

THE IMAGE OF THE RULER
AS PRESENTED IN THE TRADITION ABOUT SUNJATA

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Until recently Sunjata was considered to be a legendary character, whose connection with historical reality was far from obvious. The information about him found in sources are indeed very meagre; he is mostly known from oral tradition, and the amount of strictly historical evidence contained in it is a greatly disputed matter.

The most exhaustive account about the deeds of Sunjata, the founder of the Mali empire, comes from Ibn Khaldun, and dates back from about a century later than the assumed period of Sunjata's rule (the beginning of the 13th century). However, as the text itself indicates, it is also a summary of an oral account:

"Their greatest king, he who overcame the Susu, conquered their country and seized the power from their hands, was named Mari Jata.¹ Mari, in their language, means 'ruler of the royal blood' and 'lion'. [...] I have not heard the genealogy of this king. He ruled 25 years, according to what they relate, and when he died, his son Mansa Wali ruled after him" (Levtzion, Hopkins 1981:333).

Tradition about Sunjata was also written down in the 20th century. During my research I have had six written records at my disposal: the account by the griot Djeli Mamadu Kuyate written down and presented by Djibril T. Niane, which is perhaps the best known as well as the closest in contents to the story related by Ibn Khaldun. This may point to a certain continuity in passing of tradition which can be called 'courtly', represented by the Kuyate who were connected with the Keitas, and this tradition could have served as a primary source for the Arabs. The other records are the accounts of Wa Kamissoko written down by Yussuf

¹ Mari Jata is one of the versions of the name Sunjata.

T. Cisse, Kele Maansen Diabate, and three texts from present day Gambia published by Gordon Innes and related by Bamba Suse, Banna Kanute and Dembo Kanute.

The very first glance at this material reveals that the facts presented in different versions of the account (maybe they should be seen as separate accounts [?]) differ in many significant points. This does not only apply to the secondary events but also to the main character. However, it is not our aim to establish even a sketchy outline of what may have been a 'primary version' of the story, or to identify the facts from Sunjata's life and the early history of the Mali empire. Our interest is concentrated on another, more important question, i.e. on the idea of state government, which is represented in this tradition. For despite the differences between the accounts as far as facts are concerned, they contain, at a deeper level, a wealth of information which seems to be least sensitive to external factors which alter the content of the account. This is the ideological layer and the legitimization of the founding myth. It is not a myth about the foundation of a world but of a state, which also introduces a new and all-encompassing order into the universe, in this case - a social universe.

Our main interest will be the character who played a key role in the mythological process of the foundation of the state - the ruler. Moreover, whether or not the deeds ascribed to Sunjata either *expressis verbis* or through symbolical representations were really his, or whether the described events actually took place, will be of secondary importance.

We shall begin our study with an analysis of praises, a part of tradition which is the best preserved section of the oral texts.² Among the accounts quoted above Wa Kamissoko's seems to be the most valuable here; its uniqueness lies in the fact that it contains a description of Sunjata's funeral. The episode of

² In traditional accounts praises or nicknames often occur in groups as customary titlature whenever the name of the character to whom they refer is mentioned. In the Mali tradition they are practically the only (apart from songs) formalized fragments. Moreover, they are often related not in everyday speech and have to be explained, which indicates their antiquity (Innes 1974: 11, 16).

Sunjata's death, usually omitted by tradition, provides the griot with a pretext for presenting a great number of the ruler's praises, which reflect his claim to glory and his unmatched position. Let us examine them in more detail.

The first praises that appear in the griot's account are the titles and attributes connected with hunting. This is not surprising, for - according to tradition - in his youth Sunjata was an outstanding hunter. Moreover, oral accounts often emphasize the links of Sunjata's ancestors with hunting and their achievements in this field.³

Hunting ceremonies play a very significant role in the ruler's funeral. One of his attributes is that of the *Dangwa* - a man who can live for three or four months in the bush, without contact with his home, that is separated from the community. Moreover, he is able to do without washing during this period, due to which on return his body gives out a characteristic odour of vitality, which communicates the command to 'give way' (Cisse 1976:283-287). This provokes cosmic associations, but the underlying content of this attribute is far from funny. Apart from the hygienic aspect, washing can possess a magical significance of purifying and corroborating. Thus being able to do without it indicates the special magic powers of a *Dangwa* man.

Another attribute strictly connected with hunting is that of the *Sirimanfing*, a black hunting eagle. It indicates a perfection in the use of weapons that strike from a distance. *Sirimanfing* is a hunter who never misses his mark (Cisse 1976:279).

The third hunting attribute is *Simbo*, the hunting master. This title is so strongly associated with the founder of Mali that it is often used by griots as a synonym of his name - *Simbo*⁴.

As we have noted, hunting is connected with magic powers, a particular type of knowledge, a talent for divination, the sphere

³ Niane 1977:54. Practically all the Mande *mansas* stress the hunting roots of their power (Camara 1981:4ff., Niane 1985:154).

⁴ Cisse 1976:279, Niane 1977:83. Wa Kamissoko uses this title particularly often, but even for the other griots this is at least the first of Sunjata's titles.

of the left hand.⁵ Moreover, seen from a different point of view, hunting has yet another significance, also testified by tradition. The hunters were at the same time warriors, and their organizations also played a military role (Cissoko 1969:336).

That Sunjata was an outstanding warrior is an obvious fact. Among the reasons for the gathering of 33 clans of Manding at his funeral Wa Kamissoko mentions their wish to hear the stories of Sunjata's achievements, most of all his continual conquests (Cisse 1976:229), which had been prepared specially for the occasion. He is the conqueror of Sumanguru, a great chief, who also, inevitably, makes use of supernatural forces. However, Sunjata's position as a chief is not only due to his victory over the Soso. The chants sung at his funeral call him also *Wombe*, the one who brings war (Cisse 1976:221). He is also *Site*, an outstanding person, a chief. The griot explains this title in the following manner:

"C'est la personne qui sait proteger ses semblables; c'est aussi la personne dont les propos sont ecoute de tous; c'est egalement la personne qui, en disant: 'Cessez!' les gens cessent aussitot. Enfin le *Site* c'est la personne qui, en disent: 'Faites!', les gens s'executent immediatement" (Cisse 1976:251-253).

This attribute is also found in the descriptions of the actions of Sunjata and his comrades who formed king's retinue. According to Wa Kamissoko, another important aspect of the attribute of *Site* is its general recognition. The achievements of Sunjata which are associated with this attribute belong to the sphere of what can be called 'civic' or 'social' activity.

For Sunjata's was an extraordinary attainment. He opened the gates of Manding and purified Manding. The symbolism of the gates of Manding has not been sufficiently interpreted, although it often appears in tradition. Y.T. Cisse in his translation supplements this term by adding the words: 'gates to freedom, progress and glory' (Cisse 1976:235), but it seems that the categories he employs are incompatible with the nature of the source. It is usually believed that the term refers to the twelve

⁵ Eg. a wandering hunter-sorcerer-left handed person who foretells the birth of Sunjata (Niane 1977:56).

provinces which initially constituted Mali, or the twelve clans which were its ethnic background.⁶ Thus the opening of the gates clearly indicates the foundation of an empire.

The griot (or more likely Y.T. Cisse) explains the term 'purified Manding' as the introduction of what seems to be 'freedom from' injustice, threats of all kinds and slavery (Cisse 1976:277). This explanation also seems slightly ahistorical and based on ideas far too modern. However, they can be associated with other parts of Wa Kamissoko's account, where he states that Sunjata's greatest achievements lay in introducing stable political laws and bringing peace to Manding, which was to be the foundation of the whole structure he erected (Cisse 1976:235, 247, 277).

Sunjata is called the Father of Manding (Cisse 1976:277, Niane 1977:161). His achievements, and particularly the introduction of laws, clearly consists in the creation of a state structure over the tribal divisions, which is described in the language of tradition. However, some of the achievements attributed to him arose serious doubts, especially the abolition of slavery. In our opinion this is not necessarily a falsification of history, although at first glance it does seem so (the slave trade was one of the most important elements of the economy of early Mali). It may be interpreted not as the abolition of slavery *tout court*, but only among his own people, which may suggest that a greater community feeling was born; the terms 'slave' and 'stranger' are often almost synonymous (Goody 1980). The abolition of slavery may also be an erroneous traditional interpretation of the introduction of the social hierarchy among the Malinke, not accidentally attributed to Sunjata. The Malinke were divided into free people, who carried bows (*tantajon taniworo*), the caste of *nara nani*, which consisted of griots, smiths, cobblers and slaves; this is clearly associated with the law-giving activities of the founder-ruler (Niane 1977:166ff.; 1985:157ff.). From this point of view the *tantajon taniworo* owed their freedom to Sunjata, and the state of Mali was its guarantor.

⁶ Niane 1965:1. Banna Kanute also mentions 12 parts of Manding.

In the *res gestae* of Sunjata as related by D.M. Kuyate these achievements are brought down to one aspect, namely the founding gathering of Kurnkanfuga in Gbara. According to D.T. Niane this was a historical event, in the nature of a 'legislative convention' (Niane 1985:158). However, we believe that the character of Sunjata as well as in the description of the gathering, with its model form and place it occupies in the structure of the whole account, is a traditional synthesis of a long term process of social and political change. From this point of view the historicity of the gathering itself is less significant than the image of the nature and structure of the political system which is conveyed by the legitimizing content of the account, and of the evolution of this system.

The list of the Sunjata's attributes closes with terms *Nakamma* and *Sambalabe*. The first describes a man who has an important mission to fulfil, who is destined to perform extraordinary deeds and whose arrival is preceded by numerous signs on the earth and in the sky (Cisse 1976:291; Niane 1977:110). The second one (lit. 'the fall of the great sky'), describes the death of the great personage, a man of great character, who falls without falling, who dies upright. The death of *Sambalabe* is also accompanied by cosmic signs - a falling star (Cisse 1976:259, 263-265, 279). In this manner the cycle of Sunjata's attributes brings us back to the sphere of direct links with the supernatural.

The order of Sunjata's nicknames and attributes presented so far can be seen in two ways.

The order of their appearance coincides with the stages of the ruler's biography and indicates the connections between these stages. Sunjata achieves the next stage of his activity and the virtue connected with it thanks to the preceding stage. In this manner hunting magic always remains the ultimate source of his attainments. Even questions seemingly so loosely connected with it as the liberation from slavery are associated by the griot with the power of *Lonko*, knowledge (Cisse 1976:287). However, all of Sunjata's praises connected with hunting, even *Simbo*, which is nearly synonymous with his name, are not attributed exclusively to him. Predestination is the factor which

joins them all and determines the uniqueness and extraordinary quality of Sunjata.

On the other hand Sunjata's titles can be divided into two groups; those which point to the personal qualities of a unique individual, and those connected with his achievements for which the Mandingoes owe him gratitude. However, we have seen that the reasons for Sunjata's glory contain contradictory elements. On the one hand he brought peace, on the other - he waged wars. On the one hand he created social structure, on the other - he lived apart from them (being a *Dangwa*, and especially his rejection by society in childhood due to his handicap - paralysed legs). Nevertheless, it is thanks to these contradictions that Sunjata occupies that special and unmatched place of a founder; in order to do so he has to fulfill all the necessary conditions. If they were not indispensable for the legitimizing construction, tradition would be most likely to touch them up or to ignore them.

Let us now examine the character of Sunjata's chief opponent and the place he occupies in reality created by oral tradition. This is the ruler of Soso - Sumaoro, an individual inseparably connected with the founder of Mali. Tradition related by Djeli Mamadu Kuyate describes him in the following manner:

"Soumaoro descendait de la lignée des forgerons Diarisso, qui ont apprivoisés le feu et appris aux hommes le travail du fer; comme tous les maîtres du feu, Soumaoro Kante était un grand sorcier; la puissance de ses fétiches était terrible, c'était à cause de ces fétiches que tous les rois tremblaient devant lui, car il pouvait lancer la mort sur qu'il voulait. Il avait fortifié avec une triple enceinte, au milieu de la ville s'élevait son palais qui dominait les pailottes des villages; il s'était fait construire une immense tour de sept étages et il habitait au septième étage au milieu de ses fétiches, c'est pourquoi on l'appelait le roi intouchable.

Depuis son accession au trône de Soso, il avait défait neuf rois, dont les têtes lui servaient de fétiches dans sa chambre; [...] Soumaoro n'était pas un homme comme les autres, les génies s'étaient révélés à lui et sa puissance était incommensurable" (Niane 1977:106)

The griot's objections to Sumaoro are very characteristic. He is intended to be the opposite of Sunjata, whose actions are positive, while Sumaoro's are decidedly negative (Niane 1977:110). But we must also note the similarities. Both are great magicians, whose sources of power lie in two spheres most closely

connected with magic, namely hunting and forging (Niane 1977:74), and in the domain of the left hand:

"Cut and Sirimang. It is forging and the left hand, Senegalese coucal and swallow. Cut iron with iron. What makes iron valuable. Big *kuku* tree and big silk-cotton tree, Fari and Kaunju."⁷

Moreover, there exists a connection between Sunjata and the smiths, who forge an iron slab thanks to which he begins to walk (Niane 1977:79). Sumaoro, on the other hand, is once honoured with the title of *Simbo*, although his roots have nothing to do with hunting (Niane 1977:108). The genealogies of both the heroes are partly non-human: in Sunjata's case on the mother's side - Sogolon (the buffalo-woman), and Sumaoro's - the father's who was a djinn (Innes 1974: Bamba Suso 754). Sumaoro, like Sunjata, rules over the *mansa* both are the kings of kings. Both are accompanied by warriors who are attached to them by the conviction of their invincibility. Both in fact stand outside society. In his childhood Sunjata was a monstrosity, and in adulthood, at the peak of power and glory, although he was accepted by the community, he definitely was not a part of it.

Finally, according to tradition neither of them perishes; Sumaoro manages to escape (all accounts seem to be consistent in this respect), while Sunjata's death is a mystery. There are traces of belief that this disappearance is temporary and that he will return.

In effect heroes belong to the same category. Many of their characteristic features or attributes are similar, but in the case of Sumaoro they are marked negatively.

The Keita's tradition does not dwell on the character of Sumaoro. He is mentioned as a worthy opponent of Sunjata, who is finally overcome.

Versions from the territory of Gambia are not so strongly connected with the legitimizing needs of Sunjata's clan, and are to a great extent stories of a distant past, into which the griot can incorporate the genealogy of his patron, usually connecting him with one of the secondary characters. Moreover, for the

⁷ The text is the titulature of Sumaoro which regularly appears in texts from Gambia, eg. Banna Kanute 641-647 in Innes 1974.

Western Mandingoes the character of Sunjata himself does not possess a direct significance in relation to the foundation of a state, for this role is played by Tiramaghan Traoré (Innes 1974:Bamba Suso 615-640). The story about Sunjata constitutes a kind of preface to the history of his deeds; it provides an explanation for his arrival in the West.

For this reason in the Gambian tradition Sunjata is most of all a ruler and a great man, not a founder of a dynasty. Thus the mythical nature of his person, deeds and combat with Sumaoro are less marked. This does not mean that the mythical element is absent, but a myth which does not play a vital social role tends to undergo greater transformations. On the other hand, these transformations themselves are very significant. Thus certain events which are in some accounts described as Sunjata's deeds are in others attributed to Sumaoro and *vice versa*. These are by no means irrelevant events. One of them is for instance the naming of griot Bali Faseke Kuyate, Sunjata's first griot, which Banna Kanute ascribes to Sunjata, and Dembo Kanute to Sumaoro (Innes 1974:Banna Kanute 1550-1555; Dembo Kanute 318-325). In this case the contradiction refers to the whole motif of the miraculous balafon. In Banna Kanute's version Sumaoro is the ruler of Manding, and he is the one who forges the slab on which Sunjata is to stand (Innes 1974:Banna Kanute 942-949). Dembo Kanute on the other hand claims that the Mandingoes called Sumaoro to defend them against Sunjata's raids (Innes:Dembo Kanute 272-275). From the three versions known to me, Bamba Suso's seems to be the most closely related to the ones connected with the Keita, but like the other two it also omits the question of Sunjata's founding activity. The only possible reflection of it can be the act of awarding titles by Sunjata (Innes 1974:Bamba Suso 875-877). His achievements are crowned by sending his armies westwards.

The evaluation of the heroes by the Gambian tradition is also treated less seriously as, for instance, by that of Djeli Mamadu Kuyate. Both are outstanding rulers and evaluating adjectives are used rarely and much less decidedly, descriptions of their good or evil deeds are practically absent. We can only draw conclusions from the context, which makes them much less

clear.

The comparison of Sunjata's and Sumaoro's deeds presented in the form of a synthesis gives even more food for thought. We have already mentioned the gathering of Kurnkunfuga. The Keita tradition maintains that it was there that Sunjata was declared the *mansa* of *mansas*, he gave laws and established the solid hierarchy. However, we must note that these laws, very detailed according to tradition, existed beforehand, and the privileges he awarded were more an affirmation of the existing order, which in this manner gained a new dimension and new source.⁸

It was a non-tribal sanction for forms generated by pre-state structures, and now, contrary to their origin, this forms began to be seen as established by Sunjata, that is generated by a state. At the same time, thanks to the nature of Sunjata (presented as a super-human hero in contact with the supernatural) it sanctioned the creation of a qualitatively new institution, the state, which was described in tribal categories but legitimized *a posteriori*, not in the terms of a pre-state society (on the basis of his authority Sunjata creates new relations between the ruling families, which the griot describes as kinship) (Niane 1977:111).

Thus the facts that tradition described the gathering in this manner indicates the legitimizing needs of the Keita, as does justify the change which took place.

On the other hand, Sumaoro's rule is described in the following manner:

"Sumaoro était un génie du mal, sa puissance n'avait servi qu'à verser le sang: devant lui rien n'était tabou: son plus grand plaisir était de fouetter publiquement des vieillards respectables; il avait souillé toutes les familles, dans son vaste empire, il y avait partout des villages peuplés, des filles qu'il avait enlevées de force à leur famille, sans mariage" (Niane 1979:111).

In absolute terms this account is a direct contradiction to the results of Sunjata's actions. However, we must note that this is a synthetic description of the creation of a state, the only

⁸ The description of the emerging political connections in term of kinship is particularly interesting (Niane 1977:166; Niane 1985:158).

difference being that it has been recorded by tradition from an antagonistic point of view. It may be associated with similar descriptions, such as, for example, Samuel's warnings about the establishment of the royal rule in Izrael (Samuel 8:11-18) which, moreover, was not to be installed by force. Thus the quoted description of the injuries inflicted by Sumaoro is not necessarily the reflection of the oppression of the Mandingoes by the Soso, but - in our opinion - primarily a description of a state seen from the tribal point of view. The adherents of Sumaoro would probably describe Sunjata along the same lines.

The similarities presented above, combined with the juxtaposition of Sunjata and Sumaoro - two heroes connected with the creation of the state, is quite characteristic and clarifies the seemingly illogical statements by tradition, such as, for instance, the fact that Sunjata simultaneously brought peace and waged war. Dembo Kanute even says that:

"He destroyed Manding nineteen times. He rebuilt Manding nineteen times. They say, it was war that destroyed Manding.⁹ It was war which built Manding".

⁹ Cf. Innes 1974: Dembo Kanute 332-335. Banna Kanute uses similar terms at the end of his account.

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