MAGYAR AFRIKA TÁRSASÁG
AFRICAN–HUNGARIAN UNION

AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA–TUDÁS TÁR
AHU HUNGARIAN AFRICA–KNOWLEDGE DATABASE

BELCHER, Stephan
The Fulbe Presence in Mande Epic Traditions /Fulbe jelenlét a mande epikai hagyományokban
Eredeti közlés/Original publication:
kézirat / manuscript,
Elektronikus újraközlés/Electronic republication:
AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA-TUDÁS TÁR – 000.003.571
Dátum/Date: 2019. május / May
filename: belcher_FulbeInMande
Az elektronikus újraközlést előkészítette
/The electronic republication prepared by:
B. WALLNER, Erika és/and BIERNACZKY, Szilárd
Hivatkozás erre a dokumentumra/Cite this document
BELCHER, Stephan: The Fulbe Presence in Mande Epic Traditions /Fulbe jelenlét a mande epikai hagyományokban, *AHU MATT*, 2019, **pp. 1–25. old.,** No. 000.003.571, http://afrikatudastar.hu
Eredeti forrás megtalálható/The original source is available:
Közkönyvtárakban / In public libraries
Megjegyzés / Note:
ellenőrzött és szerkesztett szöveg / controlled and edited text
Kulcsszavak/Key words
nemzetközi Afrika-kutatás, fulbe hatások a manding epikai hagyományokban
African research worldwide, Fulbe presence in the Mande Epic Traditions

---

AZ ELSŐ MAGYAR, SZABAD FELHASZNÁLÁSÚ, ELEKTRONIKUS, ÁGAZATI SZAKMAI KÖNYV-, TANULMÁNY-, CIKK- DOKUMENTUM- és ADAT-TÁR/THE FIRST HUNGARIAN FREE ELECTRONIC SECTORAL PROFESSIONAL DATABASE FOR BOOKS, STUDIES, COMMUNICATIONS, DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATIONS

* magyar és idegen – angol, francia, német, orosz, spanyol, olasz és szükség szerint más – nyelveken készült publikációk elektronikus könyvtára/ writings in Hungarian and foreign – English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian and other – languages
* az adattárban elhelyezett tartalmak szabad megközelítésűek, de olvasásuk vagy letöltésük regisztrációhoz kötött/the materials in the database are free but access or downloading are subject to registration
* Az Afrikai Magyar Egyesület non-profit civil szervezet, amely az oktatók, kutatók, diákok és érdeklődők számára hozta létre ezt az elektronikus adattári szolgáltatását, amelynek célja kettős, mindenekelőtt sokoldalú és gazdag anyagú ismeretekkel elősegíteni a magyar afrikanisztikai kutatásokat, illetve ismeret-igényt, másrészt feltárni az afrikai témájú hazai publikációs tevékenységet teljes dimenziójában a kezdetektől máig./The African-Hungarian Union is a non-profit organisation that has created this electronic database for lecturers, researchers, students and for those interested. The purpose of this database is twofold; on the one hand, we want to enrich the research of Hungarian Africa studies with versatile and plentiful information, on the other hand, we are planning to discover Hungarian publications with African themes in its entirety from the beginning until the present day.

A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNY KÜLFÖLDI BARÁTAI AZ AFRIKA-KUTATÁS TERÜLETÉN
FRIENDS IN ABROAD OF HUNGARIAN SCHOLARSHIP ON THE FIELD OF AFRICAN RESEARCH

THE FULBE PRESENCE IN MANDE EPIC TRADITIONS

BELCHER, Stephan

kézirat, manuscript

The Fulbe are distributed across West Africa, from Senegal and upper Guinea to Lake Chad. Through much of the western portion of this spread, they are closely associated with the Mande peoples (Mandinka, Maninka or Malinke, Bamana or Bambara) with whom they share space and history. It seems thus a worthy exercise to examine the Mande image(s) of the Fulbe as expressed in their epic traditions, which have some authority as public and consensus-based statements about a collective past. The base of information used in this study is the published textual record of Mande epic poetry; the limitations of such a base, consisting of reported research, are self-evident. The advantages offered by the use of published sources are a greater extension in time and space than would be possible for a single individual, except perhaps a deep-pocketed collector such as Leo Frobenius, and such a spread offers a comparative perspective which illuminates questions which might not appear so clearly under conditions of focussed study.

Many of the questions underlying the Fulbe-Mande interaction are of a sociological nature growing out of the interactions over time of communities defined by linguistic, behavioral, and professional criteria. One now recognizes this also as a world of sliding reference points and labile identities; one might demonstrate this fluidity by noting that the CELHTO publication, *Tradition Historique Peul* (which offers four historical narratives on the Fulbe in the Manding),

presents its texts not in Fulfulde/Pulaar, but in Bamana. The ethnonyms so widely reported in the 'scientific' literature are shown in the works of Bazin and Amselle to be flags of convenience employed within a colonial and administrative context in which ethnic identity was associated with rewards and prestige as well as a sense of historical participation.[1] Presumably, an unstated but necessary precondition for such polymorphism that the populations in question be sedentarized; Amselle's work appears to look at populations claiming different origins but not necessarily differentiated by their economic and professional activity. For true transitivity in ethnic designations (and greater precision in their analysis), one would like to find evidence for sedentary groups taking up the label of 'Peul' not in the form of ancestors but in the form of the life-style which has widely been associated with that group: nomadic pastoralism. In the absence of such evidence, it would seem that the mechanisms of sedentarization (compounded with the military turmoil of the nineteenth century) should be factored into any inquiry on ethnic representations and identities.

This study, however, considers not the interactions of specific individuals within their communities, but rather the question of the image of the Fulbe within certain examples of the oral tradition. One recognizes that such an image represents a construct; the question to explore, then, is the nature of the construct and component parts. In some senses, this construct is not elusive: the Fulbe have been defined by their association with, and love for, cattle. This is a criterion applied from without and recognized – indeed, embraced! – from within.[2] But this is no longer the only criterion; the Islamic movements of the 19th century in this region were mainly Fulbe in origin; in the modern world, Islam and leadership in literacy may well also mark the Pullo.

---

1. This is the inescapable conclusion of the work of Jean-Loup Amselle (Logiques Metisses, Geste des Jakite, and au coeur de l'ethnie, ethnicite comme volonte) and Jean Bazin (a chacun son Bambara). Amselle's work in particular seems aimed at dissecting the criteria used by colonial administrators and colonial-era anthropologists and others, and clearly demonstrates the shifting claims to identity by different populations.

2. One need only look to the title of Alfa Ibrahima Sow's anthology of poetry from the Futa Jallon: *La femme, la vache, la foi*, and consider the extent of cattle-raiding narratives reported from all corners of the Fulbe world.

I. Definitions

One should further offer at least a working definition of the 'epic tradition' of the Mande to be examined. My definition of epic for West Africa is built on four elements: first, the question of historical information which may be transformed into narrative; second, the praises – the *devises* – which are incorporated into narratives with greater or lesser authority and skill by performers,[3] third, the status of the performer as a professional and a member of the *nyamakala* groups (although the singers from hunters' associations will constitute an exception), and fourth the question of public performance of the work. Two of the criteria thus look to the content, or the raw materials of the epic traditions; the other two look to the performance.

The potential corpus of an oral form of literature is infinite; in practical terms, however, we are considering the available transcriptions of the utterances of *jeliw* of various sorts and from various occasions. Such utterances operate within a range of possibilities, and while some may be taken as 'pure' entertainment, others make a more definite claim to authority behind the information they present. Another distinction might involve the degree of shaping of the narrative presented in this performance mode; some performances demonstrate a greater polish which implies that whatever their claim to value as information, they possess sufficient popular appeal that the delivery and presentation are polished and easily palatable (presumably through repetition as well as individual talent). As possible examples of the range, one might cite Baba Cissoko's version of "La trahison de Bakari Dian" (Dumestre 1979) as a polished performance piece intended primarily for entertainment,[4] while for an example of the historical tradition not normally the subject of artistic performance one might cite the testimonies of Wa Kamissoko (as collected by Y.T. Cisse) or the piece presented by Amselle et al., "La geste des Diakhite Sabashi" in which the ornamental values of the language seem subordinated to the

3. Of course, the praises may also be performed by themselves, as in the genres such as the *fasa*, the *burudju*, and others as described by Massa Makan Diabate, Dominique Zahan, and Sory Camara.

4. A further indication that would place this piece more firmly in the camp of entertainment rather than historical tradition was provided by Lilyan Kesteloot, who informed me that Baba Cissoko performed this version in imitation of that of another *jeli*. Kesteloot, personal communication, June 1994.

transmission of information.

One category of transcribed texts that lies somewhat outside the field defined by these axes is that of the Mande hunters' songs, which present substantial affinities with the historical narratives of the Mande *jeliw* but should nevertheless be considered distinct for a variety of reasons: e.g. the performers are not *nyamakala* (hereditary members of a status group, trained from childhood); their frame of reference is not historical but appears to involve the esoteric lore of hunters, and in many performance cases the narrative is subordinate to the projection of a hunter's identity.[5] The image projected within these hunters' epics seems particularly valuable, however, for the simple reason that it is independent of the accepted historical record and may be seen, thus, as a reflection of some measure of community opinion on the question of Fulbe identity and characteristics as seen by the Mande peoples; there is also the further question of the sociological function of the hunters' associations within Mande culture. We might see the two performance traditions as reflecting different chronological axes: the historical traditions look to a diachronic perception of community relations (anchored, of course, in the present of the performance) while the hunters' epics represent a more synchronic and contemporary view reflecting current perceptions.

In fact, the question of the Fulbe presence in the Mande hunters' epics seems the most problematic and challenging aspect of this project, for it is here that we enter the world of contemporary imaginings and representations, and perhaps also the field of least certainty. First, however, let us attempt a cursory geographic survey, running from west to east, to illustrate the range of interactions within the performance tradition reflecting the historical record.

One may also identify three levels on which to approach the narratives: we may identify stories about Fulbe characters; references to Fulbe culture or characteristics which are identifiable and serve as figures of speech, and last the question of the performer.

We shall treat these levels unequally. We shall not discuss the question of performers; the historical traditions preserved by *jeliw* of *nyamakala* status are by definition not of Fulbe origin, and we have,

---

5. For this point, see the paper by Karim Traore presented at the Northwestern University conference on Sunjata (1992), forthcoming in Ralph Austen, ed. *In Search of Sunjata* (Indiana University Press).

so far, insufficient information on the demography of hunters' singers to address this question. Second, while there are some (not many) general references to the Fulbe within the narratives, these references should be examined against the background of the general Bamana/Maninka cultural lexicon, and such an effort exceeds the scope of this paper.[6] There remains then the question of Fulbe characters, or explicit mentions of Fulbe identity, and these traces, then shall be our focus.

II. Historical Material

A. The Gambia: the western region

Within the Gambia we find something of a fusion of traditions.[7] While for the society's origins the *jeliw* look back to Sunjata and his generals, their repertory also covers more recent history, and that is marked by the various conflicts associated with the introduction of Islam from the Futa Jallon of Guinea. The climactic event in the history of Kaabu (or Gabou) was the fall of Kansala before the forces of the Almamy of Timbo; the event was also catastrophic, as Janke Wali, the defeated king, waited until the town was full of the enemy Fulbe and then set off his store of dynamite to destroy everyone within range. We have a number of versions of this piece; while this point may represent its importance in the standard performance repertory, it may also simply reflect historians' interest in the event.

Other performances reported by Innes cover the career of Musa Molo, a late 19th century leader of Fulbe origin who succeeded Janke Wali (Innes 1976). He was a turbulent and trouble-making prince, like many others in the region (the class of *nyanchos* represented a warrior aristocracy whose sole vocation was violence), and reflects less any

---

6. As an example, one might cite a phrase used by Seydou Camara in his performances, the 'Fulbe coat of treachery.' There is no explication of this line; it may well be a specific Wassulu reference to a certain Mamadou Ousmana ("un Peulh venu de Segou") who offered to assassinate the 19th century war-leader Tiéba (Quiquandon, 410-411).

7. For general information on the Mandinka performance traditions in the Gambia, see Knight's excellent work (1973). For a discussion of the fusion of Mandinka and Fulbe themes in the song repertoire, see his article on that subject (1982). The songs in question are not the narrative epics, but the praise-songs which a performer will keep in stock for occasional use.

single ethnic group than the general atmosphere of violence and insecurity which seems to have marked the 19th century (See Wright 1987).

As a consequence of the Fulbe role in the introduction of Islam, one finds a fusion of ethnic identities and traditions operating at some levels. Donald Wright has identified Fulbe intrusions into the traditions of origin of the Sonko clan of the kingdom of Niumi (1978). The clearest marker of such intrusions is the use of Koli Tengela as a founding ancestor; Koli Tengela is better known (outside this region) as the Fulbe leader of a 16th-century migration into the Futa Toro and the founder of the Denyanke dynasty. Another possible borrowing might be the figure of Kelefa Saane (Innes 1978), a warrior associated with the decline of Niumi, whose death scene (a constant in performances) is strikingly similar to that of the Pullo hero Silamaka associated with the region of Massina, northeast of Segou.

In this region, the contemporary spread of Islam has undoubtedly facilitated acceptance of fictional and historical oral traditions from Fulbe sources, since the Fulbe were the bearers of Islam and thus endowed with a certain ascendancy; we can also note that the adoptions take place in a time lying somewhat beyond that of the historicized memory of the 19th century, in the legendary past also associated with Sunjata and the origin in the Manden.

B. The Manden: the central region

The Manden is the heartland of the old Empire of Mali, the land of Sunjata and his generals and their many descendents. The roots of the historical tradition of the Manden are linked to the figure of Sunjata, whose story dominates the epic performance tradition and serves as a springboard for the many local historical traditions rooted in the present, whose depth (or distance backwards in time) may vary with the quality of the informant. Some of these traditions include Fulbe migrations; the population of the Wassulu region considers itself of Fulbe origin, although they speak Maninka/Bamana. Otherwise, one finds little direct contact or representation in historical terms. This is also a central region for the hunters' traditions which we shall discuss later.

i. Association with Sunjata

As a starting point, one might cite the tradition occasionally

encountered that Sunjata met his death at the hands of a Pullo. The death of Sunjata is rarely discussed in the performance tradition, either because it must be veiled in secrecy or because it is simply a matter of ignorance.[8] Almost no transcribed performance that I have examined discusses the manner of Sunjata's death: instead, performances move smoothly into the question of Tiramagan's conquest of the Djolof or some such diversion,[9] although we should note that the "Sunjata Fasa" is couched explicitly as a song of lamentation for the dead king.[10]

Historians, then, provide us with our information on the death of Sunjata, and they offer us choices: Sunjata died crossing a river, Sunjata died of an arrow-wound, Sunjata died a natural death. Maurice Delafosse, in his *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, gives a suggestive account according to which Sunjata died of a wound from an arrow fired by Maham Boli, a Pullo who was celebrating the king's grant of land to his migrating clan; this account would seem to be based on a Samburu legend of origin (1913 vol. 2 p. 184, note; cf Monteil Empires p. 71). The Samburu are a clan of Fulbe. In assessing the value of this legend, we should bear in mind Delafosse's ideas about Hamitic superiority which have led him to accept what might otherwise simply be termed a spurious legend of origin. Vidal reported that according to his informants, Sunjata died a natural death on the banks of the Sankarani, and not of an arrow-wound. Mamby Sidibe bridges accounts in a sense: he says that Sunjata had made a pact with a Pullo leader, and then died while leading an army to violate the pact, drowning as he crossed a river. Other versions say that Sunjata drowned in the river, or that he became a hippopotamus (Konare Ba, 104-5). Wa Kamissoko indicates that he died at home providing sage advice for his successors, but this notion seems perhaps revisionist.

A few comments on these modes of decease seem appropriate, although we may hardly exhaust the topic. First, let us consider the

---

8. Niane says that Mamadou Kouyate "n'a pas voulu aller plus loin" (p. 150, note 1), and this appears to be the general reported reaction. On the topic of the secrecy associated with the remains of a great man, see Conrad, "Dakajalan."

9. See Belcher, 1985, pp. 88 and Belcher, "Sinimogo," forthcoming in Ralph Austen, ed. for a discussion of these transitions and further documentation.

10. See Diabate 1970 (Etudes Maliennes or Janjon). One should note that his transcription does not credit a specific performer, and that in all probability it is based on a conflation of recordings from Kele Monson Jebate and Fadigi Sisoko made in company with Charles Bird in 1968.

death by drowning, which offers a local focus (near Niani, on the banks of the Sankarani) and a certain amount of cultural resonance. The mythological elements here seem self-evident, especially in light of the accepted association of the Keita with a cult of the river-deity Faro through the *Kama Blon* in Kangaba, and we may also recognize the theme of the transformation of primordial ancestors into theriomorphic spirits.[11]

For the second case, which associates the death of Sunjata with the Fulbe in some manner, the appropriate reading would seem to be not symbolic, but historical: for here one may surmise a telescoping of chronology and an association of the end of Sunjata's reign with the irruption of the Fulbe under Koli Tenguela and others in the fifteenth century (as reported, e.g. in the *Tarikh es-Sudan*). In the version accepted by Delafosse, the Fulbe had come to ask the ruler of Mali for land: thus the story explicitly evokes the period of migrations which brought groups now called Fulbe into the Wassulu. Mamby Sidibe's version reinforces this suggestion; in Sidibé's time-frame that Fulbe are already established in the Wasulu. One would suggest here the image of a series of metonymic associations: the founding king is the kingdom; the kingdom's death is the king's death. The king's successors were only reflections of the king himself and are effaced in the reported tradition.

Such an association may be reinforced by the Fulbe tradition that Koli Tengela was in fact the son of Sunjata by a woman given to Tengela by the king who did not know that she was carrying his child.[12] The question of the Fulbe migrations and their appeal to the

---

11. See Dieterlen, 1955, for discussion of both these aspects; see also Griaule, *Dieu d'eau* for the transformation of ancestral figures. We might recall that in many versions of the Epic of Sunjata the passage of the river, on his return to the Mande, is the topic of a specific episode or anecdote, often involving a pact between Sogolon Kulunkan and the head of the boatmen. I should note that Jan Jansen, on the basis of his recent field work, questions many of Dieterlen's assertions (personal communication).

12. This story offers a parallel with another Fulbe myth of origin in which they derive their ancestry from 'Oukoubatou' (presumably the Moslem Oqba who conquered North Africa in the first century of Islam); in this story, the master had left a mistress behind when he went off on his travels, and after he had been gone for three years the mistress was married to his slave and gave birth to four sons (the four clans of the Fulbe). M'Baba Diallo, in Tradition Historique Peul. The story of Oqba is also reported elsewhere.

figure of Sunjata for some legitimation is one which merits further detailed study.[13]

The *Tarikh es-Soudan* gives us a time-frame and approximate dates in the mid-fifteenth century for at least one wave of Fulbe migration out of the Futa Toro, and that time frame does seem to agree with the use made by the epic tradition of the Fulbe as a signal, a chronological landmark, for the (undescribed) end of Malinke hegemony. One might view as an extension of this tradition and this sequence the various narratives of local history collected by Y. T. Cisse, J.-L. Amselle and others which trace Fulbe penetration of the Wassulu. It is a striking feature of some of these narratives that the Fulbe are associated with slave-raiding (Amselle 1979) and the general chaos which, according to Person, breaks out with the decline of Mali and the end of the reign of Nyani Mansa Mamudu (Person 1981). Insofar as they are narratives of the origin of specific lineages and ruling groups, however, it is difficult to assess their wider importance for the culture, beyond the circle within which the narrative represents a claim to legitimacy or otherwise possesses some relevance. One encounters rather a confusing welter of names, genealogies, migrations, and marriages: the information may or may not be reliable, but it has certainly not been cast in any form which invites appreciation on literary and cultural grounds. It is not suggestive of wider currency.

One further point should be made about the association of the Fulbe and the death of Sunjata. The preceding paragraph considered the Mande use of Fulbe-related events in a historical sequence; one might also consider the Fulbe use of the Mande's history. The anachronistic connection of their movements and settlements (either towards the Futa Toro or into the Wassulu) with the period of Sunjata is clearly intended as a mechanism of legitimation, drawing upon the

---

A further mythological motif (A 511.1.6) is suggested rather than explicit: that of the posthumous child, which we find at its most mystic, perhaps, in Egyptian myths of Isis and Osiris, but central also to heroic traditions in Central Africa. Such an imaginative reading would view the separation of Sunjata and the pregnant mother as a metonymy for death.

13. In "The Hero and his Paradigm" Mamadou Diawara sketches out a structural approach to the problem which still leaves many of the details of the actual historiography open. I know of no clear exploration of the Fulbe migrations to and from the Futa Toro and the Futa Jallon.

prestige of the emperor.[14] That the connection is made through the time of his death (which is not a part of the public, performance record) is an indication of its lack of widespread currency.

ii. Later Traditions

The figure of Sunjata has in many ways eclipsed more recent celebrities, and we do not have extensive evidence for epics dealing with later figures. Samory Toure is sung (and appears in at least one hunters' epic as a reigning king); el-Hajj Umar Tall is recognized, but his trajectory in some regards bypassed the Manden, and so there is no great local crop of stories and legends attached to him. One war-leader of Wassulu, Fila Kali Sidibe, is the subject of narration by Wa Kamissoko, but there is little independent corroboration for his importance, nor does Wa's narration appear intended as a performance piece.

C. Segou and Massina: the eastern regions

This absence stands in contrast to the Fulbe presence in the Bamana traditions of Segou, where it is simply pervasive and also so richly provocative as to defy quick summary.[15] In this regions, the Mande epic traditions co-exist with a strong Fulbe epic tradition, and in many regards the two traditions have fused: one finds the same hero sung in both languages, one finds the same stories (without historical reference) reported across regions. The mutual influence is so strong that one wonders if the Fulbe presence has not served as a catalyst for the artistic shaping of the Bamana traditions of Segou.

The traditions of Segou are the starting point. Tauxier reports a tradition that the Coulibaly dynasty, which founded Segou, was Fulbe in origin, but this hypothesis comes in the colonial era of fascination with Hamitic intrusions. Such an origin is not given in the epic traditions; the story of Biton Coulibaly is built upon Mande elements (see Kesteloot et al. 1978; Belcher, "Of Birds...").

The traditions of Segou form a cycle which runs from the foundation by Biton Coulibaly to the period of decline under Monzon, son of Da Diarra (r. 1808-1828). This period is historically associated

14. This prestige is employed elsewhere for the same purposes. See the articles by Diawara and Belcher in Ralph Austen, ed. *In Search of Sunjata* (forthcoming).
15. This is a question I have begun to explore in other projects, as yet unpublished.

with the defeat of Segou by the Moslem forces of Cheikou Amadou at the battle of Noukouma in 1818, but this conflict is not evoked in the cycle. Instead, the series of conquests by Segou ends with an image of internal decay: the king turns against his principal hero, Bakari Jan Kone, and tries to kill him. Bakari Jan escapes this treachery, but relations are not the same afterwards.

At the end of the cycle, in fact, we see a clear transference of moral authority from the corrupt and treacherous kings of Segou to the heroic outsider, be it Bakari Jan or another such as Hambodedio. We sense also that the Fulbe have something to do with the decline of Segou, but we have few specifics. This transference, however, marks the same direction as the changes in political power which followed the defeat at Noukouma and the later conquest of the region by el-Hajj Umar, and it seems plausible to read it in the same manner as we read the stories of the death of Sunjata: as a heavily-veiled and symbolic representation of events which may yet arouse discomfort and animosity in the contemporary public.

In this case, it also seems probable that the combination of subsequent Tukolor hegemony (as observed, for instance, by Mage, Barth, and Raffenel in their travels) and more importantly the subsequent Islamization of the region have combined to remove that particular line of conflict from the repertoire of epic subjects, although the biography of el-Hajj Umar does become a subject of epic narration in almost all the languages of the region.[16] Within the oral tradition, one emphasis is upon the miraculous powers demonstrated by Umar Tal early in his career (e.g. as a suckling infant he observed the fast of Ramadan) and this stresses his function as a religious, rather than ethnic, leader. In other regards he is presented as a war-leader and an individual of great power, not unlike Samory Toure; as further recordings and transcriptions become available, a comparison of the images of these two heroes will be most interesting. Such a focus naturally evades the ethnic (or linguistic) and religious conflicts of the period by taking the side of the victor and repudiating the actual lines of conflict of the past; still, there does seem to be some ambivalence associated with el-Hajj Umar Tall (why did he attack the *dina* of Massina?) and the question awaits more detailed investigation. The

16.One can find accounts of the Tukolor leader, recorded from the oral tradition, in Poular/Fulbe (Samba Dieng), in Bamana, and in Zerma.

song associated with el-Hajj Umar, *Tara*, does seem the general emblematic song for the Fulbe within the *jeli* repertory.

As a further note, some evidence also suggests that with the growth of modern recording and broadcasting systems, Fulbe heroes such as Hambodedio and Silamaka are crossing the language lines to be sung in Bamana. There appears to be a wide corpus of ahistorical heroic narratives of no specific ethnolinguistic identity reported principally from the Kaarta and the regions lying northwest of the inland delta of the Niger.[17]

D. Observations

The general conclusion to be drawn from the historical epics, then, is that the Fulbe presence is not a recent intrusion, but rather that there appears to be evidence for awareness of a long-standing assocation translated into many specific connections throughout all the great periods of Mande history. One should also point to some evidence for geographic differentiation of relations: in upper Guinea, Maninka and Fulbe coexist in separate spheres; in the Wassulu the Fulbe assimilate; around Segou there is interpenetration and confusion of identity.

III. Hunters' Traditions

We come now to the hunters' narratives which were described, at the start of the paper, as the most problematic. We shall not rehearse the analyses of the hunters' associations here; the job has been well-done elsewhere.[18] Rather, let us consider available transcribed performances with the caution that in some sense, when looking for the 'Fulbe presence' in the *donsomana* (the hunters' epics), we will be observing not the regularities of the performance tradition, but the anomalies and the exceptions. We will be looking for things that seem out of place (by whatever standard); the analysis is experimental and tentative.

As a preface to a discussion of the hunters' songs, one might note

---

17. The best examples of such narratives are perhaps to be found in Frobenius, VI, and in the *Heart of the Ngoni*

18. See first of all Cisse, and for a more focused corrective then Cashion. Annik Thoyer-Rozat provides a polemical discussion in the introduction to her (valuable) *Chants de Chasseurs*; Keletigui Mariko provides a more popularized introduction to the topic in *Le monde mystérieux des chasseurs traditionnels*. Stephen Bulman's description of the ethnographic literature (1989) is also valuable.

that the hunting traditions occur over a wide area, not limited to the Mande peoples. Some elements of the Mande hunters' oral traditions offer parallels to the songs found among the coastal peoples such as the Yoruba and the Akan (see Ajuwon). A principal occasion for the singing of hunter's songs is the funeral of a known and initiated hunter; we have a collection of funeral dirges from Nigeria. The Dyula text, "Bamori et Kowulen," was recorded at a funeral, and throughout the other Bamana and Mandinka texts one finds references to deceased great hunters.

The narratives also tend to be shared; most of the Bamana narratives (collected in the modern era) can be matched with the Zerma/Sorko narratives collected at different periods by Dupuis-Yacouba, Frobenius, and Jean Rouch; the two Gambian narratives are also recognizable variants on a Mande type.

i. Praise-songs

A central element of the modern transcribed performances is the non-narrative singing performed in what Charles Bird termed the 'praise-proverb' mode; a preliminary study of this element inspired this paper. Much of this singing is devoted to describing and defining the hunters' state; it serves to build an esprit de corps, one presumes, and to assure the hunter(s) that the singer is aware of their plight. I wished to see whether (within the published texts) different performers used the same praise-proverb material, or whether improvisation and individuality appeared the rule; I was also curious whether the praise-songs I had identified in transcriptions of the Epic of Sunjata (see Belcher 1985) also appeared in hunters' songs.

The short answer is that they apparently do not. One finds occasional mention of Sunjata or Manden Bukari,[19] but one does not find their praises. The one hero who is cited is Fakoli, with the line "*Fakoli kunba, Fakoli daba*" and there are variants on the formula which indicate a wider conscious of of this important and progenitive hero.[20] One also finds apparently general invocations of hunters –

19. Almost exclusively by Seydou Camara, who is a treasure-trove among hunters' bards but also the most thoroughly recorded. We have a wider range of his texts available in print than for other bards.

20. See Conrad 1993 for the only full study of Fakoli of which I know; he shows how the cultural and genealogical importance of this hero eclipses, in some senses, that of Sunjata.

"Naked buttock-battler, naked chest-battler" is a striking line used repeatedly by at least three performers (Seydou Camara, Mamadou Jara, Batoma Sanogo), and there are a number of other such formulations[21] which seem characteristic of the discourse of hunters' epics and their apostrophic techniques.

Against this absence of political reference, one notices the presence of the generic Fulbe praise-lines reproduced on occasion by Mamadu Jara: *Jalo ni Jakite, Sidibe ni Sangare! / Buguturu ni bugubo! Fula Masajan!* (Mamadu Jara, Kambili, pp. 21/2, 51/2), and by Seydou Camara (Kambili p. 28),[22] and also found in the Gambia in a somewhat different form: "He is in Futa Toro, a Fula – Sidibe and Sankare – A Fula, Fula emptier of fresh excrement." (Innes pp. 21, 46). It was the memory of these praises that led me to the thought that examining references to the Fulbe in the hunters' epics might be instructive. However, on re-examination of the texts available, I found the Fulbe praises far less frequent than I had recalled: they are concentrated in performances of *Kambili* by two different performers. At the same time (and at the risk of exaggerating the importance of textual details) it is interesting that within the epics such ethnic praises find a place, when in many regards the world of the hunters seems cut off (in its frame of reference) from the politics and economics of the world around it.

ii. Narratives

Next comes the question of narratives about Fulbe within the hunters' corpus: one narrative stands out, attested by multiple versions: the story of "Maghan Jan," for which we have two versions available (by Ndugace Samake and Seydou Camara) and reports of a third. The character Maghan is mentioned elsewhere by Batoma Sanogo in one

21. Charles Bird and John W. Johnson have both described a generative system for frequently-encountered formulations such as " X and Y are not the same thing..." and other such constructions, but do not address the question of memorized praises and their significance.

22. Seydou Camara also adds another line: "Jalo ni Jakite / Sidibe ni Sangare / Buguturu ni bugubo makilikan / Fila si naani, Jatara si naani / Fila si nege bangilen don kelen," [diacritical marks omitted] . The association of the Fulbe and bullets may look back to the turbulence of the 19th century, in which a Fulbe, Fila Kali Sidibe, war-chief of the Wassulu under Samory, wrought havoc. See Kamissoko (?) on this figure in *Tradition historique peul*.

of the lists of great (dead) hunters of the past; I do not know whether he counts as one of the forty-five *gwede*, the heroic hunters whose stories, according to Dosseh Coulibaly, constitute the repertory of a hunters' bard.[23]

The story is that of a hunter who marries an animal-bride, an antilope, after he takes her changing-skin away. Their marriage is happy and they have children, but eventually the secret of her nature is discovered (in both cases through the intrusive curiosity of others and the use of diviners). She returns to her animal shape and to the bush where he eventually kills her. His children will not eat her flesh; he does, and dies.[24]

The version of Seydoy Camara makes this story a myth of origin for hunters, through the names involved. In Seydou's narrative, the character is named Manden Bukari: a significant name in Mande history, the name of the brother with whom Sunjata hunted while in exile in Mema. The names of the children are Sanen, Kontoron, and Simbong: the first two are the names of the tutelary deities of hunters' societies, the last a hunter's title (and musical instrument) often applied to Sunjata as well. Given the cast and the context provided in Seydou Camara's narrative, this marriage between a human and a creature of the bush points to the distinctiveness of the hunter's position, wedded to two worlds, and safe in neither: while the bush may be the domain of hostile creatures (in some stories hunters do actually get killed: so with "Misiba" told by Ndugace Samake and Bamori in "Bamori and Kowulen"), the human world is also subject to pressures, forces, and finally to machinations which can bring evil consequences. Safety lies in secrecy. If we see Seydou's narrative as a myth of origin for hunters (through the presence of Sanin, Kontoron, and Simbong), we can also see an evident logic in which the sons derive their powers from the marriage of the two worlds. This interpretation may be reinforced by the symbolism of the antilope which might here be seen as a parallel with the agriculture-bringing

23. Mamadou Dembele, of the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, has told me of a recorded performance by Batoma Sanogo which gives the story of Maghan Jan in a form very similar to that of Ndugace Samake. Personal communication.
24. The story has affinities with the European tradition of the swan-maiden, but tales of such human-animal alliances are known world-wide.

Chi-wara elsewhere in Mande culture.[25]

Seydou Camara's piece seems a creative and original invention, on the basis of available evidence, although there is a strong possibility that it represents a regional variation from the central Manden or the region somewhat west of it in Guinea. Manding Bokari is a significant cultural figure, but this story of origin for Sanen and Kontron is unique. By contrast, we have slightly wider corroboration for the version presented by Ndugace Samake in which the ideological interpretation is somewhat transformed. The hero here is a Pullo intent on his hunter's identity; he refuses to speak Fulbe with his family, and distinguishes himself also by his clothing: he wears yellow around the house, but secretly changes to white when on the way to the market. It is in this other clothing that he meets his antilope bride. She is apparently not the only shape-shifter in the story.

To observe this parallel between the characters is to connect the story not with the esoteric world of the hunters but with the human world populated by apprentices and relatives who will point at a wife and exclaim at her oddities. It brings the story away from the rich and dense world of esoteric and suggestive lore so artfully projected by Seydou Camara and into the realm of social identity and the integration of groups.

A fundamental irony of Ndugace Samake's handling of this story, obvious only when one notes that in Seydou Camara's version the hero is not a Pullo, involves the stereotype of the Fulbe mentioned earlier: their love for their livestock. Maghan Jan may be disregarding his social Pullo identity by refusing to answer his parents in Fulbe, but in an odd sense he is ratifying the stereotypic characteristics of that identity by his choice of a non-human former quadruped as a bride.

This irony might also be termed a rather tasteless joke; the opinion would depend, presumably, upon one's reading of the denouement of the story. One might also see it as something of an inevitable tragic

---

25. My attention was drawn to the potential significance of the antilope by Eugenia Herbert's excellent *Iron, Gender, and Power*, in which she offers an excursus on antilopes, pp. 180-184. Before that I viewed the question only in terms of aesthetic stereotypes: antilope woman vs. warthog woman or elephant-woman. This more humorous aspect of the situation is developed in some of the *Sirankomi*-type narratives, where the animals debate which type of woman will most easily seduce the hunter. In those stories, it is most often a buffalo-woman who is chosen -- and that choice raises a host of other associations.

mechanism: both members of the couple are victims of a world which cannot understand them; the man, blinded by love, comes to his senses and attains self-knowledge; or indeed as the purification of the society through the eradication of a monstrous mismatch.

The choice of avenues of interpretation depends in part on one's sense of the performer's range of choices, and what the alternatives are, or indeed if there is a set choice. This narrative does line itself up with a series of others in which a hunter is seduced by an animal bride who wishes to learn his secrets so that she may betray them. "Sirankomi" is the title given by Mamadu Jara for the Bamana version, but it is also found in Zerma and elsewhere; as a folktale it is widely reported. We also find it somewhat outside the realm of ordinary discourse in two significant instances: the story is given as part of the narrative of the "Black Bagre" edited by Jack Goody and we can recognize elements from the story-pattern in the seduction of Sumanguru by Sunjata's sister (in those versions where Sumanguru begins revealing a series of transformations, rather than the secret of the white cock's spur). So marrying an animal-bride is not the exceptional event; the real issue is that of the children and their integration with the human world.

From this angle, we might observe that Seydou Camara's version is perhaps more creative and original than that of Ndugace Samake. Our premise should not necessarily be that the intrusion of the Pullo into the hunter's story is an innovation; it might work the other way (and considering the other revisions of the story presented by Seydou Camara, it seems quite likely that it does). The question turns, then, on the range of typical characters – the classic hunter-figures – of the tradition.[26]

Our comparative evidence may help us, although it also raises far larger questions than one can fully address in this space. The Songhai-Zerma narratives collected by Dupuis-Yacouba at the turn of the century present themselves as a loose series involving a set cast of characters – the same sort of pattern evoked by Dosseh Coulibaly as he describes an (unfulfilled) series of forty-five hunter-heroes. Dupuis-Yacouba's narratives belong to a group whom he names the Gow, and following that term, mediated through the works of Jean

26. On this question, the limitations of working with published material and not in the field are self-evident. One cannot ask the *donsojeli* what the stories are.

Rouch, one comes to the modern work of Jean-Marie Gibbal and his work with the Gow of the spirit possession cults throughout Mali.

I do not mean to suggest here that the hunters' associations are spirit cults. I do wish to observe that the shared narrative corpus and professional association (the Gow at the turn of the century, in a less Islamized environment, apparently were associated with hunting cults along the Niger, although clearly their focus has changed of late) of the two groups should be recognized, and this for two reasons.

The first deals with the question of the presence of a Pullo in a Bamana narrative. The Gow spirits operate in groups: there is a recognized pantheon (pandaimon?) of entities, with apparently some variation, and one of them, accorded perhaps token representation in an association intended to appeal to all sectors of the community, is a Pullo.[27] The presence of a Pullo among a roster of hunters thus appears less surprising.

The second reason for recognizing the common ground is the growing tendency to view the hunters' associations as primordially Malinke. One might define two poles in approaches to the groups: Youssouf Cisse recognizes the integrative aspect of the associations, but nevertheless emphasizes their Malinke identity, presumably in pursuit of his larger project of defining Mande culture. A writer such as Keletigui Mariko recognizes the diversity of groups and traditions under the umbrella of hunting – in their shirts might be a more appropriate metaphor – and focuses on the esoteric nature of their knowledge. In the modern era, as the associations become an instrument of political organization and competition, the question of Malinke identity becomes more central; it is part of the same valorization and politicization of ethnic identity as defined by Amselle.

The evidence of the historical traditions shows us an awareness of interaction reaching far back in time, and consequently a need for some sort of modus vivendi among the groups, either through assimilation or through specialization. I expect other papers will demonstrate how the resident Fulbe serve, in a sense, as a specialized

27. His name is Samba Pullo, and he wears yellow, not unlike Maghan the hunter. For descriptions, see Gibbal, *Genies* pp. 42, 45 ff; *Guerisseurs* pp. 122 ff. The figure probably has a wider distribution; Solange de Ganay reported a *devise* for Samba le peul among the *devises* of the Dogon.

labor-force – non-*nyamakala* animal tenders, one might call them – in a manner which recalls Bazin's suggestion that the *numuw* might be seen as a previously distinct 'ethnic' group ("A chacun son bambara"). The evidence one gets from the narratives and the songs shows that the hunters are drawing on a regional, and not an ethnic, base of information, and that their lore is best seen not as the secret 'heart' of a group (after all, at one point Sunjata and Manding Bokari found the hearts and livers missing from their prey) but as an itinerant commodity passed from group to group through the mechanism of individuals of different origins meeting in a common ground. In other words, hunters' associations have served, as do so many other non-genealogical social organizations, to cut across the potential divisions of society and to link the diverse members by interest and by a self-consciously constructed brotherhood.

We might return here to Sunjata and his construction of the Manden. He does not define it in any unitary sense, but rather through lists of participant communities, and he does this on several occasions in which he vows to return and to rule over the constituent groups: the thirty-three quiver-bearing (or warrior) clans, the five clans of Mande marabouts, the four clans of *ngara*, the blacksmiths, the *jeliw*, the leather-workers... The Mande also is a construct into which, work and lifestyle permitting, the Fulbe seem to have effectively integrated themselves.

Stephen Belcher
Department of Comparative Literature
The Pennsylvania State University

REFERENCES

Jean-Loup Amselle. "L'ethnicité comme volonté et comme représentation: à propos des Peul du Wasolon." *Annales ESC* 1987, pp. 465-489.

—-. "Un État contre l'État: le Keleyadugu." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 28 (1988), pp. 463-483.

—-. *Logiques Metisses*. Paris, Editions Payot, 1990.

—- et al. "Littérature orale et idéologie: La geste des Jakite Sabashi du Ganan (Wasolon, Mali)." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 19 (1979), pp. 381-433.

—- and Elikia M'bokolo. *Au coeur de l'ethnie*. Paris, Editions la découverte, 1985.

Adam Konare Ba. 1983. *Sunjata: le fondateur de l'empire du Mali*. Libreville, Lion.

Jean Bazin. "A Chacun son Bambara." in Amselle and M'bokolo, pp. 87-127.

Stephen Belcher. 1985. *Stability and Change: Praise-poetry and Narrative Traditions in the Epics of Mali.* Ph. D. Dissertation, Brown University.

Stephen Belcher. unpublished. "Heroes at the Borderline." Paper presented at the conference on Epics in the Contemporary World, University of Wisconsin, April 1994.

Stephen Belcher. Forthcoming. "Of Birds and Millet: Problems in West African Mythology." *Yearbook of General and Comparative Literature.*

Stephen Bulman. 1990. *Interpreting Sunjata: A Comparative Analysis and Exegesis of the Malinke Epic*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Birmingham.

—-. "The Buffalo Woman..." in Barber and Moraes, eds. *Discourse and its Disguises*. Birmingham, CWAS, 1989. pp.

Diango Cisse and Massa Makan Diabaté. 1970. *La dispersion des Mandeka.* Bamako, Editions populaires.

David C. Conrad. 1984. "Oral Sources on Links between the Great States: Sumaguru, Servile Lineage, the Jariso and Kaniaga." *History in Africa* 11 pp. 35-55.

—-. 1985. "Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata." *Journal of African History*. 26 pp. 33-49.

—-. 1990. *A State of Intrigue: the epic of Banmana Segou according to Tayiru Banbera*. Oxford, Oxford University Press/the British Academy. Fontes Historiae Africanae, series varia vi.

—-. 1992. "Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic: The Case of Fakoli." *History in Africa*. 19. 147-200.

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

Dosseh Joseph Coulibaly, ed. and trans. *Récits des chasseurs du Mali: Dingo*

Kanbili... de Bala Jinba Jakite. Paris. CILF/Edicef. N.D.

Maurice Delafosse. *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*. Paris, Larose, 1913. 3 volumes.

—-. *Traditions historiques et légendaires du Soudan occidental*. Paris, Comité de l'Afrique française 1913.

Massa Makan Diabaté. 1970a. *Kala Jata*. Bamako, Editions populaires.

—-. 1970b *Janjon et autres chants populaires du Mali.* Bamako. Editions populaires.

—-. 1975. *L'aigle et l'épervier*. Paris, Jean Oswald.

—-. 1986. *Le Lion à l'arc.*. Paris, Hatier.

Mamadou Diawara, forthcoming. "Le héros et son paradigme." in Ralph Austen, ed. *In Search of Sunjata*, Indian University Press. Paper originally presented at Northwestern University, November 1992.

Leo Frobenius. 1925. "Die Sunjattalegende des Malinke" and "Ergänzungen" in *Atlantis V: Dichten und Denken im Sudan*. Iena, Eugen Diederick. pp. 303-343.

Jean Marie Gibbal. *Guerisseurs et magiciens du Sahel*. Paris, Editions Metailie, 1984.

—-. *Genies of the River Niger*. Trans. Beth G. Raps. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1994.

Gordon Innes, ed. and trans. 1974. *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions*. London, School of Oriental and African Studies.

Gordon Innes. *Kaabu and Fuladu*. London, SOAS, 1976.

Gordon Innes. *Kelefa Saane: His Career Recounted by Two Mandinka Bards*. London, SOAS, 1978.

—- and Bakari Sidibe. *Hunters and Crocodiles: Hunters' Narratives from the Gambia*. London, Paul Norbury 1990. UNESCO.

Kanku Madi Jabaté. 1987. *L'Histoire du Mande*, collected, translated, and annotated by Madina Ly-Tall, Seydou Camara and Bouna Diouara. Paris, Association SCOA.

John William Johnson. 1978. *The Epic of Son-Jara: An attempt to define the model for African Epic Poetry*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University. 3 volumes.

John William Johnson. 1986. *The Epic of Son-Jara According to Fa-Digi Sisoko:*

A West African Tradition. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Wa Kamissoko and Youssouf Tata Cisse. 1988. *La grande geste du Mali.* Paris, Karthala/Arsan.

—-. 1991. *Soundjata, la gloire du Mali.* Paris, Karthala/Arsan.

Lilyan Kesteloot, ed. 1972. *Da Monzon de Segou*. Paris, Fernand Nathan. 4 volumes.

Lilyan Kesteloot et al. "Le mythe et l'histoire dans la formation de l'empire de Segou." *Bulletin de l'IFAN* Ser. B 40.3 (1978), pp. 578-681.

Roderic Knight. *Mandinka Jeliya*. Diss. U.C.L.A., 1973. Ann Arbor, U.M.I. 74-1573.

Roderick Knight. "Manding/Fula Relations as reflected in the Manding Song Repertoire." *African Music* 6.2 (1982), pp. 37-47. [First presented at the Conference on Manding Studies, SOAS – University of London, 1972].

Nehemia Levtzion. 1980. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. New York, Africana. 2nd edition.

Gerard Meyer, ed. and trans. 1991. *Récits épiques toucouleurs.* Paris, Karthala.

Charles Monteil. 1953. "La légende de Ouagadou et l'origine des Soninké." *Mémoires de l'IFAN*. 23.

—-. *Les empires du Mali*. Paris, G.P. Maisonneuve. N.D. (first published 1929).

Rex Moser. 1974. *Foregrounding in the Sunjata, the Mande Epic.*. Ph. D. Dissertation, Indiana University.

F. Quiquandon. "Histoire de la puissance mandingue." *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie Commerciale de Bordeaux* Ser. 2, 15 (1892) pp. 305-318, 369-387, 401-429.

Abderrahman es-Sadi.1981. *Tarikh es-Soudan*. ed. and trans. O. Houdas. Paris, Maissoneuve et Larose. 1981. (first printed 1900).

Karim Traore. 1992. "Jele et Sere, ou la dialectique du discours au Manden." Forthcoming in Ralph Austen, ed. *In Search of Sunjata*, Indiana University Press. Paper originally presented at Northwestern University, Nov. 1992.

Donald Wright. *The Early History of Niumi*. Ohio University, Center for International Studies. Africa Series No. 32. 1977.

Donald Wright. "Koli Tengela in Sonko Traditions of Origin." *History in Africa*

5 (1978), pp. 257-271.

Donald Wright. *Oral Traditions from the Gambia: volume 1. Mandinka Griots*. Athens, Ohio. Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1979.

Donald Wright. *Oral Traditions from the Gambia: volume 2. Family Elders*. Athens, Ohio. Ohio University Center for International Studies. 1980.

Donald Wright. "The Epic of Kelefa Sane as a Guide to the Nature of Precolonial Senegambian Society – and Vice Versa." *History in Africa* 14 (1987), pp. 287-309.

Franz de Zeltner. 1913. *Contes du Sénégal et du Niger*. Paris, Leroux.