

1990

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THE TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION OF
ORAL LITERATURE BEFORE WORLD WAR II**

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AH Number 8 (1990)

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This paper was presented at the Seminar on Translation held at Boston University in December 1989 as part of the project on "African Expressions of the Colonial Experience."

Publication of this paper was made possible by an interpretive research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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AFRICANS SPEAK, COLONIALISM WRITES:
THE TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION OF ORAL LITERATURE
BEFORE WORLD WAR II*

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African oral texts produced during the colonial era present a major paradox for translation. In one sense they are quintessentially "authentic" African documents, composed in an indigenous idiom. At the same time they are delivered to us via the intermediacy of colonial scribes acting for their own purposes via not only the language but also the medium (writing) of European domination.

The problems inherent in such transmission can most logically be resolved by rejecting these texts altogether. Contemporary students of African oral literature have deliberately moved away from the "folklorist" approach of their predecessors towards an effort to comprehend the living art of narrative in its performance context.¹ In this effort they make use of electronic recording technology (both sound and video) which was not available to their colonial-era predecessors.² Moreover, post-modernist culture theory provides us with concepts of deconstruction and hegemonic discourse which might be marshalled to banish any notion that these colonial documents are African texts at all.

Despite all such negative considerations, however, it would be irresponsible to ignore the very large body of African oral literature "captured" by colonialist efforts at transcriptions and translation. At the very least, if we want to both understand and transcend the discourses of historical colonialism, we have to learn how it constructed its own version of African literature. Secondly if we are not to fall into the condescending attitude that text does not matter in pre-literate societies, we have to respect the scale and antiquity of the literary material collected in the colonial era.³ However scrupulous modern fieldworkers may be, they cannot resuscitate texts which have either disappeared

*This paper was originally presented at the Boston University African Studies Center seminar on "African Expressions of the Colonial Experience: Questions of Translation," held in December 1989. I am grateful to the conveners of that seminar (especially Christraud Geary), and to other seminar participants for their comments.

1 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London, 1982), pp. 10 ff. rejects the very term "oral literature; see also Daniel J. Crowley, "The Uses of African Verbal Art," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6 (1969), pp. 118-32, and Albert Gerard, "Literary Tradition and Literary Change in Black Africa," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 19 (1984), p. 46.

2 Early twentieth-century Africanist fieldworkers did employ wax-cylinder recording systems but such devices, clumsy and running only for three minutes, lent themselves more easily to shorter musical performances than to extended narrative. For examples of research in which literary texts are written down and music is directly recorded see Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross Cultural Analysis* (Evanston, 1958), 6-7; and Günter Tessmann, *Die Pangwe* (Berlin, 1913), II, pp. 320-75. There is also reference to a large collection of such cylinders, all of them apparently dedicated to music with, at best, very brief accompanying texts, in Erich M. v. Hornbostel, "Wanyamwezi Gesänge," *Anthropos*, 4 (1909), pp. 781-800, 1033-52.

3 According to Veronika Görög, *Littérature orale d'Afrique Noire: Bibliographie analytique* (Paris, 1981), p. 387, *passim*. Over 900 studies of African oral literature (mostly collections of texts) were undertaken before 1941, representing just under one-third of the studies up to the late 1970s; one of the later critical students of colonial literary materials even refers to them as a "treasure trove of raw data": Daniel J. Crowley, "The Dilemma of Congolese Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 4 (1967), p. 162.

entirely over the last century or have been reduced to few and perhaps already "colonized" versions. Whether for historical or philological purposes, therefore, we must take seriously the process by which colonialism inscribed African oral literature.

The approach to this task proposed here consists of a series of case studies representing: (1) various type of colonialist inscribers (administrators, missionaries, linguists, anthropologists) at work; (2) the fate of a particular text (the Manding Sunjata epic) at the hands of several such intermediaries. In neither section will the discussion provide anything like definitive coverage of either the empirical studies undertaken in the colonial era or the relevant issues in anthropological, folklore, or literary method and theory. I do hope, however, to provide a useful representation of the problems and contributions of colonialist research in providing a written record of African verbal art.

Colonialist Scribes

In characterizing the production of African oral literature texts as "colonialist," we assume a process of domination occurring at various levels. Most obviously, there are the intentions or, more subtly, the encompassing "projects," of the Europeans (or European-educated Africans) who set out to record such texts. Secondly there are the actual procedures of transcription and translation, which often link technical and ideological issues. Finally, there are the textual products themselves, embodying both the mediation of colonialism and at least some residue of African culture over which colonial processes have no direct control. This last issue, the critical one for students of Africa as opposed to colonialism, can best be addressed in the subsequent section but must also be considered here.

Administrators of various kinds were responsible for many of the early collections of African oral texts. Europeans in such positions concerned themselves professionally with the control of Africans and thus viewed the study of indigenous literature as a valuable key to "native psychology." In the words of one of the most respected French folklorist/administrators: "It is necessary to know those whom one wishes to dominate." But these literary efforts were also motivated by a more amateur humanist concern for an African cultural essence endangered by colonialism itself. As the same French collector noted, "These traditions are the supreme vestiges of the primitive beliefs of the black race and, on this basis, deserve to be saved from oblivion."⁴ The two projects could also be combined more directly, as in the case of the German government schoolmaster who believed that his collection of tales would bear witness to the aboriginal rural decency of the Duala people, to be restored once the colonial regime removed them from their recently acquired and corrupting position as commercial middlemen.⁵ All pre-tape recorder scholars suffered from the fact that performances of African oral works normally took place under conditions (usually at night) which made it impossible for them to write down what they heard. In the case of administrators such as Equilbecq, however, it appears obvious that little effort was made to attend such performances and in any case, what was heard would seldom have been understood. We thus have texts produced by command on the verandas or in the tents of colonialism; the informants were sometimes recognized as performers within their own culture, but more often appear to have been

4 F.V. Equilbecq, *Contes populaires d'Afrique occidentale* (Paris, 1972 [original 1913]), p. 22.

5 Wilhelm Lederbogen, "Duala Märchen," *Mittheilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, 4 (1901), pp. 154-55.

the Africans most conveniently available to administrators, particularly African subordinates of the colonial regime itself. Even when the immediate narrators spoke in their own languages (whether or not at performance standard), the translators were inevitably government interpreters, whose own imperfect European idiom was then further edited by the administrator/author of the ultimately published text.

The narratives thus collected provide paradigms of the philological shortcomings one would expect from colonialist inscription. There is neither an indigenous text to control the translation nor any sense at all of the performance context.⁶ The collections are usually labeled "tales" and most of their contents appear to the European audience as rather rudimentary versions of what they have been taught to consider "literature." Both the assumptions of administrators about African primitiveness and the conditions of transmission make it difficult to deal with longer and more complex narrative forms; however, as will be seen in the discussion of "Sunjata" below, modern scholars have sometimes exaggerated the extent to which epic works were overlooked.⁷

The encounter between missionaries and African oral literature represents a more complex form of colonial discourse than that of administrators. At the outset missionaries had no interest in preserving indigenous culture which, especially as represented in literature, embodied the very values they had come to replace. It was eventually recognized, however, that the inculcation of Christianity and associated secular Western values into African society required, at a minimum, mastery of local languages and secondarily a grasp of those elements of indigenous belief and practice which (often in invidious contrast to fully secular Western modernity) were seen to provide a base for constructing African Christian communities. Moreover mission catechists and school teachers appear to be the Africans who most frequently wrote down their own oral literature.⁸

Because of the commitment of missionaries to particular regions of Africa and their need to learn local languages for purposes of evangelization (and especially Bible translation), the conditions under which they produced oral literature texts often come closer to the ideals of contemporary scholars than do those of administrators. We thus have bilingual texts (or even texts exclusively in local languages), translated by the missionaries themselves and derived from skilled performers, sometimes even with an audience present.⁹ Hierarchical authority relationships as well as religious tensions undoubt-

6 For the latter purpose, the much-maligned Henry Morton Stanley, *My Dark Companions* (New York, 1893) is preferable since Stanley attended the performances he inscribed and understood the Swahili in which they were spoken.

7 For examples of such exaggeration in otherwise excellent commentaries see B.W. Andrzejewski, "Oral Literature," and Gordon Innes, "Literatures in Mande and Neighbouring Languages," in B.W. Andrzejewski *et al.*, eds., *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 45, 100. Equilbecq himself produced an entire volume devoted to the translation, theatrical adaptation, and analysis of an epic, although it was not published until well after his death in 1914: F.V. Equilbecq, *La légende de Samba Guéladio Diegui, prince de Fouta* (Abidjan, 1974).

8 For examples see Mbelolo ya Mpiku, "Introduction à la littérature kikongo," *Research in African Literature*, 3 (1972), pp. 117-61.

9 For an excellent early example see Henry Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions and Histories of the Zulus* (Natal, 1868); for a bilingual text with audience, Friedrich Ebding, "Duala Märchen," *Mitteilungen der Ausland-Hochschule an d. Univ. Berlin*, 41, 3 (1938), pp. 36-102; many more publications of this kind can be found in the German journals *Anthropos*, *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, *Zeitschrift für Afrikanische und Ozeanische Sprachen* and *Zeitschrift für Eingeborenen-Sprachen*.

edly interfered with these transmissions (especially in the case of African converts), but we cannot assume such factors in all cases.

Where missionary colonialism most clearly intervenes in shaping the literature received by its audience is in both the construction of texts compatible with Christian conceptions¹⁰ and the omission of much which conflicts with such values. The construction is most significant in the proliferation of "creation myths" that emphasize the monotheistic dimension of African belief. There appear to be relatively few formal narratives of this kind in the African repertoire¹¹ and missionaries did not so much invent them in some form which does not exist as derive them from direct interrogations and then report on the answers received in a fashion which implied a more prominent literary presence of such material. It appears that the genre of African narrative dealing most fully with creation is trickster tales, a point obscured by missionary accounts of at least the colonial era.¹² At the same time there is a considerable body of indigenous narrative and poetry (including some of the less "moral" trickster tales) which missionaries did not record, thus leaving us with an "innocent" version of African literature that reinforces the "primitive" vision of the administrators.

Of the two categories of European academic scholars concerned with indigenous Africa during the colonial era, linguists were most regularly, if indirectly, interested in narrative. The objective of linguists in Africa was essentially to catalogue the very numerous languages of the continent and analyze their vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and phonology. This was a goal consistent with the missionary aim of translating their own texts into African vernaculars and required extensive recording of texts as the basic material of language study. The linguistic project touches most closely on that of literature in cases where European scholars feared that both the language and the culture of some African group might soon disappear, a consideration which applied significantly perhaps only in Wilhelm Bleek's recordings of /Xam San/Bushmen narratives during the 1870s.¹³

The methods used by Bleek with temporary prisoners in Cape Town closely resembles that of most of the later colonial-era linguists' texts. The narratives were recorded with the greatest scrupulousness, in phonetic script for the indigenous version and sometimes literal interlinear as well as facing literary versions for the translations (practices also followed by a number of missionary texts). However the context of "performance" is essentially a laboratory (sometimes literally so in German transportation of African informants into metropolitan seminars).

10 Mpiku, "Introduction," pp. 128-29, describes the "détournement" of traditional tales by tacking a Christian interpretation onto them.

11 On Manding creation myths see below; n.b. these were recorded by anthropologists rather than missionaries.

12 Compare Johannes Ittmann, "Gottesvorstellungen und Gottesnamen im nördlichen Waldland von Kamerun," *Anthropos*, 50 (1955), pp. 241-64, and Ralph A. Austen, "Social and Historical Analysis of African Trickster Tales," *Plantation Society in the Americas*, II, 2 (1986), pp. 135-48; see also Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (Natal, 1870), pp. 1-4, in which an informant's responses to questions about creation shift into narrative form only when explaining how the chameleon's failure to convey a message from the primal ancestor brought death to mankind. For a modern theological approach to African cosmology stressing the scatology and sexuality of trickster stories, see Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: a Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (Berkeley, 1980).

13 Roger L. Hewitt, *Structure, Meaning and Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San* (Hamburg, 1986).

The texts in these collections are often a mixture of formal "tales" and personal narratives, so that the amount of literature recorded can be quite limited. Probably the greatest contribution of linguists to colonial efforts at African literary study (again, with the important exception of Bleek) was the setting of technical standards for, and in some cases the formal training of, those Europeans actually out in the field during this era.

The colonial era students of African literature included not only administrators and missionaries but also the first generations of professional anthropologists to move regularly between the Western metropolises and the "exotic" societies which they analyzed. However, for the present analysis it is important to distinguish between three forms of anthropological fieldwork: itinerant artifact collection, territorial-based surveys, and village-based participant observation.

The men and women committed to this last approach produced structural-functional studies which remain among the classical works of both anthropology and Africanist scholarship. However, such fieldworkers did not record many narrative texts. For them, social context was so overwhelming a consideration that all oral statements about other times, whether purporting to be historical or not, were easily reduced to legitimizing myth without passing through the stage of literary transcription.¹⁴ A major figure in this group, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, did publish an extremely valuable set of tales and other shorter genres: but this work is accompanied by virtually no analysis, nor did Evans-Pritchard ever include similar material in his seminal Nuer studies.¹⁵

The main anthropological contributions to oral literature in this period come from scholars who were employed at the time by either museums or colonial governments and are today much less conspicuous on academic reading lists. Such a position did not allow for either the theoretical sensitivities or the intensive involvement in a local culture characteristic of the structural functionalists. But anthropologists based for long periods in a single territory could develop great proficiency in local languages and thus undertake valuable research on oral literature.

Probably the best collection of oral texts during the colonial era was produced by the Gold Coast government anthropologist, R.S. Rattray. Rattray dedicated a large part of his career to the study of a single culture area, the Akan, and was able to reproduce its narratives bilingually with a good account of both their performance and general social context.¹⁶ Although much of Rattray's general ethnography can be criticized on the basis

14 Bronislaw Malinowski sets the tone for this school in his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London, 1926); in more ethnographic works such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1922), esp. pp. 292-97, 311-26, Malinowski does translate indigenous texts but the only ones he presents in full bilingual form are "spells" whose precise language is of immediate sociological relevance. One of Malinowski's most prominent Africanist disciples was later to characterize oral literature as a "department of culture [which] has been much neglected in recent years, and even decades, by British students": E.E. Evans-Pritchard, "Two Zande Tales," *Man*, 64 (1964), p. 105.

15 E.E. Evans Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford, 1967); this volume is based on pre-World War II fieldwork. For a bibliography of Evans-Pritchard's many other (usually bilingual) publications of Zande, Anuak, and Fur texts, see Gôrôg, *Littérature orale*, pp. 119-21.

16 R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford, 1916); *Akan-Ashanti Folktales* (Oxford, 1930). Rattray could not record actual performances but claims (*Folktales*, p. vi) to have first heard his tales in village nocturnal sessions and then invited the performers to repeat them in his quarters.

of its overt subjugation to colonial purposes,¹⁷ the stories he collected (many quite lengthy and complex) provide as rich a redaction of indigenous African narrative as can be expected within the technological means available at the time.¹⁸

Itinerant anthropologists, sent by either museums or governments to cover wide areas, could not be expected to learn either the languages of any particular African communities or to appreciate the context in which oral literature was locally communicated. Nonetheless, we owe considerable bodies of text to such scholars whose work thus has to be seriously considered. Among their number is included the German auto-didact, Leo Frobenius, the most prolific recorder of African narratives in this (or perhaps any) era.¹⁹ Frobenius's work was driven by a number of forces: a simple instinct to collect (inspired by the museum sponsors of his several expeditions), a German romantic vision of Africa's antirational civilization, and commitment to a radical theory of cultural diffusionism.²⁰ Whatever the shortcomings of such methods and of Frobenius's particular vision, the latter could occasionally inspire dialogues with informants that illuminate such issues as the Luba (Zaire) distinction between inscription (*mukanda*) as an account of dead, past things, and oral narrative (*tuschimuni*) as referring to entities (even mythical animal heroes) that are still alive.²¹ Moreover, as will be seen below, both Frobenius and his French counterpart, the itinerant government anthropologist, Franz de Zeltner, did pay particular attention to epic narratives such as that of Sunjata.²² What we may conclude from this compressed survey of colonial inscription, therefore, is that it did indeed constitute a hege-

17 Theodor H. von Laue, "Anthropology and Power: R.S. Rattray Among the Ashanti," *African Affairs*, 75 (1976), pp. 33-54.

18 While Rattray's career is somewhat unique, there are colonial-era anthropologists who approximate his role and folklorist methods e.g. Günter Tessmann, employed by the German government and the Lübeck Museum für Völkerkunde in Cameroon; see his *Pangwe*, II, pp. 359-75; *Die Baja* (Stuttgart, 1934, 1937), I, pp. 224-35, II, pp. 1-7; additional bilingual texts cited in Görög, *Litterature orale*, p. 303.

19 The narratives, along with the interpretation of their role in African culture history, are brought together in the twelve volumes of *Atlantis: Volksmärchen und Volksdichtungen Afrikas* (Jena, 1921-28); the process of collection is described in Frobenius's very detailed accounts of his pre-World War I expeditions; for a bibliography, see Eike Haberland, ed., *Leo Frobenius, 1873-1938: An Anthology* (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 231-33.

20 The best (but unfortunately very brief) discussion is Jahnheinz Jahn, *Leo Frobenius: The Demonic Child* (Austin, 1972); for a detailed study of diffusionism in German anthropological theory (including Frobenius) and its political implications, see Woodruff Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920* (New York, forthcoming), Ch. 8.

21 Leo Frobenius, *Erlebte Erdteile: Paideuma IV* (Frankfurt/Main, 1928), pp. 72-75.

22 The limitation of the categories used here to define anthropologists is revealed by the difficulty in applying them to an important pre-World War II figure already cited above, Melville Herskovits. Herskovits was a university-based scholar who collected literary texts during an extended stay in a single African community. However, Herskovits's own account as well as the evidence of his unpublished field notes indicate less than three months' actual time in the field, heavy and uncritical dependence on a small number of informant-interpreters, and narratives performed entirely in the anthropologists' residence; thus the method (as well as Herskovits's concern with cultural diffusion) comes closer to that of the itinerant scholars like Frobenius than of either structural functionalists or even territorial-based government and museum anthropologists: Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (New York, 1938), pp. iv-viii; Herskovits and Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative*; Suzanne Preston Blier, "Field Days: Melville Herskovits in Dahomey," *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), pp. 1-22. The Griaule team of French anthropologists, who are discussed below in relation to the Sunjata epic, did not begin recording their famous Dogon and Mande creation myths until after World War II.

monic discourse which failed to recognize fully the African subject it was constituting. However, the agenda of hegemony is sufficiently diverse so as to allow major elements of that subject to remain accessible to us, especially if we keep in mind the limits of what we can see through this or any other written version of oral literature.

Colonial Versions of the Sunjata Epic

The evaluation of what kind of African texts emerge from the colonial processing of oral literature depends ultimately upon an examination of these texts themselves rather than the history of their production. Most important, we must ask whether the texts are shaped so as to conform to a colonialist version of African history and culture or at least to suppress elements of African expression considered subversive of colonialism. In the broad sweep of oral literature that has been recorded, there are numerous accounts that imply that Europeans are destined in some way to rule over other peoples.²³ Such deferential attitudes may be the result of direct colonial influence upon the processes by which the texts were transmitted, although they may equally well reflect spontaneous African responses to the experience of external domination.

However the richest African texts available to us do not deal directly with the presence of Europeans but rather with relations among Africans themselves. These relationships might take the essentially apolitical form found in the "animal fables," proverbs, and riddles most favored by colonial Africanist folklore studies. However, they could also deal very seriously with issues of political power as a reality within African society, raising questions not only about competing claims among African precolonial authorities, but also of the social and moral issues inherent in the very exercise of such power. These questions are particularly present in long narrative works like the Sunjata epic.

As already indicated, a number of such works were recorded in the colonial era, particularly in the Western Sudan, where they are most prevalent.²⁴ Not surprisingly, the narrative that appears most frequently in colonial texts is the Sunjata epic, a work recited in wide regions of the Manding world and very appealing to this day among both African and European scholars and litterateurs.²⁵ At this point I have located eight colonial versions of the Sunjata epic which can be treated as serious literary texts, as well as clues to three or more possible additional versions (see appendix). While this inventory probably does not exhaust the transcriptions of Sunjata made during the colonial era, it at least covers the published references.²⁶ In any case, the analysis which follows will be based upon the texts presently known.

The provenance of these eleven texts or potential texts is heavily skewed towards administrators and military officers (seven of eleven), with fewer anthropologists than

23 Veronika Gôrôl-Karady, "Stéréotypes ethniques et domination coloniale: l'image du blanc dans la littérature orale africaine," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 15 (1975), 635-47.

24 See note 8 above and Frobenius, *Atlantis*, VI, *Spielmann's Geschichten der Sahel*.

25 See the extensive (but far from complete) bibliography of transcriptions, translations, adaptations and studies in John William Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 227-39.

26 There may be other manuscript versions in both private papers and government archives; however, the syntheses of Malian history by Delafosse and Monteil do not contain any episodes indicating sources other than those discussed here: Maurice Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Paris, 1912), II, pp. 162 ff; Charles Monteil, "Les Empires du Mali," *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, XII, (1929), pp. 359-65.

might be expected, no missionaries or linguists, and a category of scribes not discussed above, African teachers and students in government schools.

The domination of administrators can be explained by the manifest political significance of the Sunjata epic. During the 1890s and early 1900s it was the policy of the French West Africa government to request that district officials reconstruct local histories by collecting oral traditions.²⁷ The results, as will be seen, are relatively brief and, from a literary viewpoint, impoverished texts; nevertheless more and earlier versions of Sunjata were written down by this means than any other. The end products of this transcription were not the texts themselves but rather the extended historical narratives of Delafosse and Monteil, which served their colonial purposes more by glorifying the pre-colonial political order than by censoring out its memory.²⁸ However, for present purposes, it is less the historical reconstruction than the literary texts that are of interest and the relationship between them and various issues of political and cultural hegemony will have to be taken up after the texts themselves are discussed and compared.

In any case, none of the administrators who recorded extant Sunjata texts had the dedication to folklore of an Equilbecq, so that the longest and richest colonial versions available to us come from the two anthropologists represented in this group, Frobenius and Zeltner. However, it is disappointing that such interest did not continue into the inter-War period, when anthropology became more sophisticated and a justly celebrated group of researchers, led by Marcel Griaule, worked for many years in Manding areas where the Sunjata epic is very widely recited. We cannot explain this lapse in the same terms as those applied to British structural-functionalism, since the Griaule team neither belonged to this school nor shared its approach to indigenous narrative. However, what these researchers did seek (ironically under some degree of influence from Frobenius) was an African essence which was supposedly better preserved in the culture (including creation myths) of the Dogon, whose cliff-protected plateaus had insulated them from imperial conquest and Islamic conversion, than in the more historical texts about medieval rulers.²⁹

Missionaries were rather thin on the ground in the colonial Western Sudan, because of both the Islamic character of the region and the hostility of the Third Republic French authorities to their own Catholic Church as well as foreign Protestants. For purposes of studying oral literature, however, the functional equivalents of missionaries here were the secular government school masters. Like their religious counterparts, these preachers of positivism started out with very hostile attitudes towards African "superstition," but, by at least the 1930s, they came to believe that their "civilizing mission" could only succeed if at least selected elements of indigenous culture were grafted on to it. Thus the French-educated African elite, whether already serving as government teachers or still undergoing training at the apical Ecole William Ponty, were encouraged to collect

27 David Conrad, "Oral Sources on Links between Great States: Sumanguru, Servile Lineage, the Jariso, and Kaniaga," *History in Africa*, 11 (1984), pp. 35-55; I am also indebted to this article for information on the dating of administrator versions of Sunjata. Quiquandon's text is a by-product of the military alliance he formed with the Manding ruler of Kenedugu during the French conquest of Mali; see Jacques Méniard, *Les pionniers du Soudan* (Paris, 1931), pp. 526-69.

28 David C. Conrad, private communication, April 10, 1990; see also notes 26 and 27 above.

29 James Clifford, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation," in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 55-71.

local narratives and, in the case of Ponty, to incorporate them into annual theater festivals.³⁰ And here, as opposed to both missionary or mission-catechist folklore or mainstream academic anthropology, historical epic proved a particularly attractive object of research.

The methods by which even the best of these variants of Sunjata were recorded lack elements which would be considered essential to contemporary study of African oral epics: none of the texts are bilingual, none contain more than a slight indication of the songs and other set pieces which often accompany the main narrative in such a work, and none are based on performances before the kind of audience for which the works are normally composed. Perhaps the rendition closest to meeting this standard is the Ponty festival presentation quoted and described in, respectively, Quenem and Traore;³¹ but this performance dealt essentially with a single episode of the epic, although schoolboy folklorists in the same period may have written down fuller accounts. At the same time it should be noted that performances of the Sunjata epic do not usually involve audience participation and often occur without songs, so that even modern scholars like Johnson have recorded their versions in isolated settings, albeit with a scrupulousness and electronic devices absent in the colonial era.³² Four of the texts presented in extenso (and possibly the Desteneve and Quiquandon versions) were recited by *jeli* (griots), i.e. those Manding caste bards responsible for transmitting and performing oral narratives. In three cases the bards are also identified in a manner which gives some indication of the context of composition, if not performance. Frobenius provides the most extensive account of his bard, although by constantly using the nickname, Korongo, he ignores the intimate association of his Kuyaté clan with the Keita dynasty of Sunjata himself. For its time, Frobenius's account of the social status of *jeli*, their declining role under colonialism, and their narrative and musical techniques was extremely valuable, even if diluted by effusive (and not particularly well-informed) comparisons to Northern European *skalds* and *minnesänger* as well as romanticized references to drunkenness.³³

By comparison the more sober Zeltner can only refer to his Khassonké informants as belonging to "that group, so little known and so divergently evaluated, the griots."³⁴ Vidal, as an administrator, recognizes some special status of the *jeli* who provide his account but does not give their very important clan name (Jebaté) or connect them to the ritual at Kangaba where, every seventh year, the Sunjata epic is recited in combination with the Manding creation myth and Islamic texts.³⁵ Indeed, in his concern to focus on the politically relevant portions of the *jelis'* accounts, Vidal announces that

30 Peggy Roark Sabatier, "Educating a Colonial Elite: The William Ponty School and Its Graduates" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1977), esp. pp. 142-82.

31 Max Quenem, *Trois légendes africaines* (Rochefort-sur-Mer, 1946); Bakary Traore, *Le Théâtre nègre africain: Sa Fonction sociale* (Paris, 1958)

32 Johnson, *Son Jara*.

33 Leo Frobenius, *Der schwarze Dekameron* (Berlin, 1910), pp. 12-25; *Atlantis*, VI, pp. 5-10, 35-45; *Der Kopf als Schicksal* (Munich, 1924), pp. 65-70. The field notes for these accounts are apparently available at the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt and could be valuable for an historical study of Western Sudanic oral literature.

34 Franz de Zeltner, *Contes du Sénégal et du Niger* (Paris, 1913), pp. 1-43.

35 Germain Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale au Soudan français," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 25, 2 (1955), pp. 39-76.

Here is what they reported to me and what I transcribed as faithfully as possible while, however, suppressing certain details too childish and infantile to do anything but prolong the story uselessly while adding nothing to its clarity.³⁶

Finally, in the much later case of Sadji we have a *jeli* who is fully identified by homeland, clan (he is a grandson of Samory Turé's personal griot), and career (he had been in Europe for five years in connection with the French Colonial Exposition). However, this bard is also presented as very reluctant to tell the story of Sunjata, normally the staple of all such performers.³⁷ Since, as will be seen, this version of the epic is somewhat aberrant, we may suspect that Bakary Diebaté's fear "of the anger of certain very vague divinities" may have been based upon a limited knowledge of what most audiences expected to find in the text.³⁸

However defective all of them may be, these texts retain considerable philological interest simply because of their antiquity. Indeed, the oldest ones probably represent not only the earliest versions of the Sunjata epic available to us, but also the first references of any kind to an oral tradition of this formative stage of the Mali Empire.³⁹ The literary and historical value of such renditions can, of course, only be realized by comparing them with later and far richer recordings of Sunjata. Such an effort can be no more than hinted at here but will be undertaken more fully at a later stage in my own work on this epic.⁴⁰

At a most basic level, the episodes presented in these early accounts could be entered into the tabulations of variants by which Stephen Belcher has attempted to establish an "authoritative" version of the story.⁴¹ Belcher's phrase may be unfortunate in that it applies an inappropriate Western philological standard to the very fluid nature of even the most formal Manding oral discourse.⁴² However, any interpretation of the content of the Sunjata epic assumes some set of episodes and images common to various versions of the narrative. In making comparisons between versions collected in differing contexts, we thus have to pay some attention to stability and shifts in these elements.

36 Vidal, "Légende officielle," p. 318; Quiquandon also provides "simply extracts, summaries of vague accounts . . . obscured by implausibility." F. Quiquandon, "Histoire de la puissance mandingue d'après la légende et la tradition," *Revue de Géographie commerciale*, 15 (1892), p. 306

37 A. Sadji, "Ce que dit la musique africaine," *L'Education africaine*, 25 (1936), pp. 119-20, 140.

38 Cf. Banna Kanuté in Innis's admirably annotated collection, who had also spent considerable time abroad and produces an equally idiosyncratic version of Sunjata: Gordon Innis, *Sunjata: Three Mandekan Versions* (London, 1974), pp. 136-37, ff.

39 The earliest reference in Johnson's bibliography (only a decade older than the first of the references here) presents this history entirely on the basis of Arabic written sources: René Basset, "Essai sur la langue de Toumbouctou et des royaumes Songhai et Mali," in Basset, *Mélanges d'histoire et de la littérature orientale* (Louvain, 1888); I have not yet found even mentions of a Sunjata narrative in earlier European or Arab travel accounts from the Western Sudan.

40 For some indication of the direction of this work, see Ralph A. Austen, "The Criminal and the African Cultural Imagination: Normative and Deviant Heroism in Precolonial and Modern Narratives," *Africa*, 56, 4 (1986), pp. 385-98, and "The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: an Essay in Comparative History," paper presented at the Conference on Ritual, Power and History in Africa, University of Chicago, February 1990.

41 Stephen Paterson Belcher, IV, "Stability and Change: Praise Poetry and Narrative Traditions in the Epics of Mali" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1985). Belcher does make use of the Frobenius and Zeltner texts.

42 Conrad, personal communication.

It is therefore significant that several of these colonial era Sunjata texts do treat sexuality and violence in a more raw fashion than do versions produced by recent research, especially among African writers. The latter, attempting perhaps to produce (or being presented by bards with) a more respectable epic, depict sexual encounters in less explicit terms than is the case in the earlier versions and they make Sunjata into a model ruler whose deployment of violence remains within socially acceptable bounds.

Thus in the very powerful episode of the buffalo woman which introduces Sunjata's mother, Sogolon, into the narrative, almost all versions allude to the failure of the two hunters who originally receive Sogolon to achieve sexual congress with her. The general implication of this (non-)event is that Sogolon retains elements of the wild-animal power inherent in the magic buffalo which was her wraith and only a husband who is both a great hunter and a king (i.e. Sunjata's father) is destined to become her true husband. In Zeltner's version the representation of Sogolon's impenetrability is portrayed far more graphically than in later accounts: the brothers are repulsed because "this girl has pubic hair like the quills of a porcupine."⁴³ Such an accent on sexuality may be more than a matter of narrative style; it links the animal-human transformations of Sogolon and their mediation through kingship to broader African discourses of gender, power and procreation.⁴⁴

Sadji's Sunjata text varies so widely from the "authoritative" version defined by Belcher that, as already indicated, the reader has to question the competence of his *jeli*, Bakary Diebaté. However, there is one element of deviance in Bakary's narrative which seems to stem less from imperfect transmission of specific episodes than from a different vision of Sunjata, one whose unappealing (in modern, European terms) character may also account for the *jeli*'s hesitation in even reciting the epic. For Bakary Sunjata is not, as in most other versions, the legitimate and generous ruler set against the evil usurper, Suman-guru; instead it is Sunjata himself whose career concludes with a series of apparently quite capricious cruelties.⁴⁵ Sadji's is the latest Sunjata text in this pre-World War II collection, but it is perhaps significant that one of the earliest ones for which we have at least a fragmentary description presents a similar image of the great ruler as an amoral monster: "the songs of the griots endow their hero with extreme cruelty . . . and make him a sort of god of evil."⁴⁶

This horrible image of epic African rulership may emerge as much from the mind of the colonial beholder as from the words of the indigenous bard. However, such distor-

43 Zeltner, *Contes*, pp. 6-7.

44 Compare the arguments made in the papers cited in note 38 above with the interesting, but ultimately rather tame, interpretations of Stephan Bulman, "The Buffalo-Woman Tale: Political Imperatives and Narrative Constraints in the Sunjata Epic," in Karen Barber and P.F. Moraes, eds., *Discourse and its Disguises: Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham, U.K., 1989), esp. pp. 175-76.

45 Sadji, "Musique africaine," pp. 151-54; Samory, the patron of Bakary's ancestor, is also presented in negative terms (particularly as unable to reproduce children) in this text, so we are dealing here with a vision of rulership rather than just partisanship among rival dynasties.

46 Alfred Le Chatelier, *L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale* (Paris, 1898), p. 87; both Le Chatelier and Bakary Diebaté link Sunjata with other Sudanic rulers, the former by explicit comparison to the Songhai monarch Sonni Ali and the latter by prefacing his Sunjata account with one of Samory, whom his grandfather served. However, it is unlikely that the mythic concept of rulership, which is certainly represented by Sunjata, should have been altered by the memory of these more historic figures, neither of whom is known to have been exceptionally cruel.

tion by colonial scribes does not fit their more general tendency to edit "childish and infantile" elements out of oral texts in the interest of constructing orthodox political chronicles. Moreover there is little reason to ascribe the peculiarities of the Bakary text to its transcriber, the African schoolmaster Sadji. It is equally possible to use these early versions of Sunjata to call into question the more idealized post-colonial picture of African rulership, one which conforms to the historiography of a Delafosse or Monteil even if it deviates from colonialist literary versions. A vision of historical (or generic) African rulers which stresses their dangerous relationship to ordinary life may meet certain ideological needs of colonial rule but it can just as easily subvert the claims of any political domination.

The colonial transcription of oral literature must thus be simultaneously deconstructed to subvert its hegemonic power and cherished for its preservation (however imperfect) of relatively ancient indigenous documents. The relationship between these processes is not a simple one but, at the very least, it requires careful attention to both the context and results of such scholarship.

APPENDIX

COLONIAL-ERA SUNJATA TEXTS

<i>Scribe</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i>
Quiquandon (military officer)	1890-91	Kenedugu court
		<i>Reference:</i> F. Quiquandon, "Histoire de la puissance mandingue d'après la légende et la tradition," <i>Revue de Géographie Commerciale</i> , 15 (1892), pp. 305-18.
Adam (administrator)	1900-03	Soninke marabout
		<i>Reference:</i> M.G. Adam, "Légendes historiques du pays de Niore (Sahel)," <i>Revue Coloniale</i> (1903), pp. 83-95, 354-62.
Arnaud (administrator)	ca. 1906	"mes Noirs"
		<i>Reference:</i> Robert Arnaud, <i>L'Islam et la politique musulmane française en Afrique Occidentale Française suivi de la singulière légende des Soninké</i> (Paris, 1912), pp. 144-71.
Chartier (administrator)	1910	local Arabic manuscript
		<i>Reference:</i> Maurice Delafosse, "Traditions historiques et légendaires du Soudan occidental," <i>L'Afrique française, renseignements coloniaux</i> , 1913, pp. 298-301.
Frobenius (anthropologist)	1908	Jeli ¹ Kieba Kuyaté ("Korongo"), plus other jeli
		<i>Reference:</i> Leo Frobenius, <i>Atlantis</i> , vol. V, pp. 303-43.
Vidal (administrator)	ca. 1922	Kyéla griots near Kangaba
		<i>Reference:</i> J. Vidal, "La légende officielle de Soundiata," <i>Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française</i> , 1924, pp. 317-28.
Sadji (schoolmaster)	ca. 1935	Jeli Bakary Diebaté of Khosso (Mali)
		<i>Reference:</i> A. Sadji, "Ce que dit la musique africaine," <i>L'Education africaine</i> , 25 (1936), pp. 140-54.
Zeltner (anthropologist)	1904-12	griots Kandé Kanoté and Habibu Sissoko, both Khassonke
		<i>Reference:</i> Franz de Zeltner, <i>Contes du Senegal et du Niger</i> (Paris, 1913), pp. 1-43.

¹ The choice of the terms "jeli" or "griot" in these references follows the usage of the originals.

Additional, Possibly Extant Texts

<i>Scribe</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>source</i>
Destenave ² (administrator)	1890s	?
		<i>Reference: Alfred Le Chatelier, L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale</i> (Paris, 1898), pp. 1-2, 86-87.
Equilbecq (administrator)	1910s	?
		<i>Reference: Contes populaires</i> , p. 26.
Students of Ecole Ponty	1930s	theatrical performances and folklore research
		<i>Reference: Max Quenem, Trois légendes africaines</i> (Rochefort-sur-Mer, 1946), pp. 43-72; Bakary Traore, <i>Le théâtre Nègre-Africain: Sa Fonction sociale</i> (Paris, 1958), pp. 64-6, 82.

² This identification is only by inference; the introduction to Le Chatelier's volume mentions Commandant Destenave as an important informant fluent in several Sudanic languages and the later brief reference to the Sunjata epic includes a four-line Malinke verse with a French translation; David Conrad (personal communication) does not think there is any text behind this reference but, as indicated in my own discussion above, the reference itself appears to be of some value.