

Editors' Introduction

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It is rare that a source publication actually gains in scholarly importance during the publication process, but that fortunate condition may be attributed to a particular project by Stephen Bulman. In 1997 Bulman made some recordings of material about the legendary blacksmith king Sumaoro, but in order to understand the value of that recording work which has now been published as *The Epic of Sumaoro*, we must consider the ideological importance in Mali and Guinea of Sumaoro's adversary Sunjata.

Generations of scholars have been fascinated by griot narratives about Sunjata and have frequently documented them. When Stephen Bulman decided to induce a griot to give a long performance so that he could record it, he was simply adopting a well-established research practice among the scholars of Mande oral traditions, inspired in the first place by Sunjata himself and then becoming more frequent as a result of the availability of ever-improving recording equipment.

Medieval authors such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun mention Sunjata as the ancestor of the contemporary rulers of the Mali empire, called 'Mande' in the local languages. Sunjata's already huge historical prestige increased during the twentieth century because the French colonial administration gave the new colonies in West Africa a linear history featuring the Mali empire. The epic was used in the French colonial education system, so that a new generation of African schoolteachers were taught to use Sunjata in the classroom.¹ Sunjata's prestige increased even more in 1960 when the former French colony of Soudan Français

¹ For details, see Bulman 2004.

choose as its new name the Republic of Mali², and Djibril Tamsir Niane surprised the world with his novel-like rendering of a Sunjata performance called *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*.³

The introduction of the tape recorder gave a lift to Sunjata's prestige, since it made it possible to represent griots' performances in text formats such as could not have been done before. As a result, from the end of the 1960s onwards scholars from various disciplines have produced numerous linear text editions of Sunjata performances.⁴ In the 1960s the griots themselves profited from a deeply felt desire to find the real sources for African history, and some of them gained enormous prestige as encyclopaedic informants, something perhaps best illustrated by the well-known SCOA-sessions from the early 1970s when scholars were invited to consult the griot Wâ Kamissoko.⁵ In the same era scholars of African literature were debating whether the epic genre even existed within it. That debate had its origin in Ruth Finnegan's claim, made in 1968 but which she later withdrew, that there was no epic in Africa.⁶ In retrospect that discussion reads like a rather artificial word game about debunking the dominant stylistic characteristics of European epic. Parallel to the debate – and this is good news for historians looking for source material – numerous linear text editions of the Sunjata epic were produced.

Because of Sunjata's ideological importance in West Africa and his leading role in the debate about epic in Africa, by the 1990s the Sunjata epic had acquired a prominent place in academic research and teaching worldwide. That is well

² This was preceded in 1958 by the Fédération du Mali, a short-lived alliance state between the present-day republics of Senegal and Mali.

³ Niane 1960.

⁴ Listed in Belcher 1999, Bulman 1997.

⁵ For a critical essay on these events, see Moraes Farias 1993.

⁶ The best summary of this discussion is Finnegan 2007, in which the author explains that she was mistaken in 1968 in claiming that there was no epic in Africa.

illustrated by the scholarship brought together in the 1991 conference about Sunjata at Northwestern University⁷ and the many undergraduate courses nowadays that include the Sunjata epic.

Such then was the academic context in which Stephen Bulman wrote his PhD thesis. His work was a comparative study of texts of the Sunjata epic, and on a research trip – actually after he had finished his PhD – he heard of an epic of the blacksmith-sorcerer king Sumaoro, famous adversary of Sunjata in Sunjata's efforts to establish Mande, which amounted to Malian society.

Initially Bulman considered his recording a mirror to the numerous texts in which Sunjata featured; indeed, as he clearly shows in his 'Introduction', many themes from the recording are known from the epic. However, the parts of his recording that deal with Sumaoro inspired Bulman to challenge the prestigious position of the Sunjata epic within Mande oral traditions. His analysis gives ample evidence to support Sarah Brett-Smith's line of thinking that ideas of Komo secret society, fertility and human reproduction are omnipresent in Mande society, but often covertly. Meanwhile Bulman convincingly argues that scholars of Mande epic have erred in isolating Sunjata performances from broader performance practices. Crucial to Bulman's analysis is his implicit argument that oral tradition should be studied not as a text but as a practice. Bulman illustrates his point by linking his recording to mask performances, ritual life, knowledge of nature and not least to the sense of a sacred landscape. That last aspect is represented by Kulikoro Nyana, the rock formation near Koulikoro which is said to be the petrified transformation of Sumaoro himself. Bulman's research on the rocks was a time-consuming task but it has made numerous obscure published sources accessible and unearthed much interesting new oral information. Historiographically, Bulman's *Introduction* is thus of great value.

⁷ Papers of this conference were published in Austen 1999.

As editors of the series *African Sources for African History* we are pleased to see that it is possible to link Bulman's recording to changes in society that were not yet well understood in 1997 when the recording was made. It is becoming clear only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that narratives about Sumaoro of the kind that Bulman recorded are strongly linked to a societal process by which the people of Mali and Guinea redefined their relationships with the state.

The text published as *The Epic of Sumaoro* contains narrative themes, in particular the story of Sumaoro and the balafon (*bala*, a xylophone-like instrument) of Soso, that seemed new when they were recorded. However, to anyone writing in 2017 it is clear that the theme was 'suddenly' everywhere in the Mande world. David Conrad recorded it in Fadama (Northern Guinea) in 1994,⁸ while the griots of Nyagassola (Northern Guinea, close to Mali's border) integrated the narrative into their successful 2001 claim to become the geographical centre of a UNESCO-recognised Masterpiece of Intangible Heritage called 'L'Espace Culturel du Sossobala'.⁹

Furthermore it is considered common knowledge nowadays that Sumaoro's kingdom was in present-day Mali, and Abdulay Sako, the narrator of *The Epic of Sumaoro* might have heard of it via a radio broadcast or some other medium. The image of Sumaoro's kingdom as a historical place in present-day Mali is in fact a recent thing which appears to have been inspired by the historical teachings of the N'ko literacy movement. The N'ko movement came from Guinea where it had become very active in the 1980s, and took hold in Mali in the 1990s.¹⁰ There is no

⁸ Conrad 2004.

⁹ Simonis 2015, Jansen 2011. The theme features in the only version of the Sunjata epic recorded at Nyagassola (Kouyaté 2016).

¹⁰ For texts that portray Sumaoro's kingdom in Mali, see, for instance, among numerous other examples,

<http://fr.netlog.com/verimusa12/blog/blogid=4048669><http://fr.netlog.com/verimusa12/blog/blogid=4048669> and

evidence from before the 1990s of such a strong local claim to represent Sumaoro's polity, but that too illustrates the successful imposition of the Sunjata epic as a linear history for educated or at least literate citizens.¹¹

Of course, the narrators of the new stories about Sumaoro believe them to be authentic and ancient, but historians have the nasty habit of triangulating, and stubbornly linking oral traditions to social, cultural and political relations and practices.¹² These triangulating historians recognise that people tend not to make up stories about Sumaoro spontaneously but diligently obey the demands of time and place: not every story is convincing and there are 'limits of invention'.¹³

Thanks to Bulman's work we now know that the theme of Sumaoro and his balafon was more than a regional Guinean phenomenon, so we may well ask why the story suddenly became so appealing, why was it *convincing*? The answer is to be found in the dramatic political changes that occurred during the 1990s in the Republics of Mali and Guinea.¹⁴ Both countries went through processes of democratisation and political decentralisation, and for the first time each of those countries had a president who did not advocate nationalist policies featuring Mande heritage, and Sunjata in particular. In addition, by the 1990s the griots of Mali had lost much credibility¹⁵ because the media portrayed them as having been too close

https://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Royaume_de_Sossohttps://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Royaume_de_Sosso.

¹¹ See also Jansen 2016 who relates this process to political claims of autochthony.

¹² Examples of historical research based on only oral data are unfortunately too numerous to mention; we categorise them as the pre-scientific approach called 'antiquarianism'.

¹³ Paraphrasing Carolyn Hamilton 1998.

¹⁴ In March 1991 there was a coup d'état in Mali against dictator Moussa Traore (1968-1991) who had earlier organized a revolt against the regime of Modibo Keita (1960-1968). Guinea was ruled from 1958-1984 by Sékou Touré who imposed a severe socialist regime.

¹⁵ See Jansen 2008; Roth 2008; Schulz 2001.

to the former political elite. At the same time, Mande music was more popular than ever and many artists from Mali and Guinea performed on international stages.¹⁶

Thus a conceptual space in the popular imagination had been created for a powerful leader who was not in Sunjata's clique and whose message was music to the ears.¹⁷ Certainly Sumaoro and his balafon met the criteria convincingly enough. The question regarding Bulman's recording is whether it will become the first in a long list of recordings of the Sumaoro epic, or end up in the literature as a griot's personal, idiosyncratic experiment with the Sunjata epic inspired by the political situation particular to the 1990s. Given that Sumaoro is now integrated as a UNESCO masterpiece of intangible heritage as well as in the Sunjata epic wherever it is recorded, we may expect the first of those scenarios to apply.

Historiographically the text now published by Bulman is therefore of major importance. That is because in combination with more recent texts from Guinea it shows that the Sunjata 'epic' is not so much a 'literary' example of epic but a meta-discourse about society that must be performed according to certain literary, rhetorical and dramatic criteria.¹⁸ And in retrospect we can explain the key role of the Sunjata epic in the debate on epic in Africa not by its intrinsic qualities but by the historical circumstance that all the recordings of the epic were produced by a generation of scholars who worked under the spell of new recording technologies and who attempted to write a history for the newly independent states in West

¹⁶ Counsel 2015; Charry 2000; Duran 2007.

¹⁷ This may also explain why in a 2011 recording the highly esteemed Nyagassola griot Djemory Kouyate made a point of correcting the public image of Sumaoro Kante. That recording is to be published in 2018 in the ASAH series. There is also the narrative by Bala Kante about Sumaoro (Jansen and Diarra 2007: 99) a report that is very fuzzy compared to his other narrations.

¹⁸ Now this may be true for every epic, but since our criteria for epic have been developed from working with epics of which only one version was available (Homer, Beowulf, for instance), a keen eye for variation has been absent.

Africa. Since then times have changed, and the alleged Sunjata epic has changed accordingly.

Like many versions of the Sunjata epic, *The Epic of Sumaoro* as it is now published is satisfying purely as literature. The 'Introduction' and footnotes add a dimension to its understanding as well as the appreciation of it as literature. We are particularly impressed by Valentin Vydrine's transcription. In our series Vydrine sets a new standard for a textual representation of a recording, but naturally the most complete experience is to be had by combining reading the epic with listening to the recording of it on the Brill website.

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