where, as in much of colonial tropical Africa, the local population had few contacts with whites. Even in a semiurban regional center, with a railroad station and a government school, there were only two European inhabitants (King 1990:1980:2). The only colonial institution that does become visible is the school, and even this, in its Kouroussa version, is completely run by Africans. The closest we come to any anticolonial statement is the complaint of Laye's mother about the proposal from the European educational administrators in Conakry that her son continue his studies in France. But her words express more of the sentimentality criticized by Mongo Beti than a political consciousness:

> Have they no mothers, these people? They can't have. They wouldn't have gone so far away from home if they had (p. 184).

This sentimentality does represent a kind of politics consistent with its aesthetics: a politics of "negritude" that defines its place in the colonial and postcolonial world in opposition between Western rationalism and African "emotion." However, there is no explicit commitment to such an ideology by Camara Laye in this first book, nor is there any external evidence that he had contact with Black literary circles in Paris before writing it. I will thus pursue the negritude issue only after examining the internal dynamics of the text.

Much less of *Dark Child* takes place within the space of schools than a summary of its plot suggests, but stages of formal education remain the major markers of the hero's coming of age. The power of the narrative (and most of its actual content) comes from the sites that are opposed to the school: home (including an uncle's residence in Conakry), the initiation bush, and even a visit to the rural village of Laye's maternal grandparents. The appeal and overriding tone of this book is not a celebration of the hero's individual attainments but rather a nostalgic regret for the communal bonds he must abandon in order to get on with his education.[7] But before considering how such sentiments constitute Camara Laye's subjectivity, to say nothing of his politics, it is necessary to consider what he has to say about the immediate experience of school.

In the entire book only one chapter is fully devoted to education and within it, no more than three paragraphs deal directly with instruction in the classroom; but they set out the issues of the novel in very striking form. The scene they describe (all taking place in the lower grades of elementary school) is hardly appealing. It is dominated in both affect and verbal substance by the voice, the eye, and the punishing hand of an autocratic teacher, whose pupils tremble in silence at the prospect of being called to the blackboard. All that the author can recall about the content of the lessons is the teacher's insistence upon perfect penmanship and the general impression that "everything we learned was strange, unexpected, as if it had come from another planet" (p. 78; raa).[8]

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[7] For another comparison between *Dark Child* and Wright's *Black Boy,* which now contrasts the hyper-Western individualism of the latter work with Camara Laye's stress on communal identity, see Olney 1993.

Yet this seeming condemnation of the school as a space of terror, alienation, and intellectual emptiness is accompanied by an insistence that

> we were extraordinarily attentive, and were so without being forced; for all of us, young though we were, our studies were a serious and passionate matter (p. 78; raa).

The only negative response Camara Laye can imagine to such pedagogy is some putative groups of "less attentive students" who would have been "bewildered *(etourdi)"* by the teacher's flow of talk rather than revolting against his methods. The autobiography has thus revealed a very unpleasant experience of a highly valued stage in growth. To an outsider, this might be read as the ultimate colonial situation, in which the subject has no power to redefine, or at least personalize, the terms of his own advancement.

Camara Laye, however, never confronts this aspect of his education directly. Instead he moves away from the classroom and its lessons to dwell upon the social experience of schooling. Some of what he recalls here is quite simply sentimental: the friendship of his comrades and the shy affection shared with one of his female classmates. However, the most elaborated episode of this chapter is somewhat harsher. It concerns the excessive bullying of Laye and his friends at the hands of the older pupils, which is tolerated by the school principal and only ended through the very rough intervention of the author's father.

Thus even (or especially) in the section of his autobiography devoted to learning, Camara Laye falls back upon an invidious moral comparison between school and home. Compared with the Western bildungsroman (as well as what we know independently of Camara Laye's childhood) there is a major gap here: an account of the learning, and in particular the reading, that the novelist-to-be did outside the oppressive sphere of the classroom. Accounts of such reading, or of more personal mentoring by individuals who earn the hero's respect, are a standard item in the confrontation between Bildung and institutionalized, often corrupt, education. It is, of course, possible to imagine that in an African colonial setting a young person who is the first in his family to attain European education would have no recourse to such alternatives. There are not enough books at home and no one available, in the domain of European learning, as a replacement for the official schoolmaster. But in the case of Camara Laye, we know from interviews given after publishing his first books that he actually read a great deal on his own during childhood, although not one such book is ever mentioned in his autobiography. We also learn only from these postautobiographical sources that an early elementary school teacher did apparently encourage him on a personal basis, even coming to his home to tell his father "you must help this little one, you must encourage him, [and, in reversal of the school drama in *DC*] do not beat him" (Camara Laye 1965: 66, Leiner 1975:163, King 1990:1980:2).

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[8] Passages from the novel marked "raa" are my translations from the French original. This passage should not be linked, as many critics do, to the myth that French African schoolchildren were taught about "our ancestors the Gauls." Mongo Beti's critique is useful here in reminding us of the "adapted" (as opposed to "assimilationist") curriculum in these schools when he sarcastically compares Camara Laye's writing to the colonial Dick and Jane, "Mamadou et Bineta devenue Grands" (A.B. 1955).

Camara Laye's account of his education is, therefore, not intended to be a bildungsroman. The author presents himself less as an actually or potentially autonomous individual than as the simultaneous product of two externally defined identities that are quite accurately labeled (from his perspective) "tradition" and "modernity." The appeal of his book rests to a considerable extent upon the engaging and (at least for a novice in African studies) informative manner in which he portrays the Mande world from which education has alienated him. However, if we want to read this book in our own historical terms, we must first of all call into question the construction of such a contrast in a region that has been under French rule for over fifty years and exposed to Islam for close to a millennium. Better still, an informed and close reading of the scenes that Camara Laye counterposes to his schooling reveals that they are all far more implicated in modernity than he openly states and that the learning that allows him to write this book does involve a sensitivity to the hybrid nature of his domestic base, which may amount to a kind of Bildung.

The autobiography opens with an evocation of Laye's home, which provides the prime alternative to French education throughout the novel. However, home means a number of different things in this book. As a space in opposition to school, it is most dramatically represented, as already noted, by Laye's mother; but I will defer discussion of her persona for a later section dealing with gender issues. The literal spaces seen as home, however, can be divided between the compound in Kouroussa, where Laye grows up; Tindican, the village of his maternal grandmother which is the farthest removed from the world of school; and his uncle's house in Conakry, a very explicitly hybrid environment.

Laye resides in Tindican only on brief vacations from Kouroussa, but two chapters in the autobiography are dedicated to this place. The author recalls it as a realm of pure communal harmony, symbolized by the coordinated rhythm of the rice harvest, which is the occasion for his annual visit. The romanticization of "traditional" Africa reaches its peak in these pages, yet they also reveal a great deal about how such a setting is related to modern education. Most clearly, we see here that Laye himself does not come from a village but from a town, which his rural relatives already see as modern. The visit to "my village" by children not even born there is a common experience in Africa and other places of relatively short-distance primary migration.[9] It is in Tindican that we see Laye first sensing his alienation from an Africa where he knows he will not spend the rest of his life. Part of Laye's difficulty in fitting into village life derives from his being dressed in "school clothes fit only for city wear" (p. 53). What the author does not consider, but we may fairly safely infer from several clues, is that the reason "I had nothing else to wear" (i.e., he is not provided with the simple drawers of his rural playmates) is his grandmother's insistence that he remain in a costume that reveals to the rest of the village the status of a family with educated, "urban" relatives.

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[9] For a similar episode in an African autobiography, see Soyinka 1981:126–48; I owe part of this insight to my own father, who told me endlessly about such trips from Leipzig in Germany to his parents' birthplace of Tachau in Bohemia; I eventually learned that he did not depict this place any more realistically than Camara Laye does Tindican.

Tindican is also the only place where Camara Laye gives some indication of the manner in which Mande culture designates the practitioners of certain artisanal crafts, such as his own metal-worker family. Throughout this region smiths, leather workers, and bards are known as *nyamakalaw*, people with a special affinity to dangerous spiritual forces (*nyama*) (Conrad and Frank 1995). Their status is inherited and they cannot intermarry with the rest of the population. It is interesting that, for all its ethnographic tendencies, *Dark Child* does not tell us much about this well-known "caste" system, perhaps because it might compromise the idyllic picture of "tradition" that Camara Laye is trying to present. As will be seen, Laye's own identity as a nyamakala, and more specifically a *numu* (smith) will impinge in some ways upon his modern life.

Laye's time at secondary school in Conakry also occupies several chapters of *Dark Child*, but these take place almost entirely outside the school grounds, in the home of his paternal uncle, Mamadou. This is a very "African" space, since there are several wives who treat Laye much as his mother and her co-wives do. However, Uncle Mamadou already possesses a secondary education and a white-collar job. In his private sphere he has adapted to urban life in a manner very typical of colonial West Africa, by becoming a serious adherent of Islam.[10] Mamadou is in some respects the personal mentor of modernity who was lacking in the account of Laye's primary school years, but the advice he gives focuses entirely upon the choice of schools, deportment in them, and the career opportunities they offer, as opposed to discussing the content of what is being studied (or some alternatives to it, whether French, Mande, or Islamic).

In all likelihood Laye did have such discussions with Marie, the mulatto Guinean woman who is his girlfriend in Conakry and later became his wife. We know, again from outside the autobiography (King 1990:2), that Marie was an assistant at the Girls High School in Conakry and thus presumably quite well educated. But in his book, Camara Laye presents her only as a beautiful girl who took no more than perfunctory interest in her studies.[11]

For Laye, therefore, Conakry is the ultimate hybrid home that launches him into France. He gives a good picture of the difficulties it initially presented to someone from a totally different climate and African culture, but its contribution to his own education is somehow underepresented.

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[10] Camara Laye tells us that he attended a quranic school before the French one and gives many indications of Muslim influence in Kouroussa, but states explicitly that Islam is practiced very loosely there.

[11] At the conclusion of the novel, when Laye is on his way to France, Marie travels by plane with him as far as the regional capital of Dakar, Senegal, to take up some further schooling that the author never specifies.

Kouroussa, despite its own urban qualities, is still a place where Laye's father can function as a traditional smith.[12] "My father's hearth" is thus presented throughout the novel as a place of great—and potentially dangerous—ritual energy (recognizable, but not named, as nyama) and also the potential alternative to school education in determining the hero's career. The brothers and other young men who do sit at the senior Camara's feet are explicitly referred to as apprentices. In some respects formal education is also experienced by Laye as a sort of apprenticeship, rather than the more individualistic Bildung. There is also some indication that the kind of schooling to which he is sent has some connection to his blacksmith status. He tells us that his strengths in school were in French rather than mathematics, yet in both Conakry and France, he is enrolled in institutions for technical training. Meanwhile his friend Karamoko Kouyate, the son of a griot/*jeli* (casted bard) but who happens to be stronger in math, becomes a teacher, whose main task (as we have seen) is to instill the French language in his pupils.

Along with apprenticeship to his father or another smith, the procedural alternative to European education in Camara Laye's African world is the series of initiation rituals to which boys are subjected around the age of puberty. Laye himself went through the first stages of this process and again devotes two chapters in his autobiography to this experience. While the first person voice is seldom abandoned here, these sections of the book are at once the most ethnographic and the most introspective. Laye seems to be aware of how interesting these events will be to his audience but also how contradictory, in a double sense, it is for him to write about them. On the one hand, he never reaches a very advanced level of the complex Mande initiation system and thus rightly feels that he has not acquired a very deep understanding of his natal culture. At the same time he acknowledges that secrecy is one of the key elements of this culture so that by publishing what he does know, he is an accomplice in its subversion. Thus the first of the initiation chapters ends with the plaintive query. "But what is left of all this at the moment that I write about it? Secrets. Do we still have any secrets?" (p. 141; raa).

A particularly touching moment during Laye's initiation occurs when the women from the homes of the various boys about to be circumcised hold up symbols of their future occupations, for the most part implements of agriculture and artisanal crafts. One of his father's wives, out of apparent pride, produces a school notebook and pen. Laye recalls this incident with an embarrassment he does not feel required to explain. It is important, however, to understand that the alienation he senses here is not just momentary or metonymic of his larger "trad/mod" problem, but also indicative that the ritual itself will never succeed in one of its major goals: creating a life-long peer group relationship between

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[12] But his craft is also extended to repairing motorcycles, automobiles, and clocks, a set of skills possibly acquired during a childhood apprenticeship to "Syrians," which Laye is only told about on the eve of his own departure for Conakry (I am grateful to Hervé Jezequel for this observation).

Laye and his fellow initiates. Instead, it turns out that European secondary education will not only train him for a specific set of roles within the colonial system, but also define his African social status. Thus when he returns on vacation from Conakry to Kouroussa, Laye's closest friends are the two other boys from his primary school class (still including the fellow nyamakala, Kouyate) who also went on to further studies and have now taken up teaching posts.

Laye's movement to the farthest point from home, the suburbs of Paris, is intended to terminate his technical training, so that he can qualify as a modernized equivalent of his father. It is here that he finally turns from the path laid out for him and becomes instead a writer.[13] But this shift involves its own "homecoming," since it is based on nostalgia while in Paris. The sketches of his early life that eventually make up the autobiography were originally intended, Camara Laye tells us, only for his own consumption, out of fear that otherwise such recollections "would be bound to fade in time" (Camara 1965:64).

The transformation of the solitary provincial in the metropole into an artist who can aesthetically validate his homeland is, of course, a classic bildungsroman move.[14] In Camara Laye's case, however, it is not included within the novel, which ends with his departure for France. There is no general reason to expect that Camara Laye's narrative should be conscious of such a European narrative pattern except for the fact that while writing *Dark Child* , he was reading Flaubert's *Education sentimentale* explicitly as a literary model (Camara 1965:66, Leiner 1975). But in good schoolboy/technician rather than "inspired artist" fashion, he recalls that he used this book mainly for such matters as the employment of tenses (to make up, he says, for his choice of the wrong training in school). Far from feeling himself in the bildungsroman tradition, Camara Laye even confesses that he experienced some embarrassment at the idea of producing "memoirs" at a young rather than a mature age (Leiner 1975).

Given the problems of looking for a bildungsroman between (or outside) the lines of *Dark Child* , it would make sense at this point to consider whether there is some other literary genre, particularly one derived from Mande oral sources, that might help us understand the coming of age process in this work. Several critics of the book have made such efforts, with varying degrees of success. The most convincing case for an African oral influence upon Camara Laye's writing relates less to the structure of the narrative than to the repetitive rhetoric of his language, much of which is suppressed in the English translation (Skattum 1991, Michelman 1982). However, unlike the case of Wolof women's *Taasu* (McNee1997), Mande male praise poetry is seldom if ever autobiographical, the one partial exception being the griots, whose main function is to spare others in society such dangerous public utterances.

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[13] Miller (1990:169ff.) makes a great deal of the affinity between writers and griots, thus tying Camara Laye's ultimate calling to his nyamakala origins. For reasons to be discussed below, I do not find this meaningful except in the broad (largely African-American rather than African) sense that all Black verbal/narrative artists are "griots."

[14] For example, the famous conclusion of Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist,* "I go ... to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated consciousness of my race" (1916:299).

Claims to find a Mande form or content in Camara Laye's actual narrative thus encounter serious problems. The attempts by Lent and Bourgeacq, to discern, respectively, a generic African or Mande cosmological content to *Dark Child* are difficult to take seriously, since they both rest upon European constructions that bear little relationship to particular African cultures and specifically that of Camara Laye's Kouroussa.[15] Kone, who also criticizes Bourgeacq's approach, opens up a more fruitful line of comparison between this autobiography and Mande heroic narrative; however, its closer pursuit, as I will try to show, tells us more about Camara Laye's reluctant, very "colonial" embrace of European modernity than his rootedness in local tradition.

In both *Dark Child* and his later work, Camara Laye does provide good grounds for at least considering a relationship between the account of his own coming of age and Mande oral epics. As already noted, the autobiography accords a central role to initiation rituals which, with their process of separation, liminality, and reintegration, may be the model for the kind of heroic narratives that are common, among other places, in the African oral repertoire (Campbell). More specifically still, Camara Laye's last literary project was the recording of a performance of the major Mande epic, *Sunjata*, and its transformation into a novel, *Guardian of the Word.* Can we therefore examine the Mande concept of heroic biography and consider whether it offers some alternative to the bildungsroman model against which Camara Laye seem to be struggling, whether consciously or not?

One of the most valuable analyses of the Mande hero (Bird and Kendall 1980) explicitly compares the epic journeys of figures such as Sunjata with the departures of modern Mande migrants to France, whether they seek education or menial work. Both sets of movements are said to constitute *fadenya* (literally, "father-childness"), the antisocial actions by which men build their reputations through displaying dangerous but valued qualities of behavior. There are, however, problems with this analogy that are related to the fact that *Guardian of the Word* has never enjoyed the success of *Dark Child* , among either readers or critics (Austen 1999a). Had *Dark Child* placed more emphasis on outward adult action rather than the inner development of childhood and youth, it might indeed be better understood in relation to oral epic than to the Western autobiographical tradition. However, this is clearly not the case and it is *Guardian of the Word* that suffers instead from the insertion of items that seem out of place in an epic, such as inner dialogue and even the subjective experience of initiation. Moreover, as Skattum (1990) notes, when transcribing, translating, and adapting the performance of an actual griot, Camara Laye's prose takes on many more "modern" mannerisms than it does in the first-hand account of his own early life.

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[15] There is no need in the year 2000 to argue against Lent's "Hantu"; for problems in Bourgeacq's reliance on the anthropological work of the Griaule-Dieterlen school, especially the "Mande Creation Myth" allegedly located in the Malinké/Maninka sub-region that includes Kouroussa, see Beek and Jansen 2000.

There are other aspects of *Dark Child* that distance it from specifically Mande values and literary modes, while also illuminating some of its particular links to colonialism. Despite the constant opposition between home and school in Camera Laye's narrative, it is difficult to view any aspect of his educational career in the disruptive terms of fadenya. Precisely because schooling is taking place within a colonial situation, education represents a conformity to the highest local authority structure, a move from culture to "hyperculture," rather than the departure of a hunter into the wilds of nature, which is the paradigmatic fadenya gesture. The public learning that takes place in the school also contrasts sharply with the occult knowledge (nyama of the bush, unrelated to normal initiation or caste status) that gives the hunter his power.[16] Finally, while European education does, from its earliest stages, take Camara Laye away from the domestic space of *badenya* (mother-childness), it does not bring him to an entirely masculine realm since, in both his Kouroussa and Conakry schooling, Camara Laye is comforted by girlfriends who are fellow students. But to understand how female figures play into the literary and identity issues of this work, it is necessary to look more closely at the gender aspects of Mande heroic discourse.

Despite the polarized opposition between the spaces of male antisocial "bush" and the female hypersocial homestead expressed in the fadenya/badenya dichotomy, the mothers of figures such as Sunjata often play a central role in Mande narratives. Fadenya assumes close alliances between mothers and sons because the ultimate sources of disruption are rivalries with other co-wives and their sons as well as against the father/husband, whose reputation the hero must surpass. The mother cannot normally travel with her son into the bush,[17] but her own status (as an outsider to her husband's lineage) depends upon the achievements of her male children. Thus women are assumed to have their own access to occult forces which they use on behalf of their sons and the dual protective spirit of all Mande hunters, Kondolon ni Saane, is a single-parent mother-son pair (Traore 1999). One of the most potent threats to the male hero is a nubile woman from another lineage, who may become his wife but is always suspected of acting in the interests of her male kin.

Camara Laye gives great attention to his own mother in *Dark Child* and many of the details he presents here conform to the image of senior Mande females found in local oral literature and ethnographic sources (Conrad 1999). She does possess considerable preternatural capacities, including an ability to counter the forces of local sorcerers and is careful to protect her son from sexual contacts with the younger women of Kouroussa. But her protests against Laye going off to France indicate the incapacity of Mande female powers within the realm of European culture. Already in Kouroussa, it was Laye's father who had to rescue him from the school bullies and at the moment of decisive heroic departure, it is he and not the mother who encourages the son to seek a more exalted career than his own.

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[16] One could make similar arguments about the acquisition of Islamic culture in the account of Sunjata's exile from the region around Kouroussa to the Sahel; but in the epic it is control of local occult forces that decides the climactic encounter between the hero and his chief adversary, Sumunguru.

[17] In the epic, however, Sunjata's mother actually leads him into exile and only disappears from the scene when it is time for him to return to Mali.

This shift away from the Mande heroic pattern transforms the representation of women in *Dark Child* from magical supporters and seductresses to more homogenized objects of sentimentality. Thus Laye's relationships with both Fanta (his Kouroussa "sweetheart") and Marie are explicitly innocent and his mother figures most prominently as the object of a dedicatory poem that precedes the narrative body of the book. These verses make some reference to the blacksmith clan affiliation which, in the main text, is linked with the occult powers of Laye's mother; but in this early evocation all that follows is a desire "to feel your warmth again, to be a child by your side." The mother of this poem is the negritude trope of "black woman" as the personification of an African homeland that is the passive antithesis to European modernization: "simple woman, woman of resignation." Negritude literary works more typically take the form of poetry than prose, but *Dark Child* falls into this school not only through its prefatory verse, but also by the lyric fashion with which it evokes the world of the author's parents and even more so Tindican, the village of his maternal grandparents and thus the ultimate lost African paradise.

I do not wish, by such characterizations, to dismiss *Dark Child* as "merely" sentimental and thus unworthy of serious literary or political consideration. The work has survived because of how effectively it evokes the conflicts between individual striving and communal loss in the particularly alienating context of colonialism—even a colonialism that imposes itself at some distance and (in its own terms) benevolently upon its subjects. Indeed, it is not surprising that French authorities in the terminal stage of colonial rule promoted Camara Laye's book and employed him as a kind of cultural intermediary.

In spite of itself, *Dark Child* is ultimately more of a bildungsroman than anything else. It makes valuable use of Mande culture to speak to themes of modern bourgeois self-realization rather than to Mande struggles with domestic tensions and the occult powers of the uncultivated bush. It is about the inward state of its youthful subject, however limited his autonomy, rather than adult deeds, epic or otherwise. Such a work still represents one means of recovering Mande culture, or at least integrating it into a modern identity, through selective and sentimental evocation. However, as the frustrations of Camara Laye's later career indicates, such a beginning can become an obstacle to direct confrontation with oral literature.

The Dark Child is a classic example of colonial autobiography, divergent from the European genre to which it is most readily compared, but even more difficult to read as an exemplar of "the unbroken continuity in African verbal art forms" (Scheub 1985:1). What it reveals most fully is neither the European tradition of Bildung nor Mande concepts of heroism but rather the colonial condition, suspended between the two, perhaps embodying the kind of "hybridity" celebrated by Homi Bhabha but still lacking the postcolonial vision that can more fully contemplate its own situation.

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