

Field of Life**Sowing of Speech****Harvest of Acts****Sory Camara***translated by Lee Haring***Prologue¹**

Let speech begin with the Master's name:

Yiri

Konko Maa Yiri.

Tranquil spirit of health

Little tree in the pool's brightness

Little pool in the dawn of the Swamp

Master of winter's waters

Height of summer's waters

You who have scaled the burning mountain

You who have contemplated the sea of serenity

You who have entered your nocturnal palace

without deserting your solar kingdom

Witness of the era of nesting

visitor to the savannas of the annunciation

Perpetual dweller in the forest of knowledge:

in the night of the visitation

you contemplate this world

and you leave it

Having found in this land

no path

May grace be given you through speech.

Until the downfall of the ages

may this word never cease watering the fields of life.

Kôndorôn Jimmê

Jimmê Sora

Kandara Koyi

¹ Translator's note: having no competence in Mandinka language, I have made no effort to verify the translations of quoted words.

Konko Maa
Yiri!

So are you named!

Sowing of Speech

Kandara Koyi was the last of the Pathmasters whom I have had the good fortune to meet. In his time he was the youngest and most precocious of the Most Ancient Masters. His public utterances emitted ungraspable meanings that invariably left me bewildered.

In the second sun of the sixth moon of the year of Ordeal, he called me. His message found me very distracted. Ungraciously I abandoned my visitors. The time he chose and his hesitant delivery increased my impatience, which was aggravated by a muffled sense of evil presentiment springing from this unexpected call of his. Then his message flew across my hearing like lightning in a cloudless sky proclaiming a tornado. I had no conception of the gravity of the moment until Yiri Konko Maa had departed this world. I carry the infinite grief of that as day in its cool shadows carries night's phantoms. Kôndorôn Jimmê, who when asleep drove away the wicked spirits of daytime, who when awake repelled the maleficent emanations of night, Kôndorôn Jimmê the Knower, silent among the perilous horde of this world's chatterboxes, Kôndorôn Jimmê the truth-teller, who spared neither the scholars lost in the desert of their learning nor the ignorant cut down by the stones of the pathways of ignorance: when this reticent master did me the favor of a private interview, I hardly heard him, I who had traveled so far in quest of a word to use as a foundation!

His utterance fell into the abyss of my inattention. Bred in this untimely interview, the word I report here grew in the swampy fields where forgetful thoughts gestate, wandering in the uncertain confines where ancient words are stored and new words germinate:

Most ancient Words are like seeds
 You sow them before the rains
 The earth is warmed by the sun
 The rain comes to wet it
 The water of the earth penetrates the seeds
 The seeds change into grasses
 then become stalks of millet.
 Thus you to whom I have just told the Most Ancient Word
 You are the earth.

In you I have sown the seed of the word
The water of your life must penetrate the seed
for the germination of the word to take place.

This was how Kidugu Mahan replied to a question about the meaning of the words he had just entrusted to me. It was an answer I understood only ten years later. When my life's strength began to betray me on the threshold of trial, I found again the Most Ancient Word of master Kidugu, "The Young Man with Empty Hands" (Camara 1982). The text had been lost in the middle of a heroic epic. The Master had wished it so. So surprising were the circumstances in which he recounted the myth to me that over eleven years I had forgotten them. Seeing how eager I was for Most Ancient Words, Kidugu Mahan replied sternly that he was no storyteller. Then he commenced the interview with the history of our people, the Mandinka. When after several nights of interviews, he saw I had abandoned my earlier search, he interrupted his story to say, with a satisfied smile, "Tonight I will tell you the Most Ancient Word!"

He told me the myth of the Young Man with Empty Hands, who is denounced by the hunter whom he has saved from the trap. Then he resumed the story of the Mandinka. That is how I forgot this myth. A dream brought it back to me at a moment when destiny was calling me to account. That was the means the old man had found to preserve the Most Ancient Word from ill-timed or premature exegesis. Just when the water of my soul had so painfully moistened the seed of his speaking, his utterances resonated in me like the howl of earth at the junction where life's paths cross.

Of that moment of grace, however, I did keep some relics: I did record the words. I did not have such good luck during my private interviews with other masters. From those precious moments, all that comes back to me is jetsam memories that wash up, by the hazard of days, on the desolate strand of my consciousness. When I cast myself back to men of another time who now lie in the earth, again I feel the acid taste of fruit that is sharpened by a child's stealing; I feel the unease of a disciple annexing the lands of a dispossessed master. But is not the master an accomplice in his own dispossession when he employs trickery to utter serious speech?

There is the drama. To transmit it with some justice, I shall use prose for the new words that issue from the gestations of my existence, and verse for the remembered pearls that the interval of my absence washes down the sand of the days, distinguishing without separating the memory of the Most Ancient Words from the inspiration of the Emergent Words

(Camara 1982):

The Ancient Words
 some come out of others
 but they are not identical
 Look at a human being
 He is first a baby
 From this baby
 comes a little girl
 from the little girl
 comes a full breast
 from the full breast
 comes a mother
 But the mother and little girl are not the same
 Ah well—
 Most Ancient Words are like seeds
 some come out of others
 but they are not the same.

At the moment he speaks, a speaker echoes multiple heard words. But he is at the same time the very voice of *Mahambu*, the voice of the Original Man whose speaking brought things together, gave rhythm to their movement, gave shape to their form. He is carried away by *da fara gooto*, the ravaging spirit whose violent speech “breaks the mouth” of the one possessed by the word. What is thus expressed is the result of the taming of the wild beast of speech and the conversion of a corporeal hunter into spirit, or *nyama*.

For Kandara Koyi, verbal utterance also had something of the forge about it: the extraction of the verbal ore from one’s inner veins, the fusion of the matrix down in the burning of the kidney’s furnaces, the sublimation, by the chimney of the mouth, of the metallic liquid in the indefinitely malleable and subtle kinds of breath—there is the word of proof which the miner-smith must realize. He must become a master of this art. For the only mastery man can claim in this world is speech in harmony with life’s strings stretching over the abyss of death.

According to Kôndorôn Jimmê, the primordial act of manifestation, which survives today in the laggard echoes of human speech, is *bank kuo*, which means both the advent of speech and the event of creation. It is this correspondence, this harmony that disturbed the Immobile in his immobility and broke the silence of the Silent. And I hear the Master say:

The Immovable conceived
 He begot movement
 Movement conceived
 He begot the abyss
 The abyss conceived
 he set in motion *fuu faa fuu*
 nothingness begetter of nothingness.
Fuu faa fuu conceived
 He begot breaths/whispers
 Fêh fêh fêh . . .
 Made the whirling winds in the desert of the worlds
 that was *jeng kango*
 the Voice of the Universe
 that was *foli fôlô*
 Primordial Music
 That was *banke qule kan*
 the resounding of the flute of creation.
 There was the face of the coming of the whole universe.

In the depths of *denka ba*, the matrix abyss, *fuu faa fuu*, the “nothingness begetter of nothingnesses”—from which ages and worlds continually emerge and into which things continually collapse—*wuyen daga ba*, the great bathing tub, was shaped. Dry cold winds of the first age felt *hinnô*, compassion. They condensed, bringing forth *sama funtanô*, rainy heat. *Sama funtanô* begot *hala fingo*, the black gods, whose avatars are the clouds of existence. These were turbulent creatures: “*Fata fata fata*,” like a great drum they moved; they clashed.

Came forth *san fêtengo*, heavenly brilliance. “*Bili bili biliw!*” A lightning flash burst into the face of the Great Forefather of Violation. It struck the *hala fingo*. Thus was the world threatened with sinking. Weeping, *woyii* created *N Maama Bulabaga*, the great ancestress of deliverance. “*Pêtê pêtê pêtê, Pêtê pêtê pêtê*” came her tears, compassionate rains to purify hostile fogs from the veil of the world. As the sands of the sea fell into space, they sang the bonding song *kanunko koyo*, “Bright Love,” which is sung today by the Mandinka of Niokolon Kôôba at the eve of the turning of the year.

The seeds of compassion begot *san kungo*, the emergent year. But the soul of springtime did not live long. For the shadowy gods had quickly assembled the shreds of their world, which had been riven by the lightning. They set to hunting; they cast out their inheritance into the universe of birth. Under the weight of their sultry breath, Bright Love expired.

The younger brother of *Kanunko Kôkô* was so impatient to come into the world that he pushed himself out. This was *Jusuba*, Great Passion. The

voice of his scalding arrival was “*Gidi Gidi Gidi Gerêh!*”² Jusuba fell into the atmosphere. There was a hubbub:

“*Taling taling*
Taling taling!”

Jusuba bestirred himself, upsetting all the reincarnating forms of Bright Love, dead too soon. Everywhere fiery clamors resounded:

Ta fu fu
Ta fa fa
*Barang barang!*³

Everywhere he sowed disarray and desolation. Once burnt, the area of the birth became uninhabitable. Jusuba took refuge in the male heart of the nascent world and became *mônêba bobali*, great pent-up anger. It was his growling that made hearts beat “*diya goya diya goya*,” scattering seed by seed, willy-nilly willy-nilly. These fierce jolts brought forth *fitina mankan ba*, the great perturbation of the threats that periodically come to creation from heaven.

In the female heart of the nascent world, *Jusuba* brought forth *jarabi*, the downfall of beings who collapse in ruin under the weight of passion. *Jarabi* breathed out, giving birth to the sighs and sobs of *nimissa*, nostalgia, the complaints of the beloved counting over her grievances at her lover’s lack of compliments: “*Woyi, Woyi yoh, Wêle wêlê wêlê!*” This was the voice of all that falls, flows away, and gushes. This pluvial voice came to moisten the cinders of the untimely-burnt world. *Nimissa*’s precipitations whitened the expanse: “*Lew lew lew.*”⁴ They formed in their souls the *kombi loolo*, stars of the dew, which still shine and sparkle at life’s heart, extinguished and enkindled by myriads at each instant. The shades found their somber recriminations rarefied. Finally came *jenjen kaane*, universal dawn: all became translucent and cool.

The clear sound of *Kanunka Kôyô* reawakened from her swoon. In this time of sweetness she extended her diaphanous loincloth as a veil of

² *gerêh*: onomatopoeic word evoking the sound of violent fall, also a word signifying boxing.

³ Onomatopoeia evoking first smoke, then flames.

⁴ Onomatopoeic word for whitening.

shame over the nascent things. The hunter soul of *Jusuba* emerged from hiding: it riddled the garment of Clear Love with a shower of *tutugu tambo*, fiery spears. The soul of the dawn was refined: “*Wuyen yen.*”⁵ Invulnerable to conquest of possession, she took refuge in the echoing of torrents, in the shadows of sunlit beings, and in the pale brightness of nights of the full moon. There she will reign until ages fall.

The earth was unveiled.

The “bitter breath of a canicular season,” of parching, *funtanô tonkolon fôniô*, breathed everywhere.

Lakali Fenba, the great Being of Utterance, World of the human generation to come, still dwelt dozing in the clammy sweetness of the soul of the Great Forefather, *N Maaba Taalga nitodiya*. Yet did signs of the events remain open towards times to come, vibrating with an infinite expanding power. Between the sweetness of that dwelling and the vertiginous call from afar, these archetypes, *ti fôlô*, evolved into “flowing speech,” *wuuyu waayo kumô*. The world of human engendering, on the threshold of its realization, hesitated between shame and desire. The Great Forefather of deliverance and impatience shook *karo daga ba*, the great vessel of the plexus of the Great Ancestor of Ravishment. Not yet fixed in their true movements, the signs dispersed themselves in the abyss of *fuu faa fuu*. Caught there, they were separated and petrified. They became opaque in their solitude:

Kiling kiling taga
Kiling kiling finki
 Going one by one
 Each creature blind in its solitude.

This was the voice of the advent of the signs, the music of their transformation into things. There succeeded a world of “beings with carapaces.” So did these *fatama fengo* confine their seed of light (*yelen kêsê*). That is how the world of human engendering became *bobo fenda*, the great mute thing. The great ancestor was its originator. To rescue and preserve light against unholy greed, future purloinings and desecrations, he held back his incandescent emanations. Winter’s cold was the result. That is how the signs—coalescent, translucent—became opaque, leathery, and closed.

The Great Forefather of Ravishment acted thus to protect the depths of the beings to come from the shameless caprices of the great Foremother

⁵ *Yen* onomatopoeically evokes an evaporating/refining liquid; *wuyen* = vapor.

of Deliverance. With their rarefied seeds, *naaje keso*, he seeded the human soul. Out of this humus, out of the germ of things, the shoots of speech were to germinate. Thus did the world, by closing itself up, lose the “clear word”; thus did men, by uttering speech, lose direct vision. That is why the Pathmasters say that the world has turned its back on men’s speech. So when humans, who are vassals to their prowess at plundering, knock *Konkon!* at the gate of things, no answer comes to them from closed things. *Lellé!* Then, in their anger and impatience, they arm themselves with burglars’ tools and injurious weapons. They violate the world and their own essences. But the subtle seed of revelation is inaccessible to any implement. Only speech can apprehend it. Yet at the very dawn of its advent, speech will denounce its own lying nature and accuse itself of twisting ruses and malversations, to put on guard the very ones who betake themselves to her to guide them. That is why the narrator of such ancient words begins by saying, “I shall tell you lies!” At the end of his narration he will conclude,

That is how things happened at that time
 That is what ended it.
 You will find that that still happens
 I have seen it.

“You have contemplated the vision!” his interlocutor will attest. But what narrator today knows what is behind those words?

It is thus that with closed eyes, men go smashing against the stones in the road, killing each other on the thorns of the world’s underbrush. They have ears and do not hear the world’s music. They stamp their feet and dance the world’s dance out of time. It is thus that they foment plots to threaten each other and utter words of malediction to cause these plots to erupt. For the dancer is the child of the dance. If he gets out of rhythm, he goes against life’s grain.

Now *jen donseng*, the step of the world’s dance, makes a great sound:

Tisidiba nyiassa
I no donseng fêlê
 Firewood filled with signs
 Here is the step of your mother’s dance!

Indeed every being born and mortal is a badly bound bundle of signs that can only dance in time. The world’s music may turn into one string stretching and swelling, answerable to events, in haps and mishaps: a link

with *musu kan kiling tigi*, wife of the unique word, who never deserts the heart of the Great Forefather of Ravishment. This string is at once *ni julô*, the string of life, and *kuma julô*, the string of speech. Man is the musician who strums the strings of life, which emit speech by their vibrating.

It is man's destiny to crack things open—to reveal the burning seed that was penned up at the dawn of creation. Indeed, the dust of the primordial signs, *to fôlô*, has endured since the shaking of the vessel containing them, suspended in the desert of the worlds to come, immobilized in the indiscriminateness of heaven and earth. The face of the Great Forefather was obscured; the heart of the Great Forefather was grieved. The Great Forefather expired. That was the breath of the scattering of the signs, *tio jensen fonyo*: “*Kêsê kêsê kêsê kêsê Jêsêng!*” Throttled in the immobility of the suspended world at the threshold of its realization, the Great Forefather, at the same instant, powerfully inhaled. There resulted the great whirlwind, mover of primordial things, *tifolo lamaga tonkolon*. That was the dance of the spindle weaving the cotton of the world: *Wala wala walaw!*

Then *san nyang kaba*, incandescent stone of heaven, fled from the confines of the worlds, repelled by the vertiginous expansion of the primordial signs and having witnessed the departure of the Forefather of Ravishment. Turning on itself, earth fell into the depth of the universe:

Dugu daga dingo!
Muntu!
 Little pot of earth!
 Closed!

That was the voice of men's coming into the world. The expanse bowed: *fuulu faala fulayih* The ribbon of life linking heaven and earth was twisted by the whirlwind movement of the dust of the primordial signs. It broke. The great maternal waters, *jiba jio*, threw the dust of the signs back down to the little pot of earth:

Foyi kisi kisi kisi
foyi falen falen
foyi kisi kisi kisi
foyi falen falen

Sowing is safety, safety, safety
 Sowing is change, change
 Sowing is safety, safety, safety
 Sowing is change, change

Thus echoed the song of the sowing of fecundating speech, *yidi kuma foïkan*. Space became the field of life and the nesting place of speech, *balo kêna ani kumo nyaa*. And I hear the master say:

It was the uttering of speech that made the world whole
 It was the uttering of speech that wove the fibers of the world
 It was the uttering of speech that laid the foundation of the world
 It was the uttering of speech that revealed the foundation of the world.

That is what I recall from my private interview with Yiri. It contains numerous lacunae and uncertainties. But the road thus traveled makes it possible to understand what the *Silatigi*, Pathmasters, of Nyokolon, Sirimanna, and Dantilan in eastern Sénégal have expounded in their public speeches: that the performance of speech with correct expression and suitable rhythm, in harmony with the dance of things, causes seedbearers to germinate, solidifies the bones of many things, erects the erectile, bends creatures disposed to fall, raises bodies into their orbits, arranges the objects of the cosmos, ties the creatures of the knot, and releases the creatures of unknotting. Speech wrongly performed engenders “bad life,” bad luck, and a bad death. Is it not performance that sows the field of life with verbal germs? Then the shoots of life take root, and the uttered speech brings about germination, tearing the loincloth of the earth.

All things that have come to pass, all present things, all things to come accomplish their destiny by the pathways of speech. At each instant human speaking perpetuates this unending birth. When words aim at healing the cleft of the world, they spring up ceaselessly, opening out into flowers, diffusing into odors, greening in leaves, swelling into fruits. But when they wander off this path of life, they ceaselessly burn the verdant fields of existence, and the fine grasslands of life turn white. When the grassland whitens, then comes the time of falsehood. Moistening by actions is what follows this sowing of fecundating speech in life’s field.

Germination, burgeoning, flowering, fructification are the silent voices of life. We can hear them in certain states of grace and inspiration: then, the *kumajerila*, visionaries of speech, contemplating their vision, utter the limpid word, streaming forth and back, splendidly incandescent. The man who forges this word of fire and light becomes, unawares, a demiurge, as the smith of this own destiny. For in that instant, cosmic speech resounds through the human voice, and man enters into the dance in harmony with the rhythm of the world.

For the *Silatigi*, the Pathmasters, the sole calamity is a disharmony between the speech of man and the music of the world. The sole salvation

is the harmony of vocal cords that echo the resonances of the dance of the elements. Their wisdom may be translated thus: “Do not speak lightly; never speak lightly. If you cannot hold speech back, take several nights to follow the spoor of your internal words. During your hunt, breathe in the wind that blows over the four cardinal peaks. Consider with attention every wood, every bush, every blade of grass. Let your soul become an aperture of vigilance, a trench of resonance, where all things reverberate in cascading echoes, without diving off the cliffs of silence. For the wild game of speech is unpredictable, inconstant, and confounding. It is subtle and versatile. Its metamorphoses are innumerable, its ruses are unsuspected, its attacks are unstoppable. O hunter, you wander as a stranger in lands where it knows all routes and haunts all refuges. Keep back any word that tries to escape from your mouth. For the breaths of utterance draw you in their wake towards the fields of trial. The wild beast of speech has awaited you there a long time; he watches for you to appear. He observes your moves long before awareness comes to you. He chooses a moment of your inattention to charge you.

“And that beast has no time for foolery. Once uttered, speech is irremediable. The route it has traced coming out of you abrades, imperceptibly but infallibly, the external channel of your destiny; nothing can disjoin you from this channel. This road no one can retrace without having run its whole length. No one can leave it before having savored the sweet wine of its palms and drunk the bitter sap of the bastard-mahoganies [trees] that mark it.”

This, then, is the Mandinka ethic of speech. This ethic is above all a poetics of speaking well, so as to be born well to oneself and the world; so that the music of speech may launch the ship of the soul on the river of life and avoid the reefs of evil speaking, cursing, and scandal mongering; so that man may pick the seeds of speech and not sow tares in the fields of life.

But the journey through the world is not without its clashes. Suffering always begets recriminations and anger. Man swears and blasphemes. At each stumbling block, he sows poisonous speech in the field of life. Hence it comes that humans never stop calling down misfortune, and that misfortune never stops clouding over their sun and envenoming the bruises of their souls. By these roads come to us *nitokuuya*, bitternesses of heart, which spoil the essential oils of the earth with excessive acidity, and *jusu kasi*, tears of the heart, which darken the firmament of existence.

Speech, then, is spun from the cotton of the world. Man weaves its fibers, but sows the seed in the humus of his soul to fecundate the nest of

his body. The words for stretching of cotton into thread, *kêrêtêttê*, bears witness to the winding of destiny on the turning spindle from the instant of creation. The turning device at the base of the spindle is the sphere of the universe. The point of the spindle is the place where the “seed of self-vision” germinates in “the field of the contemplation of the universe.” In the shadows of distant worlds it sparkles; in the sun of existence it is obscured. The man who follows with sharp-pointed attention the thread of the word that penetrates, passes through, and escapes from him and draws him on to the pathways of destiny—such a man arrives at the point of the spindle where the vision of the word glitters. That man becomes a *jong jong*, according to the expression of the Pathmasters of Sirimanna and Dantilan. He pulls the thread of speech, starting from the cottony substance of the forming universe. He stretches this material thread, makes it vibrate, and lo! faltering lives are set in motion and defunct souls come to life.

Again begins the dance of the great adventure of manifestation, *dunnya lafôlô janjonba*. This human demiurge is an incarnation of the primordial hunter, whose quest causes savannas to rise up and who beats out the game of destinies’ consummation. This man is a *jong jong*. But of all the game animals inhabiting this bush, the only one worthy of a *jong jong* is the Great Reptile. The *jong jong* Nomogo Musa of Dalooto told me about this reptile at our first and last interview, in the year of grace 1973 in the land of Sirimanna.

Harvest of Acts

Nomogo Musa, like any other *jong jong*, was a hunter before he became a master of that inspired speech that incites emotions and achievements. When he abandoned the hunting of meat in favor of the hunt for speech, the *jong jong*’s achievements were prodigious. But in doing so, he lost something of his vital substance, for speech disrupts the life of the speaker. Therefore he exhorts hunters to bring him animal souls in order to nourish his own. Contained within beings of the bush is the seed of vision; they have removed it from its unique position of contemplating the world and watching oneself, to make it into the animating principle of their blind bodies. The word of the *jong jong* circumscribes the territory of these light-fleeing beings, tracks them in the depths of their ways, and subjugates their spirit. Before the den of the wild beast, he stretches the nets of speech. He gives the thread to the hunter of meat. Then begins the harvesting of existences that have been fecundated by the sowing of speech. (When the

Pathmaster speaks, he always has a respondent who replies to his words with the expression *nam*, which may be translated “So it is” [Arabic “Yes!”]. Sometimes he says *sigi kunturing*, which is untranslatable.)

Tiliding muta dantuman, Little eclipse of the sun
karundin muta dantuman, little eclipse of the moon
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 I send you to battle *Gumbo* tomorrow
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 If you do not win out over *Gumbo*
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 He is a being in the savanna
 I shall send you to track his soul in the heart of the “secret”
 [Respondent]: True!
 Are you listening, Sory Saba Jaaje?
 He goes through the night wetting the string to braid
 He goes through the day wetting the string to braid
 He is the elder/ancestor of tortoises
 that you go to hunt
 to come and offer his soul to me, *Bamba Musa*
 [Respondent]: True!
 I will make of him a gift to the old women
 the two of them are fleshless beings
 bonded in friendship
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 Now he exclaims, ô Dantuman:
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 being in “the secret”
 I will send you to hunt him in the savanna
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 Since you have not been able to hit *Gumbo* mortally
 [Respondent]: You say true!
 The being who covers his chest with a shield
 The being who covers his back with a shield
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 Proclaiming that he will be the exterminating genius of death
 he declares a lie, *fuusali!*
 [Respondent]: You say true, *Sigi Kunturun*
 He is the ancestor of tortoises
 that you go to pick a quarrel
 to come and offer his soul to me, *Bamba Musa*
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 The two of them are hard beings bonded in friendship

He calls on/summons you to go fight with the elder of tortoises⁶

[Respondent]: Here he exclaims, Dantuman:

He is a being roaming far

[Respondent]: *Nam!*

in the savanna

Do you know him?

I do not know him

[Respondent]: *Nam!*

The whole night he washes himself

the whole day he washes himself

[Respondent]: *Nam!*

If his washing produced holiness

then the fly tribe would be sanctified

[Respondent]: *Nam!*

Lance him tomorrow with your spear

come and offer his soul to me, *Bamba Musa*.

If that does not satisfy hunter

it will water my *Kaamo*⁷

[Respondent]: Lend him an attentive ear,

Sory Saba Jaajé!

He is a being that goes roaming the bush, Saara!

[Respondent]: *Nam!* What is he?

So now speech lies in the bush

before my face,

I Bamba Musa Ganya, the gnarled crocodile

Drive it out!

Visionaries of speech are not identical!

This is what he cries, Dantuman:

“Cutting iron with iron

comes impurity into one of the irons”

[Respondent]: *Nam!*

Not all the wise live past the knowledge issuing from sacrifice

[Respondent]: You say true!

The *Kaamo*, now, have acquired knowledge

So bring me their soul tomorrow.

If it does not appease my hunger

it will water my soul.

[Respondent]: True.

See him exalting Nginya Nginya of the eminences,

the bald mountainous *kokusan maadi*

[Respondent]: True!

⁶ The respondent addresses himself to me, as he often does in the text, to emphasize the words addressed to me by the master of the path. Dantuman is one of my names.

⁷ Hunter’s fetishes.

If the wind blows
 the elephant goes laughing
 If it doesn't blow
 the elephant goes laughing
 [Respondent]: *Nam! Sigi Kunturun!*
 Go track him tomorrow
 Lance him with your spear
 Let him topple with one yell
 Come offer me his soul,
 me, Bamba Musa
 [Respondent]: True again!
 Even if I don't give it to the Muslims
 the two of them are bowmen linked in friendship
 [Respondent]: True!
 O Dantuman, he cries out *Allah!*
 [Respondent]: *Allah!*
 What says he then? He says one single thing
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
sita koto buku naring
 Agitation comes and goes under the baobab
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 He is the ancestor of the duiker⁸
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 If you don't give it to the harebrained
 what will be done with it?
 It will be hard to do anything with it
 If you don't lance him tomorrow with your spear
 to come offer his soul to me, *Bamba Musa*
 If it does not appease my hunger
 it will give some flavor to the sauce
 [Respondent]: Again you say true!
 Here is what he cries, Dantuman:
 Many days will be cloudy
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 Dantuman, little eclipse of the sun
 Dantuman, little eclipse of the moon
 You who create the ardor of the fire-stick
 [Respondent]: True!
 Cutting down the hunter who skins the living
 [Respondent]: *Sigi Kunturun!*
 He is a being in on the secret of the faraway
 What is this other being?
 To fight Damba, the male buffalo, is the test
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

⁸ A flighty, restless antelope associated with children.

He is going to send you to fight the spirit of that one in the bush
 the stumbling block
 the iron boulder

the swarm of terror
 Dantuman! he doesn't fight without night knowledge

If he charges you in the bush
 you will be laid on a "porters' bed"⁹
 and eat meat no more
 [Respondent]: True!

Damba, who leaves nothing behind him but dust
 is pointed out not to a blessed hunter's son
 but to a cursed hunter's son
 [Respondent]: True!

Damba, who wipes out hillocks
 and who charges at rocks
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

If he grinds/pulverizes you in the bush, Dantuman
 you will be laid on a "porters' bed"
 and eat ground things no more

I shall send you to betake yourself to Damba,
*Takikte Birama*¹⁰

[Respondent]: *Sigi Kunturun!*
 You will bring his soul to me, Bamba Musa
 "Woiyo!" he cries out, Dantuman
Maa Diba Jaaball,¹¹ Sweet Vision of Hope
salamaga salagija, salamaga banjugu
 [Respondent]: True!

If a woman comes down to the river to bathe
 Maa Jaaba is pure
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

If a woman does not come down to the river to bathe
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

Maa Jaaba is pure
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

If the woman seeks linen
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*

Jaaba of the Dawn wears beautiful linen
 [Respondent]: *Sigi Kunturun!*

Jaaba of the Ancient Days brings many species into the world

⁹ Stretcher.

¹⁰ One of the names of the buffalo.

¹¹ One of the names of Gumbo, the *hippotrague*.

Jaaba of the Ancient Days was the ancestor of many
 The horde of Buffalo are his descendants
 [Respondent]: You say true
 I shall send you to betake yourself to Gumbo
 [Respondent]: *Sigi Kunturun!*
 If Gumbo withdraws from my enclosure
 There! my herds are scattered
 [Respondent]: Truth!
Sambantari Gumbo who carries a high load¹²
 young warrior who calls for a fight
 he is *Gumbo, Tanjalika*
 [Respondent]: It is the truth!
 How many days are overcast, O Saara;
 O Saaya, extinction is always about its business!
 I have heard that Yiri has become cold,
 that Maafina Yiri¹³ has become cold
 [Respondent]: True again!
 He did not live past the bullet
 Allah, what say you?
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 May we replace the ropes
 [Respondent]: *Nam!*
 For the earth is chilled again.
 [Respondent]: That is true!

Thus sang *jong jong* Nomogo Musa of the Sirimanna country. Often he spoke in the third person, "He declares," not out of vanity nor humility, only as an act of gratitude. He pays homage to the genius of inspiration, whom certain masters of speech name *n da fara gooto*, genius who has opened my mouth, and whom *jong jong* Nomogo Musa here identifies with the Muslim God Allah. Inside him he hears whispering words that correspond to the modulation and rhythm of his heartbeat, conformable to the breathing of the inspired word. And this genius of utterance, who calls forth the visionary moment of speech, reveals a field of pursuit, the performance place of the primitive hunter tormented by a hunger whose only sustenance is a quarry of meat. Now in this field of pursuit, all quarries resemble each other; all are confused. The hunter is threatened with goring by the horns of a wild attack. And indeed that is the unknown goal of this quest, which transports him to confront the murderous beast

¹² Refers to the animal's big horns.

¹³ Legendary hunter.

Damba, the male buffalo:

Damba, who leaves nothing behind him but dust
 is pointed out not to a blessed hunter's son
 but to a cursed hunter's son
 [Respondent]: True!
 I send you to betake yourself to Damba.

The hunter who has not confronted Damba does not deserve the name Danna. And Nadjan Danfaga, the Master of Bantakokuta, said, "The battle against Damba is the war against Allah!" So what can one say about the fight against Gumbo, the waterbuck, whose spirit begot the horde of buffaloes? It is pitching oneself into the tomb. Indeed that is the hunter's dream, for in that death lies a hope of being reborn as a master of speech. This spiritual conversion was recounted on another occasion by Mandjan, the initiate of the swamps of Tumbir Fara. Destroyed by Gumbo, assimilated into the earth he had traversed so long, and exhumed by the buffalo, Fanta La Mamadi, archetype of the hunter, is initiated into the word by Dembô the hyena, Dembô the spirit of nocturnal knowledge. From Dembô he receives the lute of the *jong jong*, whose silver calabash and golden strings evoke the horns of Gumbo. With the end of his quest in view, he forgets the hunt for meat. He takes up the instrument. Thanks to the music of the word, thanks to the word of music, he gives himself over to a subtler hunt: catching forest spirits in the net of speech, souls that resonate to the radiance of human vision. Thus he grasps the correspondences between wild species and the races of men. He gains access to the contemplation of the vision.

But to contemplate this vision annihilates both the object of the vision and the contemplating subject. Everything reduces itself then to the seed of vision, the blinding reflection of the Great Forefather's incandescent face. At that instant *there is neither thing nor person: there is only radiance of light in light*. And in this desert of vision he retains only unheard speech, the unique word whose infinite whirlwinds, sweeping down from the peaks of unknowing, cause all things to entangle. This the hunter who has traversed the bush of solitude and ordeal to confront Gumbo knows, with irrefragable knowledge. He knows that the ultimate object of his quest is the great reptile, the primordial python, from whose folds the opaque world of manifest beings will be begotten, a world where things enfold their original light and leave the human usurpers of speech in blindness. The purpose of the *jong jong*'s hunt is to remove the skin from creatures, so that they may gain access to this incandescence they contain. But the hunter of meat does

not know that, and not knowing it, he sows everywhere devastation, rending, and relentless fury.

In this unpopulated field, the *jong jong* cause the light of speech to stand forth. By no means, however, are all those who speak, or even all who excel in the art, *jong jong*. *Jong Jong* Boukari Kamara of Bula Kuru, a performer of authentic speech in the Sirimanna country, would sing:

The *griotte* Ngaara is in search of a rich man
 The master of the great drum calls her Namaniya¹⁴
 Woman coiled
 like a boa
 in intoxicating sensuality
 The master of the lute seeks the conqueror of women
 The *kora* master seeks the warlord
 Speech destroys the soul of the Great Reptile
 [Respondent]: You say true!
Jong Jong seeks the Lord of the hunt
 He knows the bush where speech lies!

And the spirit of the true lord of the hunt is then in quest of the great universal soul, from which emanate all the seeds of light and the incandescence that the opaque beings of manifest existence guard in their lairs. His aim is, by means of speaking, to transform life into a vision.

I must report the story of this great reptile, so as to base everything in truth and reality. I tell the legend of the field of life that called forth the sowing of speech and the harvests of existences.

Field of Life

Silatigi Djeli Mandjan Danfaga, the Initiate of Toumbing Fara, the pathmaster, a speaker of true speech in his time, favored me, on one night of grace, with *kuolu damina kuo*, “The Matter of the Beginning of Matters” of existence. Here is what it was granted me to report from this esoteric interview.

Maaba Tala, the Great Uplifting Forefather, and Maama Bulabaga, the Great Midwife Foremother, were in *sisi fôlô siisi*, the primordial mist of primal smoke. Maaba Taala, the Great Uplifting Forefather, lay in the first dream of *siibo fôlô fôlô*, on the breast of Maama Bulabaga. The spirit of the Great Forefather dwelt confined in his dream of himself. With him

¹⁴ Archetype of the sensual woman.

there was nothing except himself. His breath, in a state of inspiration, was suspended in *fu faa fu*, Nothing Father of Nothings. And the dream was in *jenfango*, the world egg. Maaba Tala experienced the illumination of *san falimô*, the heavenly bolt. And the world egg appeared in his bosom, filled with the totality of *dunya baliba*, the unmanifested archetypes of speech. And the archetypes were great with the *ti fôlô tiô*, primordial signs of signs. And the signs formed the totality of assembled times. In the Great Uplifting Forefather's fantastic lightning, they appeared in the great sphere of numberless seeds of light, *kiima kêsô*. From this sphere burst forth a sparkling jet. Ascending, he shaped the garland of mother stars, *lolo ba*, towards the zenith. Descending, he shaped the garland of the Dewes of Trembling Lights, *yelen jêrêjêrê kombi*.

Between the first heaven and the first earth of signs appeared the sea of flames, *ba maamô*. *Ba maamô* was the primordial mirror. The mirror had two faces, one reflecting the earth, the other facing the heaven of signs. All this took place in the infinitesimal instant of primordial fulguration. The mat of the expanse was already rolled up on itself; *tuma*, time, was coiled in the folds of patience, *munya*. Though they appeared in the splendor of divine vision, the first signs were indistinct. The Great Forefather's word would unmix them by calling them into distinct presence. Ceaselessly they flowed back and forth over one another. At the fulguration of the primordial bolt, they leaped forth. But the downward and upward jets were nothing but sparks that burned slowly and then immediately went out, followed by other sparks, in that night of the dream of the universe. These fires appeared and disappeared in the wink of an eye; then nothingness reigned as if nothing had happened. Nothing but a memoryless dream!

But in that instant, the Great Forefather differentiated all the signs and marked their movement and development. As yet, however, none had any consistency of substance or differentiation of form. They streamed out continuously, begetting one another, annihilating one another. The universe of primordial signs was only a universe of anticipation and aspiration: its anticipation resembled a broiling earth as it awaits the rainy whirlwind. As soon as the imaginative intelligence of the Great Forefather grasped a sign to form it, hardly was it outlined before it fled into the evanescence of the expanding ocean. Only the sign of primordial man, *môgô fôlô tio*, was an exception. At the moment of the fantastic lightning-bolt, he unfastened himself. His unfastening made *ningi!* He coiled himself and his coiling

made *nango*!¹⁵ Taking the shape of the Python, *Môgô Fôlô*, still called Mahamba, had just enveloped the primordial lightning bolt in the folds of his sides, sparkling from all his scales. Thus Ningi Nango came to be, the great rainbow snake, big with the eggs containing all the human generations to come.

So inconstant and fluctuating was this first creation that the Great Forefather was obliged to recommence the operation of fulguration. Again in his head he took up the world's primordial signs, phenomena, and things. He brought them forth and caused them to give birth. He separated each "according to its face." He counted them without separating them, like the fingers of a right hand telling the beads of a rosary. All this the Great Forefather did instantaneously.

Yet the vigilant divine attention could not maintain the signs in separateness; they were still predisposed to fluctuate. They fell back into their innate minglement as a tornado-filled sky lapses into blue darkness after lightning. Again all was as if nothing had happened. This was the first forgetting, *nyina fôlô*.

In the face of the changeable memory of the primordial signs, the Great Forefather sighed; that was *ba kumaba kôtôma*, speech of the mother of creation. Pronouncing the autochthonous names of the signs, *dugurengo tôgô*, the Forefather's Word arranged them in accordance with the degrees of the scale of creation. Whispered namings and numberings penetrated the hidden universe of signs, bringing on the whirling movement of *tonkolong*, the whirlwind. Creation made it dizzy. It emerged from *jenfango*, the world egg. Then began *faleng fôlô taga*, the primordial cycle of change, from which the primordial plants would emerge.

Smoke conceived
 she brought forth flame
 Flame conceived
 she brought forth ash
 Ash conceived
 she brought forth *fisaareng*¹⁶
Fisaareng conceived
 she brought forth *jaaje*
Jaaje conceived
 she brought forth *nanguwêrêto*

¹⁵ Name of the mythical snake, the rainbow, and the python.

¹⁶ All the following names are of plants.

Nanguwêrêto conceived
she brought forth *badô* at *Junfara*

And this was the green ocean of ruby-seeded plants. The expanse was contained. Interior speech produced a lightning bolt. The rolling thunder that followed the lightning was the voice of the emergence of the world, *jen bo kango*; the universe still has not stopped echoing from it. But few are they, according to Silatigi Mandjan, who are capable of hearing this voice without losing their ears.

The grumbling was prolonged by the expiring breath of *da feng ba*, the macrocosm. This first wind of call to the soul, *nilakili fônyô fôlô*, dispersed the river of the word mother of words, *ba kumaba kumô*, into numberless streams, which in all directions irrigated the empty places of the existences to come, preparing the soil of the field of life, *balo kena*. The multiple arms of the river found many holes and innumerable underground streams. There resulted the universe of pools, swamps, wells, and springs: these were *tôgô jikêsê fôlô*, the seeds of the sea of first names. Obeying the Forefather's call, the seeds began to sparkle like pearls of dew quivering on the hollows of morning's leaves. They detached themselves one after another from the rosary of names and numbers. Each of these names, corresponding to a number, was a mark of distinction, identification, and recognition of the being they were to engender. Each of them received an archetypal face, which would be manifested in the created world. They became *têémantê sawura*, conceivable forms amidst things. These forms only authentic dreams and contemplative ecstasies are capable of revealing.

By naming and counting them, the speech of the Forefather breathed into the signs the power of manifestation, of putting forth buds and being constituted according to their proper nature, movement, degree, form, and consistency. Each one found its place in space and its fixed moment on the thread of the differentiating and numerating word. Its position defined its degree on the ladder of being and its vital power within the confines of its frontier waters, *ji dang*. Telling over the names and numbers, speech resonated within the python's body, which rippled and vibrated imperceptibly from head to tail, from scales to bowels, thus informing its gestating children of the event. Having formed the cosmos thus, the Great Forefather saw it and sighed. His sigh gave a name to that place, *Farabanna*, place of the great swamp.

This world was muddy, with thick fogs floating on its face. Forefather N Maaba Taala threw the python there. As it fell, it went *mahamba*, thus uttering the name of its coming into the world, "Forefather of *Mahan*," or men. Under the force of the resonance of speech, the eggs

broke, and Mahamba's children began to move in the belly of the python. The reptile, uncoiling, crept into the swampy world towards the Mountain *Fuulu Faala Fulai*, site of the expanse of space in the light of vision. The smoking-hot breaths of *wuyen dibô* blew the wandering python to distraction. Haunted by oneiric apparitions from *siibo faraba*, the great swamp of dreams, he became deranged from without, in the immensity of the swamps; within, in the mirages of his soul, he became unhinged. Randomly erring, changing his path in wayward perturbations, Mahamba felt the distresses of *fakilô wuli*, evasions of the mind. Every time a form rose up out of the gases, the python had the shudders. His rasping scales, echoing the noise of the apparition, reverberated to the very bottom of his entrails in a prolonged wheeze. This was *tôgola fulanjang*, the second nomination, which gave eminence and substance to the spectral beings of the universe of the swamp.

But the python took no notice. Driven by fear, he turned away from the apparition. He did not see the effects of his speaking. Hence the great storehouse, *fuli fen ba*, was lost: an evasion of the mind, a forgetting of the memory the Great Forefather had entrusted to the ancestral python for its time of traversal of the swampy world. The python could not prevent this flight of divine glory, which eluded him upon a word from the ordaining energy. Maaba Taala had to intervene to safeguard life from devastation on the heels of the word. He divided the store of life into three lots. *Tôgôla*, the imposition of the name, was the ancestral Python's lot. *Togolông*, knowledge of names, was the portion of the shedding of the python's sin; it dwelt in the mystery of Maaba Taala's consciousness—his universal consciousness, his essential memory, his penetrating intelligence, his visionary regard, which obscurely reflected the infant soul. *Tôgôfô*, uttering of names, was the lot of the human generation to come.

Being synthetic by nature, *tôgôfô*, the function of affirmation, realized everything that the first two faculties contained in germ: the power of catching the world of created things in the net of speech and subjugating it to human desires; the power of emptying man of his carnal soul and converting it to visionary light, after conferring on all things a present face and a consistency of being.

But the supreme event was this: each name breathed by the python gave to Mahamba the power of knowledge, the authority to act, and the strength to affect the thing named. As a consequence, human speech became a force capable of diverting anything from its characteristic activity. A correspondence was created between the events of the world and the properties of the human soul. Mahamba made no use of this prodigious

power. He left it as an inheritance for his children, who never stopped being impatient inside him.

And the python glided into the swamp of the world, breathing into all things the radiant seeds of name and number. In the swamp he grew, losing drop by drop the ambrosia of eternal existences, which gave rise to fine, verdant plants with ruby seeds, the ancestors of nourishing cereals. Losing his substance by the force of the word, the python swooned at the foot of the mount of vision. With his last breath he tore out his entrails. His soul mingled with the swamp gases. His children, now free, hurled themselves steaming out of the field of the swamp. On terra firma at the foot of the mount of vision, they were illuminated. They rushed towards the peak of the splendid mountain, leaving behind all memory of the ancestral python, dead in the vapors of the swamp.

They arrived at *bantaba kêna*, the field of dawn. There they were struck with wonder: the parks were verdant with earth's nascent life. They glistened from the gold of the fruits. They played with the young animals. In the presence of this place and its splendors, the humans breathed in the balmy atmosphere; that was *diya dula*, place of delight. Then they breathed out; that was *fan mara dula*, place of self-mastery.

But of the two words they had just uttered, Mahamba's children heard only the first. Thus they saw the field of dawn only in delight's daylight. They did not see that the field was encircled by the nighttime of testing. They became drunk with covetousness. Hunters on the heels of the fugitive beings from the shining moon, the greedy children, *hawujadengo*, suddenly lost all memory of their Forefather Mahamba in the thick fogs of the swamp of gestation, at the threshold of existence. This was their innate misstep. Running out of breath, they drummed on the quiet earth, "*Mung feng!? Mung feng!?* What thing, what thing?"

This was a word of both wonder and questioning, for wonder and questioning are inseparable. With their morning quiet sundered by the footstamping of these men running, the spirits of collectedness, *hakili laaring*, made echo to the questioning. The running men then heard the voice of their race, *bori kang*: "*Fang fang! Fang fang! Fang fang!* The very thing! The very thing! The very thing!"¹⁷ Echoing back to the greedy men the voice of their race, the spirits of collectedness said:

"You who are tracking us,
don't you see what we are?"

¹⁷ Word for word, *fang fang* equals "Same, Same!" Usually it means, "That is identical to the truth!" or "That is true!" or "That's just it!"

The 'very thing' who gave you the light of vision,
The 'very thing' who favored you with motion!"

But the humans heard only the voice of their greed, *hawuja kang*. They did not hear the pounding of their feet on the earth. By the expression "the very thing," they understood that the field of dawn, with its treasures, was lawfully being offered to their covetousness. All things, echoing their greed, confirmed that they were "the very thing" human beings desire. They heard the speech of the world according to the twisted intelligence of covetousness. They did not hear the spirits of collectedness say, as they raised themselves from the marred earth, "We are the 'very thing' of reassembling and totality, *kumben ni kamari fang fang*—the restitution and transformation of the Most Ancient Forefather, whom you follow now as you injure the seeds!"

So the men ran. Exhausting their last vestige of recognition and identification in their dizzy race, they lost the native suppleness of their bodies as well. So violent was their pounding on the earth that their bones broke through their flesh and then broke into joints. They lost the grace of fluid movement. They did not hear the fatal sound of their bones cracking, announcing the horrors of death. Seeing that their deafness was deeper than the abyss of ignorance and their blindness thicker than the shadow of nonexistence, Mahamba challenged them to awake: "*Jong, who?*" But in their dizziness, human beings answered with one voice, "*Ntélé jong jong, Me, that's who.*"

This word was true, in that it said, "It is I, the voice of the one who names!" but their intention and thought were twisted: they thought they were asserting "It is I, the one who names!" For it was the word that was in question. By asserting themselves as agents of the word, humans committed an offense, the fault of *lèse-majesté*, dispossessing the Most Ancient Forefather from his seignory. Hearing his children speak so, Mahamba deserted his body. His spirit, taking the form of a great diaphanous phantom, went before them into the field of dawn, wishing to shelter the treasures of the field of the forefather from their onrush. He began to gather the flowers of incandescence, *nyan nyang fiiro*, with which the tress were covered, and which the Pathmasters call *londô firi firô*, butterflies of knowledge. Hungry with a bottomless hunger, he instantly brought them to his mouth and eagerly swallowed them. Soon he felt disgust.

Feeling the effect of the gluttony of Mahamba's ghost, *londo tilo*, the sun of knowledge, little by little lost its brightness. Shadow came on. In the dizziness generated by the overcrowding on the paths of knowledge, Mahamba collapsed. All the trees were now deflorated with one exception,

kamari yiro, the tree of reassembling. Driven by his inextinguishable desire for knowledge, he crawled up to the foot of that last tree (still called *dafa yiri*, the tree that fills the mouth; the *jong jong* call it *yiri firi naani*, tree with four flowers).

Stretched out flat, he raised his hand to the first flower. It was the flower of the times before dawn, *jen jen kaanêh fiïro*. He plucked it and swallowed it: cold began to come on him.

He plucked the second flower, the flower of the charming sun, *tilo nya fiïro*; the cold paralyzed his limbs.

He plucked the flower of the bitter sun, *tilo kuna fiïro*, and swallowed it. Instantly the cold immobilized him. But he still had his vision.

He threw *lahio nya*, the look of desire, at the flower of the setting sun, *tilo laa fiïro*. The flower fell into his mouth. He swallowed it. The cold came up to his eyes. Mahamba the seer became Mahamba the shadowy, *finki mana*. He became one with the earth.

All those deflowered trees carry down to today the fruits of boundless enjoyment, *dan matambi dya*, in place of the flowers of knowledge.

Now that Mahamba was dead, men became lords of the world. Before them extended without limit the verdant field with its golden fruits. The field of life was handed over to nascent humanity.

The human multitude of Mahamba's children traversed the confines of the swampy lands. They spied a glimmer piercing the thick fog, illuminating the summit of the mountain of dawn. They were attracted by the splendors of the place. When the humans reached the imposing foothills of the mountain, they stood up, freed from their miring and creeping. They crawled towards the light. Arrived at the peak of *nyan maana kônkê*, the mount of splendors, they beheld a landscape as far as its borders. It was a shining desert. At the foot of the mountain was nothing but swamp that stretched out of sight. The men overran the ground of the light of knowledge, but, befogged by the torments of covetousness and misappropriation, they did not recognize it. And they were "bitter with the bitterness of ignorance," *lonbalya ji kuuma*. Many died of disappointment.

The rest kept on scanning the swampy fogs. Memory enabled them to distinguish islands of dry land in the swamp, peopled with inconstant forms that appeared and disappeared, corresponding to their fickle attention. Where they made the effort to concentrate like a contemplative, the forms stabilized under human scrutiny. Memory begot recognition. Recall became breath. Breath cleared the way for the mouth.

The children of Mahamba were born to speech, and speech

consolidated the world that was born with them. Silent and glistening at first, the breath of naming speech displaced the fog, except for a few diaphanous clouds. Under the ardent regard of the call to existence, the lands freed from the veil of ignorance spread forth and gathered into *dugu kônkêba*, the great mount of the earth. The whirling breaths of speech raised the earth above the abyss: “*Fiuh!*” The bitter tide filling the abyss unveiled by the elevating of the earth went “*Waah!*” Resting in its oceanic bed, the earth went “*Geji!*”, which became the name of the bitter sea. With *geji* supporting the earth, all things acquired solidity, and the earth was consolidated on its foundation, nourished by the ocean’s vital currents.

Yet, all this took place as if in a dream. The human multitude did not believe in it with a constant faith. To reassure themselves, men descended to this dry land. They saw that all these things were in fact present. Then they felt their power and were wild with pride. Had they not, by virtue of nothing but speech, just pulled out of their impermanence the things of generation?

Now, every word issues from the Great Forefather; every utterance proceeds from an act of Mahamba. Men are no more than the manifold throats through which his breath escapes. They are no more than the splintered echoes of his voice. But in their arrogance, mystifying, forgetting, they trampled on their lord and father.

Thus occurred the second emergence; that was *Mahamba lombaliya kêna*, the park of ingratitude to Mahamba. Men rushed into the parks of the dawn to pluck the *sanu yiridingo*, the heavy golden fruits, before the time fixed by the owner of that place, *jalang jala kuna*, the bitter bastard-mahogany [tree] of worship. Each fruit plucked from the trees of life cast its shadow on the morning brightness of the field. Imperceptibly, light began to wane. Shadow invaded the earth at the dawn of the ages, and men knew blindness. The bitter sea blazed up with a roar. *Sanfing kêlefitinô ni tinyarila*, the shadowy legion of the somber genius of destruction, weighted down the nascent earth with sinister grumbling. The birds of imagination flew out of the golden park in the wake of *tinbanding kôyô*, the bright turtledove, and *korêh duga*, the initiatic vulture, heavy in flight. They abandoned men to the apprehension fomented by *hakilô wuliba*, the great escape of the spirit. From heaven fell a rain of larval lives and aborted births, escaped prematurely from the eternities that the Great Forefather promised to Mahamba’s descendants. This torment raged for the time of “ten great rains, one great moon, and one great sun,” according to the count of the Great Forefather.

When *massibo suo*, the night of unhappiness, had raged to its end, a

column of light rose up from the midst of the field. Men ran thither. There stretched forth *hêra dalô*, the pool of quietude. At the bottom of the deep sparkled the stones of light, *yelen kaba*. Men plunged into the pool and rooted up the stones. Once again they gave themselves over to their bent for devastation, forgetting the havoc in the parks of the dawn and its ensuing terror.

The stones of light, indeed, had been deposited in the pool to efface the effects of the effraction men had committed when they plucked the golden fruits prematurely. When he saw what his children were doing, Mahamba felt chagrin at his heart. He wept, and the field became the pool of compassion, *hinno dalo*. The heavenly seeds that had fallen into the heart of the park crystallized into the stones of light, and thus were called *sanji kuna kaba*, crystals of the bitter sea of heaven.

This was the treasure that men were wasting now, emptying the pool of mercy. They roiled the waves. When the bottom of the pool was all muddied, the pillagers came forth and saw that their hands were full of pebbles. Once out of the pool of compassion, the stones lost their brilliance. Where they broke were now sharp edges. Anger invaded the hearts of the ravagers. In their fury, the light-fleeing men flung the flints, ravaging the place, immobilizing the living, spreading silence. First, they repaired to the trees and cut them down; the stones became *têgêrang*, axes. Then they ploughed up the earth, and the stones of light became *sendang*, stakes. Then they hunted the animals of the Park, and the stones of light became *daranbô*, spears. That is how all armaments began.

But a few men remained apart from the havoc. Their cries resounded, prolonged by the echoes from the park of dawn: *Eh . . . eh . . . eh . . . eh . . . !* Their cry of horror was requited by the madness of the furious ones. They were stoned and constrained to silence. Their mouths were shut, but their eyes stayed open to watch the furious in their fury. The mad ones forced them to acknowledge that their act of anger was legitimate; the contemplatives endorsed the disturbances they committed, saying:

Ignorance leads the Great Event
 Propagators of black fires
 and propagators of white fires
 immobilizers of the living
 Agitators of the Great Event!

In the height of their pride, the drunkenness of fame was added unto them, and the men of greed took it for praise. They did not see that the meanings of these words deviated like the split tongue of a snake. Each one wanted

the praise attached only to his name. They set on one another, and that was the great destruction. Thus it is that men of greed and impatience, the usurpers of the seignory of the Mahamba, became the princes of the world, the lords of war, *kêlêmans*. Wielding the tools of housebreaking and wounding, they violated the earth and oppressed the living. *Tinyariba*, great destruction, caused great tyranny to reign, subduing the vanquished to the field of labor, captivity, and suffering. Hope deserted the heart of the sages.

Now the contemplatives, who never touched the stones of light, had preserved in their souls the bright images of the park of dawn. The sea of compassion in their hearts, *missi jio*, was muted by their continual shock. Because they had the grace to keep hold of that shock, they were named *jeribagô ni fêlêlô*, people of vision and contemplation. Overcome by this interior spectacle, they did not touch the trees with golden fruits; they felt no hunger. But when shadow invaded the park upon the havoc committed by their brothers, they were afflicted with blindness. In a fog, they turned one way, then the other, going and coming, without knowing what they were doing or being able to utter a word. Finally, they collapsed exhausted on the ground and went to sleep.

When they woke up from their numbness, they turned towards the *têman tê dula*, central place of places, the place equidistant from all places, *hinno dalo*, the pool of compassion I spoke of a moment ago. There a column of light descended from a cloud. This was the evidence of Mahamba's compassion. The tears of the Most Ancient Forefather had dug a bed for the pool, but were still invisible. They were only waters in the water. When the contemplatives, at the edge of the pool, concentrated their attention on the prodigy at the bottom, they were moved. The movement of their hearts, inundating their eyes, answered to the Mahamba's mercy. They cried out, "*Luuluô!*" diamond. Then Mahamba's tears crystallized in the water of the pool of mercy. These were the stones of light.

Awaiting them there was a call to human contemplation, "A thousand times one, a hundred times four, ten times four, and four stones of light," according to Silatigi Mandjan Danfaga. From the *dalifenba*, mother creatures, were born all elements and things in existence at present. The contemplatives recognized in these sparklings the brilliance of the fruits gathered too soon and did not touch them.

During this time their brothers, stuffed with the fruits precipitately plucked from the trees, were seized with greed. Like words they writhed on the ground, their stomachs in pain, their eyes blind, their souls in darkness. The cool breath of the men of vision and contemplation rose up

in that place, dispersing the shadows, dissipating the bitterness and malign humors of the hour. The field of life knew verdancy and brightness once more.

Awakened by the cry of shock of the contemplatives, the actives were delivered from their pain and blindness. They set themselves to new havoc. But this time, the *jerijebaga*, with the second vision, had acquired wisdom. They erected between themselves and the men of havoc the wall of ignorance and blindness, *lombalia dandang ni finki dandango*. Separated from the wonder of knowledge, the men of greed overran the field of life in all directions. Seeing things with the eye of ignorance, they could not identify them. All remained opaque, impenetrable to light. *Jalang gundô*, the initiatic mystery, had stripped from them the soul of things.

Then the contemplatives could officiate in peace and serenity as *soma*, priests. With the fine point of *lono kalo*, the arrow of knowledge, they penetrated each being to reach the heart of everything, *suutê kima kêsô*, to name it.

After being recognized and named, each being gradually closed up, confining its seed of light. Now in secret the shining of the world responded to the light of the ancestor's face. But so powerful was the shining that it shone through. Then the *soma* invoked *yelen jija*, the shadow of light, and each being cast forth a shadow from its light, which spread around it. Stealing over the earth, shadow veiled the emanations of the seed of light, ensuring that earth-manifested beings would adhere there. But this veil of projected shadows was not proof against all indiscretions. The *soma* named the *jija kôyô*, bright spirits, to distinguish them from their source. They caught these bright spirits, like live fish, in the net of *kûma kôtôba*, very ancient words—words that since then have become *kûma kôtôma*, words of the foundation. Then they drew out the spear of sagacity, and things permanently closed over their interior incandescence, earth enfolded its treasures in its entrails, time projected its promises beyond the reach of the present so eager for possession. Henceforth, existence required effort, pain, and suffering from men, to win and deserve their subsistence.

Thus, each time man attains some good (said Silatigi Mandjan), time immediately withdraws the seed of light sheltered in it and launches it farther on, into a subsequent good, thus guaranteeing the coveting of things to the world in perpetuity, by means of this flight of essence.

This happened thanks to the wisdom of the contemplatives.

The men of greed, having been kept away from the secret of knowledge, could no longer manipulate things or oppress the living, for they could no longer reach *kiima kêsô*, the seed of fire, sealed in the depth

of creatures. The essence of things lay beyond the reach of their effraction and wounding. The men of greed became, in reality, *faantang*, the unprovided, the powerless in journeying over the world. All they could do was to accumulate stones and dust as if they were treasure and immobilize themselves in the end under the vanity of heapings. Their fury became a terror on the face of the earth, their desires a devastating drunkenness, their action *tatugu waalio*, incendiary deeds. They exerted their aptitude for effraction and wounding, as they had done in ancient times, but now they did so with the cynical despair that makes sport in the hearts of blind heroes. Not a single one could appropriate earth and its treasures for himself. For in this confrontation, said Silatigi Mandjan,

The Unique Hero who will defeat all heroisms is death
 but however heroic death may be,
 the heart of *lakira gôrêh*,
 garden of the beyond,
 mount of compassion
 where the seeds of vision are set like pearls
 that reveal the light at the world's heart
 and engender new things again and again
 with their endless deaths.

In default of reaching the luminous essence of the world, the men of greed wanted to drain pleasure out of all things. They broke the carapaces of the world. They could not touch the seed of incandescence. But they wanted *dya jijo*, the liquor of enjoyment, to spring up. They made banquets of it, introducing envy into the heart of the priests, and wisdom succumbed to the seduction of so many proffered pleasures. The men of vision and contemplation suffered from that. They began to betray the secret of knowledge, fortifying the strength of the effraction by the men of greed and their power of oppression by arms. And human pride and desire were limitless.

When they were sated, they felt the bitterness of enjoyment and the disgust of excess. They noticed then that hunger and thirst are reborn after disgust. They were ashamed to have been created, and they renounced the Great Forefather, so profound was the abyss of their treason.

The contemplatives were isolated in the world, blinded by the vagaries of their enjoyments. The actives fought among themselves, appropriating the objects of enjoyment, taking advantage of one another by the force of their arms and the ruses of the spirit of appropriation. But nothing could keep the others subdued. "The citadel built by one warlord is

broken by the other,” said Pathmaster Kidugu. And anxiety invaded their hearts over this impossible scheme of possessing the world. The fear of arms begot cries and weeping. And everywhere resounded words of suffering that echoed the oppressors’ rage:

Do you not hear
 children of the great destruction
 Do you not hear their lugubrious clamor?
 They howl at death
 as far as the park of beyond
 attacking there the quiet of the Forefather
 Do you not hear in your secret heart
 all these clamors throbbing with death?
 They darken the vision of visionaries
 they trouble the light of contemplatives
 they trouble the quiet of hearers
 they deafen the speech of the *jong jong*
 They are *sétigi finkinté*, the powerful blind
 They cannot withstand the thunder of speech
 they have not turned it aside to their twisted ends.

Menaced by the fury of the actives, prey to their temptation to use the thunder of speech to attract the goods of the earth to themselves, the people of contemplation were afflicted by disquiet. But three *soma*, who had not succumbed to the seductions of enjoyment, clung to tranquillity of mind. To ward off the danger, they invoked grace from the Great Forefather, who took pity on them and revealed to them the secret of the silent word, *dê kumô*. Setting silence into the very heart of utterance, setting occultation into the breast of unveiling, placing a veil of depth over the unendurable exposure of the light of truth, they wove the watered fabric of allegory and symbol. They threw the net of most ancient words over the nudity of the world. That, they saw, was in accord with the will of the Forefather. Through these words of silence passed something of Mahamba’s power, which satisfied the men of greed temporarily. But the glowing embers of knowledge remained deeply sealed in the heart of things. And the Great Forefather was satisfied.

It was then that the *soma* perceived that by themselves they could gain access to the secret of vision and contemplation only if they peregrinated the paths of mastery, *mara silô*:

At the gate of the great house of the secret
 be stripped of the desire for effraction
 think not of knowledge or ignorance

At the gate of the great house of the secret
 keep your mouth closed
 For here speech is for the speaker

At the gate of the great house of the secret
 abandon all companions
 renounce all company
 Company here is for the one who accompanies
 At the gate of the great house of the secret
 want to see nothing
 not even contemplation of the vision
 for wanting is for him who wants

Wayfaring on the testing earth
 give way to neither vanity nor humiliation
 Traveling to the place of execution
 execute the signs revealed
 without exaltation or abasement
 Traversing the earth of greed
 run after no enjoyments
 Contemplating the earth of vanity
 take refuge in humility.

So spoke Silatigi Saraba, of the mountain of Banyombe, and was silent ever after.

Splendors and Miseries of Human Speech

He suggests that the world is a matter in process of formation; its forms, which are conceived, known, and named in God, are taken up and brought to fulfillment by human action. That is the meaning of that redoubled “Who? Who?” Man is also therefore a demiurge, a singular self somewhat freed from the voice of the great Forefather. The efficacy of man’s implements and the strength of his action correspond to that speechlessness of the Great Forefather that is sheltered in the heart of his creation. The nascent world, consequently, has two faces, a beneficent one embodied in contemplative persons and a maleficent one populated by the greedy. Yet, according to Silatigi Mandjan, both greedy and visionary persons together constitute the heroic primordial people, *gêdê fôlô fôlô*. These are two antagonistic but inseparable phratries of one and the same tribe. From their combat results the world of generation, corruption, and death, which is a condition of the Great Forefather’s rebirth in heaven.

It is the drama of their antagonism that plays out in existence. Death never stops pursuing life and swallowing up all things. Dragging all this booty behind it, death becomes heavy and immobile before it crosses the threshold of the Beyond. Then, emerging from their mortal numbness, the souls escape the hands of death, which have been crushed by the weight. Lightened by their flight, *saaya* awakens and begins the hunt again. Every man is the place where this drama is rehearsed. But it is contemplative persons who experience it most intensely, for their consciousness is a consciousness of ordeal, and their souls are haunted by unhappiness.

It was when the shadow of death, *saya dibo*, fell on the parks of golden fruits that they felt this numbness. The song of Tibanding Kôyô, the divine messenger, woke them. When he came to the field, he wept. His voice resounded; the shadows turned to dawn. The wind of his speaking came to revive the memory of the contemplatives, as the wind causes embers to glow under ashes. The dazzling purity of the bird's voice was reflected in the surface of the pool of the park. There were the spears of consciousness, *lôndo yelen tambô*. Reflected from the sparkling wave, the sparks from this burning jet touched the contemplatives on the back, between their kidneys. They saw the light of the world being reborn, though they still remembered the former obscurity. Between shadow and light their consciousnesses were subjected to eclipses. Like fireflies they sparkled in the world's limitless night, lighting up and going out at every instant, causing hope to be followed by despair and sadness by exaltation.

Vigilant though the contemplatives were, they were present at the origin of the primordial falsehood, *komayêlêng fôlô*. In fact, when they heard the bright turtledove's sobbing, they were caught up in the drunkenness of speech. They wanted to attain to the continual flux of divine speaking. Seeing the distance that separated their speech from the divine, they began to multiply words. Soon the production of words exceeded the number of existing things, and a discrepancy arose between the universe of words and the world of things. In this discrepancy were born equivocation and illusion, and from them all the possibilities of falsehood and lying with words.

In the drunkenness of speech, the contemplatives also felt the temptation of magical incantation. They wanted to make use of ecstatic revelations to take control of events. So they began to utter incantations. Joining gesture to word, they performed sorcery. Answering their covetousness, Maama Bulabaga, the Great Liberating Foremother, placed the sun and moon within reach of the incantatory rituals. So they made the sun and moon descend and light up the idols they created in their own

image. Before these little magic men, *suya jalang môgoning*, they fell in adoration. They prostrated themselves, covering their heads with dust. They made use of the speech of the Forefather to praise their own images. Then the Great Forefather turned away from his creation, abandoning it to the greed of the men of effraction and wounding. He withdrew his sun from promiscuity with the charred earth. So that it would not consume itself, Maama Bulabaga was obliged to inundate the earth. The water rose so fast that it immersed the moon, which was weighed down and cooled. She dwelt in proximity to the earth, becoming the mirror of human desires. She buried the living under her arm. The idols stayed standing, heads above the diluvian water.

When human beings awoke on the broiling earth, they were all the more surprised at these gigantic statues that could withstand fire and water. Then they disputed over the idols with each other; in the end they disputed with the idols themselves.

It is to prevent these many woes that Mandinka wisdom makes a separation between the time when the heroes of vision call up the contemplation of the first World—the season when most ancient words are spoken—and the time when the acts of the heroes of effraction and wounding are rehearsed—the season when ritual actions are performed (Camara 1992). By so doing, the Mandinka attempt to preserve man from the dangerous attempt to reunite in this world the force of ravishment of Maaba Taala, the Great Uplifting Forefather, and the desiring power of Maama Bulabaga, the Great Foremother, who liberates the tribe of humans from the father's imperium. Thus they avoid the synchronicity that would risk bringing history to a premature end by confounding two distinct moments of evolution and creation.

The Dream of the Golden Key and the Light of Speech

For only *fu faa fu*, nothing destroyer of nothings, on the hither side of time and space, in the absolute reign of immobility, silence, and pure light, reunites in himself the Great Forefather's force of gathering and contention and the Great Foremother's powers of exuberance and dispersion. He dwells alone in himself, inaccessible to any but himself. In his vicinity, action and thought are annihilated alike. Beyond the object of contemplation, beyond the subject who contemplates, beyond the desiring subject, beyond the object desired, nothing subsists outside the word of light, dazzling veil over the unknowable.

Only a dream can comprehend the annihilating effects of proximity to *fu faa fu*. On one night of grace, I had such a dream.

I was on a journey with numerous companions. We arrived at a vast stage. The atmosphere was moonless moonlight. Vision stretched to a horizonless infinite. Descending from the stage, I broke away from my dark companions. Traversing golden paths across verdant fields, I arrived at the great house of the father. The door was closed. I saw the great golden key tacked up in the thatch of the roof over the doorway. Thinking it within my reach, I put my hand to grasp it, but it was higher than I thought. I picked up a pole to unhook it. At that instant, my dark companions arrived. They rushed on the man who was trying to grasp the golden key. They seized him by the legs. They dragged him downward. Like a snake shedding its skin, I escaped from that body being assaulted by those dark companions. I saw the massed crowd of them fighting over a now invisible skin. From above I contemplated the scene, without disturbance of any kind, serene. Then out of me came a single word: "What has become of them?" My question concerned the man who wanted to unhook the key and the one whose body was being fought over by the crowd. On the hither side of the place where the word of interrogation arose, a voice came to me: "Their bones are reduced to dust!" At that moment, having left all places behind, I was the strange witness of several events one after another. The final event, the vision of speech, contained within it all the others, which were:

The quest for the golden key by the man who broke away from the dark companions.

The contemplation of the spectacle of the onslaught of the dark companions on the robber of the golden key.

The interrogation about the growth of the skin.

The apprehension of speech, which by relation to contemplative consciousness came from behind. At that moment, there was no longer person, nor skin, nor rabid crowd, nor speaking subject, nor listening subject. There was only an infinite struggle of word answering word. When I awoke, I had an unmistakable sense that I had just had the revelation of the way that leads to the place, more precisely the non-place, of the vision of speech, *kuma jeri*.

Then I recalled the interview I had had with Djeli Mandjan Danfaga while he was still alive. I understood that "I, the very thing, Who? Who?" with which men answered the Great Forefather's call, corresponded to the skin that the dark companions of my dream fought over. This "I" is rarefied by the grace of knowledge before it can reach the key to the door

of mystery. Afterward, the contemplating “I” faints. All that remains is the light of speech. That, then, is the path of knowledge. That is *jeerije*: contemplating the vision, being nothing more than limpidity for the word, an empty place of listening!

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