

ON THE VERACITY OF ORAL TRADITION AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE:
THE CASE OF SAMORI TURE

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Introductory remarks

Oral tradition in Africa more and more attracts the attention of both African and foreign scholars. As early as at the turn of the XIXth and XXth centuries numerous efforts were undertaken to use the oral texts (myths, fables, stories, proverbs, prayers, incantations and historical tradition proper) as a source for discovery of social and cultural facts. For many years, however, those efforts were linguistically inclined and it seems that they were best defined by the well-known saying of D. Westermann: "Through the languages to the African culture". In the course of time, however, another attitude started to prevail. The researchers began to stress the necessity of taking the oral texts on their own in the attempts to discover the traditional African culture in all its aspects.

In recent times, some impressive definitions of oral literature supplemented those being in current use so far. For Geneviève Calame-Griaule "[...] oral literature is a mirror in which one sees a society as it is, as he would like it to be or as he would not like it to be" (Bouquiaux 1988:17). Luc Bouquiaux (1988:11) considers it as an autobiography of a society which enables the researchers to learn its history, philosophy of life, institutions and systems of values.

Historical testimonies and other texts interpreted from the historical point of view constitute an invaluable source for the discovery of the African past. According to Jan Vansina (1960), the history of societies lacking written records does not involve - as some writers wanted it to be - a new discipline called ethnohistory, but quite the same history which takes into account all the possible sources at our disposal. The importance of those

various sources is nevertheless quite different from the ones being used by a historian of societies with a tradition of literacy. While the general methods of historical criticism remain the same, their application poses some special problems (Person 1962:462).

The subject of the paper

In this article we intend to make few remarks on two African texts on Samori Ture (c. 1830-1900), a great Malinke warrior and state builder. We consider them as samples of the oral tradition which, after some time, have been fixed in writing.

First pieces of information on Samori were given by officers of the French troops which were stationed in Western Africa. It was lieutenant-colonel Borgnis-Desbordes, first commander of the Haute-Fleuve region in the Upper Senegal, who in 1880 in a report sent to Paris was announcing that "[...] a certain Samuru, chief of Bissandugu made the right bank of Niger buzz with the echo of his conquests" (Tymowski 1976:114). In 1881, French officers gave more reliable information about Samorian activities for both military and colonial authorities. One year later, war broke between them and Samori. Since that time news about that African hero started to predominate not only in the official reports, but they were also filling French press, parliamentary accounts, memoirs of French officers and private correspondence of commanders and soldiers fighting against Samori.

All those pieces of information are quite impressive but strongly one-sided ones as they were written, at any rate, by Samori's enemies. Still thanks to them our knowledge of the Samorian state becomes more sound. Approximately at the same time, there appear some English sources concerning the trade between Samori and the British colony of Sierra Leone and, later on, some valuable data on their diplomatic relations.

It is much more difficult to find source materials about the earlier period of Samori's life. In 1881, when French documents started to appear, he was around fifty years old and became renown as a ruler of a relatively great and strong political unit. What was his fortune in childhood, youth and in the early

years of manhood? How did he manage to create his state? Unfortunately, questions like that cannot be answered on the basis of the European archives. The answers should be looked for somewhere in Africa. Even there it is not an easy task, as there was no official chronicler on the Samorian court whose duty would be the description of events from the life story of that Malinke ruler. All we possess is part of his correspondence and especially those letters which were despatched to the French and English authorities after 1881. In great majority, the letters sent to Samori got lost in case when there were no copies of them in the European archives. Samori's chancellery did preserve only those letters contents of which was acceptable for the ruler. In other cases they were returned to the senders. Even some of those being preserved in Samori's archives were destroyed or simply got lost in days of his defeat.

In such situation, for the period 1830-1881, we have no written sources on Samori at our disposal. Fortunately, there exist some other testimonies in the form of oral tradition. The personality of Samori, his conquests, splendour of his rule and tragedy of the final downfall - all these drew attention of his contemporaries. On the ruler's court an official version of the oral tradition was shaped. Among Samori's enemies likewise stories about his deeds, glory of his army and the organization of his state were recounted, although with grudge and antipathy. Those narratives, kept in the memory of special West African "historians", have been preserved up to date (Tymowski 1976:17ff.). They constitute main source of our knowledge about Samori and his state until his first contacts with the Europeans.

As far as the fore-mentioned African texts are concerned (which will be the subject of our further consideration), one of them is a Hausa manuscript in Ajami which is actually preserved in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and bears a SOAS call number: "20871 Hausa Mss. of Samory, Babatu, etc." A catalogue description of the manuscript was given by J.D. Pearson (1971:140). It was presented among some others which came from F.H.W. Migeod's collection. Migeod was well-known British colonial officer, linguist and traveller and lived in years 1872-1952.

The manuscript has been described in the following way:

"Papers of Frederic William Hugh Migeod. 'Histories of Samory and Babatu and [...] other raiders, written in Hausa about 1914 by Mallam Abu, who said he was with them, for Dr. J.F. Corson in the Northern Territories of Gold Coast'. Hausa text in Arabic script, with notes by F.W.H. Migeod in English and transliterated Hausa, c. 1914. (Given by Dr. Corson to F.W.H. Migeod in January, 1926. Ms. 98017) [...]."

The manuscript is composed of 323 pages and it consists of two thematic parts. Part one (182 pp.) is devoted to the life story and activities of Samori Ture. Part two (141 pp.) describes the Zabarma conquest in present-day Ghana and Burkina Faso.

The analysis of the manuscript supports the Mallam Abu's claim that he may have taken part in the Zabarma campaigns. The description of both Babatu and Gazari's raids (who were Zabarma leaders) are more detailed than the presentation of Samori's deeds. Almost all the place-names having been mentioned in the second part of the work could be traced and identified. The information concerning the strength or size of different towns and peoples, as well as comments on their weapons, seems to be quite probable and verifiable from some other sources. On the contrary, the data on Samori's army and his state are more general and, in places, rather symbolic in character. One way or the other, Mallam Abu could not be present in two so distant places at the same time. Almost all he knew and wrote down on Samori must have been based on oral information or rumours which, somehow, reached him on the then Gold Coast territory. Only the final campaigns of Samori and his son Sarantye (= Sarankeni) Mori in the Ivory Coast and in the northern part of the Gold Coast (in 1890's) could be known to Mallam Abu from his own experiences.

The other African source is a Dyula text entitled "The History of Imam Samori" which was put down into writing by M. Delafosse (1901) in 1899-1900 (Kofikro, Ivory Coast) after Amadu Kurubari's narration. He is supposed to be a witness and participant of some events having been described. Some fragments of the narration have been edited with a Russian translation by V.P. Tokarskaya (1963). Only these will be taken into account in our analysis. Since Kurubari's description of Samori's life was written down at the turn of the XIXth and XXth centuries, for many decades it must have been kept only in human memory.

Therefore, we feel to be justified in considering "The History of Imam Samori" as a sort of oral tradition as well.

In order to prove the veracity of a written document one has to compare its contents with that of the other existing manuscripts, parallel to it or being an external source. We believe that the same method could be successfully applied to the analysis of oral tradition. Such comparisons proved already to be very fruitful in many other attempts to rediscover the African past. They were extensively used, for example, by Yves Person (1968, 1970, 1975) in his monumental work .

The comparison between Hausa and Dyula versions of the oral tradition concerning Samori Ture will be limited to few episodes of his life which have been recorded or mentioned in both sources.

Descent of Samori and his youth

Dyula text under consideration provides the following information concerning the birth and parentage of Samori:

"Samori was born in Sanankoro, in a region which is called Konian [Guinea - S.P.]. His father was a Mandingo and his name was Lafia Ture. He was a pauper. His mother was a Konianke and her name was Masorona Kamara. It is said she was a beautiful woman" (Tokarskaya 1963:191).

Whereas the data on Samori's origin in the Dyula text are given at its very beginning, those in the Hausa version became scattered in different places. There is no mention about his birth place. It is pertinent to say that even the Dyula text is not very precise in this respect. Thanks to Y. Person thorough investigation now it is known and generally accepted that Samori Ture was not born in Sanankoro itself, but rather in a village known as Maniambaladugu (in Milo valley) which was close to Sanankoro.

The Hausa version confirms the poor descent of Samori Ture stating that:

"Samori's father was a commoner. He had nothing and he was engaged in keeping hens. His father's name was Kufila. Such was the name of Samori's father" (Mallam Abu I:1-5)

One has to pay heed to the fact that the name Lafia Ture

becomes Kufɩla in the Hausa text. Is it a deformation effected by the agency of some other African languages or do we need to look for another etymology? One thing is obvious: the pronunciation of the name Lafia Ture is quite possible according to rules of the Hausa phonology.

The Hausa version, which lacks some details given in its Dyula counterpart, provides some useful information which are not attested in the other text. After having described the itinerant trading of Samori and his companions (which in a lapidary way shows what has been recognized by historians as the process of state building based on trading activities), Mallam Abu provides in few stories (*lāabāarai*) a legend explaining the etymology of Samori's name and he describes his special guidance by a mythological creature:

"And one day, when Samori and his friend were travelling in order to carry into effect an itinerant trading, suddenly they heard a call from behind. They halted, turned their heads round and they looked back. When they turned their heads round, they saw a snake. The snake's name in Wangara is *Sa*. Together with *Mori* it means "Malam Snake". Such was the origin of the name Samori which is Malam Snake.

[...] When the snake called him, he delivered a speech to him. The snake said: 'You should know, for sure, that at one time I was not snake. No, by no means. Formerly I was a jinn and only later on I became snake. I have a promise for you, do you hear?' Samori said he took notice [of it]. 'Samori, you and your friend! Samori, you will become the ruler of the world. As for me, your jinn, I make you a promise. You will rule and govern the world. Samori, I, the jinn, I give you the name today. Your name is Samori. As for your friend, he also will rule and govern the world. He also whose name is *Sāgakikī* [=Saghadyigi]. As for me, the snake, I say that you also, *Sāgakikī*, you will become the ruler of the world. As for me, the snake, I say I am a jinn. As for me, the snake, I delivered a speech to you. You and your friend, you will get the world. Do you hear?' Samori said that he took notice [of it]. The jinn, the female snake said to them that they should rest. They spent the night.

[...] The snake said to Samori, to him and to his friend. 'Samori, when you get the world, it is you who will kill your friend.' Samori said: 'Nothing like that'. The snake continued: 'Samori, this is God's will and the will of mine likewise. You are not in a position [to avert] this promise. It is you who will kill your friend, You Samori, you will get the world, you will rule, but it is also you who will kill your friend. He also, he will become ruler.' Samori broke his promises towards everyone.

[...] The snake said to, the snake said to Samori: 'For a long time you will not enjoy resting in the town. Samori! I, the snake, I give you the news about the world. Samori, when

you get the world, you will not fear God. Samori! I, the snake, I make you a promise of the world. Samori, the snake is your origin. Samori, keep the promise. Do you hear?'

[...] This snake was a jinn, it was not snake. The snake said to Samori: 'I give you the news about the world. Samori, you will become the ruler of the world and you will govern. Samori, you will not keep the promise towards anyone in the world'" (Mallam Abu I:1-5).

Both in Dyula and in some other Mande languages (e.g. Bambara and Malinke) the word *sa* means "snake" and *mori* - "learned man". Y. Person (1963) has proved beyond any doubt that snake was Samori's totem, although the majority of the Ture clan members (to which also Samori belonged) consider the elephant to be their mythological ancestor. Many other legends recorded by different scholars link the snake with Samori. For example, the snake is believed to have appeared to Samori's father in a dream vision: it was interpreted as a sign of Samori's future greatness (Person 1963:145). In another legend, that recorded by M.D. Traore (1949:96), the snake was believed to march under the soil and to mark in such way the route of Samori's victories. In the Hausa manuscript under discussion the snake appears once more in a fragment describing the battle of Fadugu. According to it, the real fight had to be preceded by the struggle between a jinn sent by Samori's snake and the jinn of the Fadugu's ruler!

The case analysed in this paragraph proves that the two sources remain in a complementary distribution. They supplement each other with some additional information which provide a more complete image of events being researched.

The capture of Samori's mother

This episode which is considered to be very crucial for Samori's career, is completely overlooked in the Hausa text. On the contrary, the Dyula version provides a quite detailed description of the event:

"At that time there was a great chief there. His name was Sori Burama, son of Fode. He knew how to fight. All the Konianke people feared him. Sori Burama despatched his warriors. They went to capture the slaves. Then they saw the traders who were carrying loads of cola nuts in the direction of Sanankoro. They were Masorona, her husband and Samori among them. The riflemen fired the guns and shot dead all the men. Then they captured the women, took along the children and

carried off the cola nuts. Samori ran away very fast and they could not capture him.

The warriors looked at Masorona and realized that she was a beautiful woman. So they went to Burama and said to him: 'Here is a woman, we captured her. We came here in order to offer her to you. She is yours'.

At that time Samori was not a young man yet. He was becoming a stripling, a youth. He came back, entered Sanankoro and he said to the Sanankoro people: 'My father was killed, my mother was taken into slavery and given to Burama. She is his slave-woman. Please, go and ask Burama that he may release my mother.' The people of Sanankoro replied to him: 'Who are you? You have nothing. Why should we go and tell your story to Burama?' Then Samori shed bitter tears" (Tokarskaya 1963:191).

Sori Burama of Sise clan (known from the Hausa text under the name of Siri Ibrāhīma) was the ruler of the Moriuledugu state with Madina as its capital. It surpassed already the frame of the traditional *kafu*, i.e. small political unit composed of few villages and ruled by *mansa* together with some important clan members. In order to redeem his mother, Samori offered his military service to Burama, and - according to oral tradition - he served him seven years, seven months and seven days. This was between 1853 and 1859. Thanks to his courage, initiative and intelligence, he became a well-known war leader. He also learned the importance of the cavalry and that of the firearms and grasped the significance of the fight in the field. Sise were Muslims and it is there that Samori started to profess Islam:

"Samori always headed the cavalymen of Sori Burama when they were departing to fight. If they waged war, he was always capturing bulls and slaves which were transmitted later on to Burama. When Samori did not fight, Burama was teaching him the Qur'an" (Tokarskaya 1963:192).

The Dyula version suggests that Samori's father was killed during Burama's raid on the traders' caravan. Yet Kufila remains alive almost through the whole of the Hausa text. Ahead of more important campaigns Samori is described as swearing oaths on his father's name. According to Mallam Abu's account Kufila died in Dyimini (Ivory Coast) which must have taken place in 1896. The appropriate fragment in the Dyula text should now be re-interpreted as a momentary impression of Samori who when running away from Burama was convinced that his father must inevitably have been killed.

Still another question arises in this moment: Why the Dyula

text does not mention Lafia Ture's name any more? It seems that the relations between Samori and his father were not coming along all right. In youth, Samori had a grudge against Lafia Ture that he neither defended Masorona Kamara from the capture, nor tried to redeem her later on. According to the local customs, the head of the great family *lu* should be a man coming from the oldest generation. In such way Samori should be subject to his father but being a powerful ruler he was not willing to conform to his authority. What is more, his father was an "animist", whereas Samori became a Muslim. Lafia Ture never moved to Bissandugu, first Samori's capital, but he preferred to stay in a village surrounded by his several wives and children. Samori even resigned from the efforts to convert his father to Islam. Be it as it may, the comparison of both sources allows us to reconcile some apparent divergencies.

Although the capture of Masorona Kamara and Samori's service for Sere Burama were not mentioned in the Hausa version, the conquest of Moriuledugu and the downfall of Madina could not be overlooked:

"He decided to go to a certain town. He summoned his malams and said [it] to them. They said they took notice [of it]. His malams said: 'Where are you going to?' The ruler replied to them: 'I will go to a certain place. There is a lot of people at that place. As for the place, its name is Madina. The town is called Madina. The place is called Madina. Madina's ruler is called Siri Ibrāhīma. It is him who owns Madina. He is a great ruler. So Samori decided to wage war against the place of Madina. Samori's people said that they took notice [of it]. Ruler, owner of the world, son of Kufīla. There is none like you. He started on a journey to the place of Madina. And then the ruler of Madina heard the news. A certain man came and informed him as if Samori was coming. The ruler Siri Ibrāhīma stood up and summoned all his people. The people of the towns came together and he informed them that in all likelihood Samori was coming. The people asked: 'Where is that one who is coming?' The people of Madina added: 'Ruler Ibrāhīma, we took notice of it. We, people of Madina, we are not accustomed to the fire'. The community of Madina dispersed. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori

Thus Samori arrived at the Madina country. The town was called Madina. The ruler's name was Ibrāhīma. They heard the news about Samori. Siri Ibrāhīma and his people gathered and they started the war preparations. Samori, the war leader sent an envoy to Ibrāhīma. Ibrāhīma, the ruler of Madina saw Samori's envoy as if he came to greet him. The ruler Ibrāhīma replied to the greetings with the words: 'How is Samori?' The envoy replied: 'Very well'. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori

The ruler of Madina sent Samori's envoy back and he ordered him to greet Samori. But [it was not clear] whether this envoy [was sent] out of respect or in order [to predict] the war. As for the envoy, Samori - the ruler, owner of the world said to the envoy that he should return to the place of Ibrāhīma and tell him: 'No. As for him, Samori, he is not joking'. Samori's envoy returned to him. Ibrāhīma, the ruler of Madina said that he took notice [of it]. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori

Thus he departed to Madina. Siri Ibrāhīma made the preparations for war. As for the town of Madina, it had two hundred and thirteen villages. As for the Madina leaders, there were seventy four of them. Such was the ruler of Madina. So numerous were the officials of Madina. They assembled in Madina and they were waiting for Samori in order to fight. Samori was ruler, not a commoner. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori

He started on a journey and came to Madina. He had seventy one detachments. He arrived at the suburb of Madina and he stopped there. As for Siri Ibrāhīma, Madina's ruler, he also accomplished war preparations and he was waiting. They were looking at each other. The ruler Ibrāhīma was not staying at home. The ruler Siri Ibrāhīma did not attack first. As for Samori, he also refrained from attacking him and was waiting until seven days passed. Samori did not say anything. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori

When seven days elapsed, Samori beat the war drum. Siri Ibrāhīma also, he beat the war drum. Samori, son of Kufīla [and he], they met each other. They opposed each other very fiercely. Samori and Siri Ibrāhīma. Siri was the name of Ibrāhīma's father. They were fighting for one month. Samori did not win. One day, on Friday, Samori stood up and he swore by Kufīla, his father, saying that if the ruler Ibrāhīma, the owner of Madina should rest that day, he, Samori, he would not stay in this world that day. It was done like this. The town was called Madina. Samori killed the ruler Ibrāhīma that day, on Friday. This story is also ended.

Here is a story of Samori, Kufīla's son

the ruler, owner of the world

Samori, the deceiving ruler, the ruler who bewilders the people. You killed them. It is Samori who bewilders the people. Such is Samori's character. This story is also ended" (Mallam Abu I:82-90).

Every conquest of a Muslim town used to evoke similar indignation of Mallam Abu. Madina surrendered in 1881, after a prolonged siege. The advisers and some close relatives of Sere Burama were treacherously murdered, but he himself was not killed as Mallam Abu suggested. Having fallen into captivity, he was

pardoned by Samori and spent the rest of his life in a village which was close to the Milo river.

The case of Saghadyigi

After his return from the service for Sere Burama, Samori continued the career of a warrior and war leader. He went to a large village of Diala (near Sanankoro) in the Konian mountains which became endangered by two warlike clans, namely Sise and Berete. Having offered his services to its chief, in 1861 Samori was given the post of *keletigi*, or war leader. In Diala, Kamara clan was of first importance. It was the same clan from which Samori's mother came. Samori managed to gain their confidence through his strong speeches against the Sise Muslims. They proved to be very appealing to the Kamara animists. Thanks to the Kamara support, Samori became later on the *keletigi* in Sanankoro. In 1863 he felt strong enough to take the title of *murutigi* - "master of the sword". By doing thus he tried to weaken his dependence on the Kamara control. All that was leading him inevitably to clash with a certain Saghadyigi, a Kamara animist who - being supported by the local Muslims - ruled over the Upper Konian.

Mallam Abu's account recurs often to *Sāgakikī* as Samori's friend, and to the broken alliance between them. Whereas the Dyula version centers on the conquest of Sanankoro, the Hausa text describes the decisive battle in the Konian mountains. Let us compare both narratives. The Dyula text runs as follows:

"When the inhabitants of Konian heard about this, they sent envoys to Samori and told him: 'We are your people. Rule over us as we do not want to follow Burama any more'. The Sanankoro people said: 'That Samori was a petty trader with us. Now he wants to rule over us and we do not like it. We have many leaders here who are more famous than Samori. If he comes here, we will not accept him in our house.'

When Samori learned about that, he became furious. He summoned all the people of Toron and those of Konian. He summoned all of them and started with them on a journey. The Sanankoro people built a large wall in a hurry. When Samori arrived, he ordered his warriors to encircle the town. Samori's people were capturing into slavery all those who left [the town] in order to chop up the wood, to draw some water or to look for food. They used to kill the men and to leave the women alive.

Six months passed and the Sanankoro people felt very

exhausted. They had nothing to eat. Then the elders said: 'We maintained that Samori was a small boy but we were wrong. He is strong, stronger than we are'. They took twelve slave women who were beautiful. They took also gold, they gave them to Samori and said: 'You are the leader. Our town is your town'. Then Samori entered Sanankoro, summoned all the elders and told them: 'This town is my town. In this town I was born by my mother and I want to live in this town' (Tokarskaya 1963:193ff.).

The Hausa text disregards all those details and describes only the final stage of Samori-Kamara relations:

Here is a story of Samori

Ruler of the world, the ruler, there is none like you. Samori, Kuffla's son called his malams and consulted with them saying that he would go to a certain place. The place was called Gbankundo. The town was called Gbankundo. The ruler was called Sāgakikī. He was Samori's friend.

[...] Sāgakikī was Samori's friend. They started to conquer the world together. Samori will break his promise.

[...] Sāgakikī, name of his friend, he and Samori, they were conquering the world together. God gave the world to Samori. His friend also got the world. He became ruler in his father's house. His name was Sāgakikī. His town was called Gbankundo. Such was the name of Sāgakikī's town. He was Samori's friend. Samori was not reliable. Samori was an over-bearing person for everyone. Samori was a false Muslim. Samori, son of Kuffla, one who deceives everyone" (Mallam Abu: 90-93).

The description of this campaign, which took place in 1883 and resulted in 10 months of siege, spreads over some ten folios. Samori suffered great losses before he managed to capture the town. In this instance also the information remain in a complementary distribution. Whereas the Dyula text is rather poor in any appraisements, Mallam Abu's account abounds in the elements of critique. Every move of Samori is somehow evaluated, mainly from the Muslim point of view.

Conclusion

Comparisons like those above could be multiplied. Even this rather superficial and selective analysis makes us believe that both those oral sources are convergent to some extent. Facts presented in a vague way or being controversial in one of them are better understood in the perspective of the other one. Each provides also some information which are absent in the other one. This considerably increases our knowledge of the historical

events and uncovers the motives standing behind them. Of great advantage is also the fact that both sources are not in the same mood as they came from two different environments. It allows us for looking at Samori from a broader perspective and for presenting his mission in a more objective way.

Both sources are characterized by a relative chronology, i.e. such one in which no dates are given. Chronology like this is typical not only of the oral tradition, but it is also a quite common trait of many Sudanese chronicles being under the influence of some Arabic prototypes (or maybe under the oral tradition likewise). It seems impossible to establish a satisfactory and absolute chronology covering all the events which are mentioned in Mallam Abu's work. The author avoids to mention even a single year of the Muslim calendar, specifying merely the day of the week and pointing to the consecutive day of the month. The only event which could be identified on the basis of the astronomical records is the following statement: "He came to the Futa people in the time when a comet [appeared]" (Mallam Abu I:100).

The establishment of an absolute chronology becomes even more difficult when we realize that events are not described in a chronological order. In such almost hopeless situation, the Dyula version proves once more to be of an irreplaceable help. In this case the method of counting back from the well-established facts can be applied. So the comparison of different oral sources allows also for the transformation of the relative chronology into the absolute one and by doing this it brings the African historical tradition nearer to that which is dominating in our cultural environment.

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