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The World Won’t Listen: The Mande “Hunters’ Oath” and Human Rights in Translation

“Every life is a life,” the hunters declare. “Such is the Mande oath. May the whole world hear it.” Yet, who are the hunters and why should we listen? In recent years, two celebrated texts have circulated in West Africa and beyond. Both the Hunters’ Oath, from which the lines above are taken, and the Kurukan Fuga are often referred to as “the Mande Charter.” In spite of the fact that they are radically different from one another, here, I will refer to them collectively as the Mande charters. Although both texts are, in Karin Barber’s terms, durable “tissues of words,” neither has until recently been a document.[1] Rather, they are products of a rich and rigorous tradition of oral history; each has been captured, transcribed, printed, and published only in the last few decades.[2] Still, they are situated historically—and in the case of the Hunters’ Oath, somewhat hazily—around the time of the foundation of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century.[3] Grounded in a distant and treasured past, these two charters are regularly hailed as examples of an early constitution, as evidence of a distinctly West African tradition of rights, or as human rights documents *avant la lettre*.[4] The publication of these texts was met with acclaim in many circles. Indeed, one of Africa’s most influential elder historians credited the Kurukan Fuga with the “rehabilitation of African thought” and, within a decade of its publication in 1998, UNESCO had recognized “the Mande charter”—without specifying which one!—as a protected element of world heritage.[5] And while a leading philosopher proclaims that the significance of the Hunters’ Oath lies uniquely in its content, no matter where and when it was first pronounced, the charters’ contemporary champions more often anchor claims for their value in their venerability.[6] In other contexts, the celebration of the charters has provoked skepticism and even hostility, mostly from those who query their origins and therefore their age.[7] Historians and ethnographers who have studied the charters as interventions in a contested cultural politics imply that their content is of little consequence: what matters is the motivations behind their publication.[8] Clearly, there is room for disagreement, and no small amount of confusion. What is at stake in such a debate? And what of the texts that are its pretexts?

What Is at Stake?

In recent years, scholars of Africa and of human rights have worked to reconcile competing narratives. Historians of social movements and international institutions have asserted the role of anticolonial movements and of postcolonial state-building in the elaboration of a global human rights regime.[9] Meanwhile, writing “up and out” from specific contexts, historians of contemporary Africa have focused on the rights-based activism that has become an important factor in African politics, whether in the postindependence or in the neoliberal age.[10] Yet through the 1970s, at least, the practice of African sovereignty and that of human rights activism developed in tension with one another, emerging nearly simultaneously, but apparently out of sync.[11] Since then, African dissidents, foreign activists, international "partners," and organizations of different scales have appealed to the idea of human rights in varying and sometimes contradictory ways. The effects of such appeals have been uneven. The point here is not to plumb the efficacy, the intent, or even the sincerity of such efforts. Nor is it to intervene in somewhat shopworn debate about the origins of human rights. Rather, it is to query the pervasive nature of human rights discourse as a language of governance, one that is almost never portrayed as an African mother tongue. Thus, recent work lauds "Africa's contributions to the emergence of international human rights norms" as progressive, but it also portrays them as coming late, contributing to a vision in which rights-based governance in Africa has a bright future, but a dim past.[12]

Constitutional government, too, has a complex and dynamic history in francophone Africa. The machinations around late colonial and postcolonial constitutions may now appear to be rather distant history, shorn by changed economic circumstances of their always-relative emancipatory potential.[13] Yet over the last few decades, plans to amend or revise African constitutions have provoked mass opposition, dramatic confrontations, and even—as for example in Burkina Faso—popular revolution. This may be counterintuitive. Are African citizens so profoundly attached to their constitutions? After all, those documents were often designed to protect the state from its citizens, rather than the inverse.[14] They were also designed to produce powerful presidents and weak legislatures. In several recent instances, they have been revised to prolong the mandates of heads of state, to remove or make exceptions to term limits, or to centralize state power even further. In other words, and somewhat paradoxically, the stability of executive authority often exists in an inverse relationship to the fungibility of constitutions. The more readily one can change the constitution, the firmer one's grip on the state and its institutions, and vice versa. Those in power hope to change the constitution in order to remain there. Those out of power hope to take their places, while keeping the constitution more or less intact.

In such a political context, the Mande charters matter. The apparent durability of the Kurukan Fuga and the expansive interpretation of rights presented in the Hunters' Oath offer due cause for celebration. The charters address the linked issues of rights and constitutional government while powerfully domesticating them by situating them in the "ancient Mandé [which] constitutes the cultural matrix" of much of West Africa.[15] They demonstrate, by way of contrast, that constitutions written in French have proven less durable than an African-language oral tradition of which many are proud. Moreover, contemporary constitutions depict an ideal image of government that conflicts with what people know to be true from experience. Not surprisingly, the charters may better reflect how people actually live their lives, the values they embrace, and the ways they see their place in the world. This is true of the Kurukan Fuga even in the bowdlerized and homogenized pseudo-juridical form that has become the most influential version.[16] That text gives an historical foundation to the "joking" or "fictive-kin" relationships that in many parts of West Africa animate daily conversation and facilitate exchanges of all kinds, from marketplace transactions to state-level diplomacy. It proceeds to lay out a set of rules and principles for communal life in the Mali Empire.[17] While it is often considered an early version of a constitution, the Kurukan Fuga says rather little about governing and gives only a bare outline of the organization of the state. On the other hand, it says a great deal about living together in a hierarchical but diverse society. With its references to the clans, the craftspeople, and their relationships to one another, it is best understood as the representation of a social structure, rather than a map for governing.

In contrast, the Hunters' Oath offers only the most skeletal sense of a social order. More abstract than the Kurukan Fuga, and quite succinct, its real commitments are elsewhere, to individual freedom. It is indeed a manifesto, announcing principles for the well-being of an amorphous community, "the Manden." The Oath speaks to questions that are durable, politically potent, and even profound, which has made it alluring to philosophers like Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Michael Neocosmos.[18] Departing from other key texts in the African rights tradition—such as the African Charter on Human and People's Rights—it emphasizes the individual, rather than the community.[19] Yet this is only part of its value. It also emphatically rejects the practice of slavery that the Kurukan Fuga legitimates. Yet, like a neglected sibling, it has generally drawn less attention than its more robust counterpart.[20] This article offers a brief sketch of the historical context in which the Hunters' Oath is situated, or to which it implicitly refers. I argue that the Hunters' Oath must be disentangled not only from the Kurukan Fuga, but also from the Mali Empire and historical accounts of its founding. Whether the origins of the Oath lie some seven centuries ago may be an unanswerable question, but its history as a text is only a few decades old. That history calls out for critical scrutiny, but it is the very opposite of an historical "whodunnit." We know "whodunnit": the Malian ethnographer Youssouf Tata Cissé. We do not know quite what he did.

After excavating the history of the Oath in print, the article offers a full translation of it, one derived directly from the Mandenkan original. To my knowledge, this is the only existing translation from the original to English. The point is not a minor one. Few of the scholars writing on the charters read or speak the West African languages in which they were produced. Rather, they work from French translations, which in the case of the Oath efface or obscure key lines on poverty, hunger, and slavery. Working from the original—or at least from a more faithful and complete translation—may make it possible to ask a deeper set of questions. The most important one may be, can African-language thought contribute to human rights discourse, or merely receive it? Such reception has not always gone well. Translations *into* African languages have often been clumsy, at best. In an illuminating study of human rights activism in Malawi and Zambia, Harri Englund revealed that in translations of key texts such as the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, a Chichewa term referring to "freedoms" had regularly been used as the equivalent of the English term "rights." The effect was to emphasize political and civil over economic rights.[21] In Mali, as I have written elsewhere, the very "phrase 'Human Rights' enters Bambara [a Mandenkan variant] as '*adamadenw ka sariya*' or '*mogow ka tien*' ("the laws of humanity [lit., ". . . of Adam's children"]" or "people's truth"). Neither phrase captures the idea, dear to its champions, that such rights are superior to law, any law, and certainly not to God's law."[22] Englund demonstrated that "inaccurate translations may compromise readers' [or listeners'] capacity for emancipatory interpretations."[23] Might the inverse also be true? Could poor translations *out from* African languages not only prevent "emancipatory" readings of particular texts, but also confine those ideas, universal in aspiration, to a particular postcolonial political and linguistic frame? The strange career of the Hunters' Oath might help in thinking through such questions.

Hunters, the Manden, and *Sundiata*

Before exploring the Oath itself, three elements demand clarification for the non-initiate. First, who are the hunters? Second, what is the Mande or the Manden? Third, how does all of this relate to an epic history, *Sundiata*, grounded in the thirteenth century? More generally, how does social scientific—and humanistic—knowledge intersect with a venerable and disciplined oral tradition, and a deep "pre-colonial" history, within which these texts are grounded? These questions are best addressed in turn.

In much of the West African savannah, hunters have historically played a dual role. As individual men—hunting is an exclusively male activity—they are adventurers, frontiersmen, and organic intellectuals. As members of confreries, they occupy a large space in the collective imagination, representing a form of knowledge and behavior that may draw from the Muslim ecumene but is often explicitly non-Islamic.[24] If hunters confront the dangers of the wilderness and its potent spiritual world individually, they confront threats from other people collectively. In the distant as well as in the very recent past, hunters' associations have claimed to protect their communities, asserting a legitimate monopoly on armed force either complementary to or in place of the state itself.[25] In the contemporary Sahel, their role as armed protectors has been revived in the context of widespread insecurity, ranging from banditry to targeted political violence to mass killings. Along with other armed groups providing what Compaoré and Bojsen dub "security from below," hunters' associations acting as allies of state security forces have been accused of perpetrating some of the worst of these crimes. As national armies, international peace-keeping and anti-terrorist missions, foreign fighters, and various militias confront each other in Mali and Burkina Faso, hunters' associations—or their symbols, their paraphernalia, and their forms of knowledge—have become increasingly visible elements of a devilishly complex landscape of insecurity. The Hunters' Oath did not emerge from such a context—quite the contrary, in fact—but it now exists within it.

The hunters also exist within an historically grounded conceptual space that corresponds to no contemporary borders. That space is known as the Manden, and here our definitions become somewhat circular. The Manden straddles the border between Guinea and Mali, the republic—independent from France since 1960—which took the name of a celebrated empire that developed in this land in the thirteenth century. The Hunters' Oath—the "Mande Oath" as it declares itself—emerged in this space and in a language that we can also refer to as "Manden," "Manding," "Mandenkan," or, over the heated protests of linguists, "Mandekan."[26] Less important than the taxonomical distinctions between languages and dialects is the important point that communities that speak "Manding" languages generally trace their history to or through the Mali Empire and, implicitly therefore, to or through the space known as the Manden. Adding another layer of complexity—are we talking about a space, an empire, or a language group?—one can recognize that communities speaking "Manding" languages share less the political imprint of the ancient empire than a version of its social structure as represented in the Kurukan Fuga and in the eponymous epic history of its founding figure, Sundiata Keita.

Sundiata is likely the best-known African epic, particularly as represented in the slim prose rendition of it first published by D. T. Niane in 1960, a volume that is still in print. Recounted by oral historians or griots (*jeliw*), the epic has been performed, produced, transcribed, and translated in dozens of versions.[27] It is central to the collective identity of Mande-speaking peoples and to the national narrative of contemporary Mali in particular. Some scholars embrace the epic as a history that describes, albeit with license, actual people and events.[28] Others are ambivalent, and others still dismiss it almost entirely as a historical source, regarding it as literature.[29] The core of the epic can be reduced to a few key episodes, with minor variations: the contest between two hunters and an aggrieved elder woman who takes the form of a buffalo; the birth to that woman's niece and a local king of Sundiata, who suffers from a debilitating curse; Sundiata's recovery from the curse and his exile from the kingdom to which he is an heir; Sundiata's return and his triumph over Soumamarou Kanté, an invading blacksmith-king; Sundiata's conquest of a broad empire extending west to the Atlantic coast; a meeting of Sundiata, his griot, and other chiefs, elders and luminaries at a place known as Kurukan Fuga, where the structure of the Mali Empire was established. While the Sundiata epic has generated an enormous corpus of texts, translations, and analyses in its own right, along with myriad interpretations, only two things need detain us here. First, in spite of its recent prominence, the episode at Kurukan Fuga is often either entirely occluded or is treated quite succinctly, as a concluding element in a very long narrative.[30] Specifically, the contemporary text now known as the Kurukan Fuga or "the Mande Charter" is absent from the epic. Second, and most significantly, while a pair of hunters is key to early episodes of the epic, the Hunters' Oath as such appears, to my knowledge, in only one version of it: that of Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wâ Kamissoko. There, its position is quite curious.

Origins of the "Hunters' Oath": Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wâ Kamissoko

While there are many versions of *Sundiata,* the one Cissé and Kamissoko published in 1991 is the only one that matters, at least as far as the Hunters' Oath is concerned. Only there does the text appear, in its first published version.[31] Cissé would later republish the Oath, in various versions and in different formats. Since his death in 2013, the translation has been published under his name yet again, in a posthumous multivolume work.[32] Yet uniquely in the 1991 publication with Kamissoko did Cissé link the Oath to the epic.[33] After that point, and in the decades since, the Oath has always been presented as a distinct work in its own right, one that emerged from a deep tradition among the hunters. Thus, the Oath would seem to have two points of origin. One, Cissé tells us, is at or just before the moment when Sundiata Keita founded the Mali Empire, either in 1222 or in 1235 (although Cissé seems to have settled on the earlier date, linking it to the appearance of Halley's comet in African skies).[34] The other point of origin, we would later learn, is in 1965 in the village of Tegué-Koro, in the district (*cercle*) of Kangaba in southwestern Mali. There, Fadjimba Kanté, identified only as a "master hunter and blacksmith," shared this brief oral litany with Cissé, who at the time was a young ethnographer and hunters' apprentice. In 1991, when the Oath was first presented to the world in a work entitled *la Grande Geste du Mali*, all of this was more than a little obscure.

La Grande Geste du Mali is a unique, dialogic text. In two tomes, the first of which offers an incomplete version of *Sundiata* in both Malinké and French, Cissé plays multiple roles. He is the amanuensis of Kamissoko, the great griot, whom he translates.[35] He is also embedded—as ethnographer, former student, and interlocutor—with a group of African and French social scientists who gathered in a kind of running seminar with Kamissoko in 1975 and 1976. A third seminar was held in 1977, after Kamissoko's death, but his influence remained, in the form of pre-circulated materials for discussion.[36] In this unique series of seminars, Cissé acts as chair, host, or master of ceremonies for this group, which includes well-established figures from the colonial generation like Amadou Hampaté Bâ, Vincent Monteil, Raymond Mauny, and Germaine Dieterlen, who had supervised Cissé's 1973 doctoral thesis at Paris's École Pratique des Hautes Études (predecessor of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, EHESS). The group also includes relatively younger researchers: D. T. Niane (author of *Sundiata*), Alpha Oumar Konaré (archaeologist and future president of Mali, 1992–2002), Madina Ly-Tall (historian, and one of two women), and Paulo de Moraes Farias (the lone Brazilian). In a society in which age, among other hierarchies, mattered greatly, Cissé was older than most of his West African peers, excepting Bâ, Niane, and Kamissoko himself. The seminar—with its genealogies, its gendered, racialized, and colonial dynamics, and its attempt to induce a dialogue between competing forms of knowledge—merits a study of its own. In the publication, the seminar and the epic are combined, the unique and ephemeral dialogue between academics and Kamissoko staged alongside a durable work of oral literature, one that was being simultaneously canonized and contested.

Lost in the effort to establish the authority of Kamissoko over the academics, and by extension of the epic over the institutions of the academy, is Cissé's own contribution. It is worth remembering that Cissé was not a griot. Neither of course were his fellow researchers, including Niane. However, Cissé was engaged in a different intellectual experiment, and on a distinct personal trajectory. In the 1960s, he had left a position at Bamako's Institut des Sciences Humaines for an academic career in Paris.[37] On completing his doctoral studies, he became a *chargé de recherche* for France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS); there he would stay for the remainder of his career, working within the ethnographic tradition associated with Dieterlen and Marcel Griaule. Given this trajectory, he confesses that he was at pains to refute the perception that he was a "*toubâbou fing*," literally a Black white person, or a "colonized" and aloof intellectual.[38] This is clear in his approach to his work. While Niane's *Sundiata* transformed the epic into limpid and accessible French prose, Cissé and Kamissoko sought to preserve its flavor, its nuance, and its complexity.[39] Yet while Cissé had the majority of the Sundiata epic from Wâ Kamissoko, in the years following the seminar and Kamissoko's death he had a couple of major interpretive challenges. First, while Niane's version effectively concludes with the meeting at Kurukan Fuga, Kamissoko ignored it. He insisted that the capital of the Mali Empire was the town of Dakadjalan—near his own birthplace in Krina (Kirina) in contemporary Mali—rather than Niani, the Guinean town that Niane had identified.[40] Dakadjalan lies far from the clearing that gives the Kurukan Fuga its name. This would seem to preclude reference to the event and to the "constitution." Second, and graver still as an interpretive problem for Cissé, Kamissoko refused to go on record addressing certain key themes, notably the founding of the empire and explicitly the "proclamation of the constitution (*l'acte fondemental*) of the new Manden."[41]

How then would the epic end? Here is a hypothesis. Cissé solved this problem by inserting another, radically different text he had to hand, one he had collected years earlier but not (to my knowledge) published. That text was the Hunters' Oath. Cissé wedged it into the final passages of the epic, allowing Kamissoko's narrative to follow the general arc of *Sundiata*, but to land in a different place, Dakadjalan, with a different conclusion. Cissé never claims that the Hunters' Oath comes from Kamissoko. To the contrary, he is quite clear about the fact that "to fill in certain gaps and also to make the stories and the statements of Wâ Kamissoko more clear and direct [he] had decided to turn to [his own] fieldnotes."[42] He was, however, vague about the origins of the Oath. Only years later, in 2003, would the attentive reader learn that Cissé's fieldnotes were from Tegué-Koro, and the Oath from Fadjimba Kanté.[43] Nonetheless, and happily for Cissé, the Oath resonated with a key and somewhat idiosyncratic theme in Kamissoko's re-counting of the Sundiata epic: the abolition of slavery.

Wâ Kamissoko was a curious character, at once an iconoclast and a traditionalist recognized as "one of the most knowledgeable bards" of the Manden.[44] More than a griot, he was also considered a *nwâra,* or an exceptional talent, and a member of the hunters' guild.[45] By all accounts both intellectually and physically imposing, Kamissoko coupled his idiosyncratic interpretations of Mande history with a fierce insistence on the validity and the accuracy of the oral tradition, which was his métier and vocation. In addition to his friendship, he shared many things with Cissé, whom he allowed to broadcast his knowledge to a wider, francophone world. Yet while he was a great advocate for Mande orature, his long and productive partnership with Cissé was also marked by discretion. Kamissoko refused to speak on certain topics, and his reticence, frustrating as it surely was, may have been prudent. It may also have been inadequate. At the time of his death, P. F. de Moraes Farias reports, "It was widely believed that he had been killed for revealing esoteric knowledge, or 'for attempting to become the equal of the great masters of the *Kòmò* (initiation society),'" but Cissé suggests that there may have been other motives as well.[46] There is no evidence that Kamissoko was murdered, but the assertion attests to the high stakes of secrecy, trust, and betrayal among those entrusted with the oral tradition, whose duty it is to know both what can be said and what must not be said.[47]

Most important for our purposes is what Kamissoko did not share: the Hunters' Oath. He is not recorded as having pronounced it in its entirety, although he recited stray phrases from it, notably the idea that while the physical body is nourished by food and water, the soul is sustained by fundamental freedoms.[48] In fact, according to Cissé, Kamissoko was vehemently opposed to the idea that the Oath would be shared. The two men—the ethnographer and the traditionalist whom Cissé called his griot—quarreled over this.[49] Still, Kamissoko's interpretation of the Sundiata epic resonated with core aspects of the Oath. His *Sundiata* is much more invested in slavery and opposition to it than are other variants of the epic. For Kamissoko, slave-raiding is the *causus belli* of the conflict between the eponymous hero and his nemesis, Soumamarou Kanté. He depicts ending slavery in the Manden, rather than creating the Mali Empire, as Sundiata's great achievement.[50] In Kamissoko's telling, Soumamarou also waged war against slave-raiding and slave-trading, and against the nobles of the Manden when they refused to unite behind him because he was a blacksmith.[51] When they rejected him, he swore to overcome them by force of arms rather than capturing them one by one.[52] He did so, waging war on the Manden but freeing the Mande from the fear of enslavement. This depiction of Soumamarou, the anti-hero as abolitionist, was so generous and idiosyncratic that the historian Madina Ly-Tall felt compelled to ask Kamissoko what his relationship to the Kanté clan was.[53]

In addition to lauding Soumamarou, Kamissoko celebrated hunters, who—in Mali at the time—were specifically associated with the military junta that had seized power in 1968. Moussa Traoré, the leader of the junta, shared a patronym (*jamu*) with one of Sundiata's key lieutenants, Tiramakan Traoré, and therefore shared in his cultural capital.

Moussa Traoré and his comrades used traditional songs and epics associated with the hunters to legitimate their place in the cultural imaginary and in the political landscape. In his preliminary remarks in *Soundjata, la gloire du Mali,* Kamissoko fulsomely praised the Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (CMLN), as the junta was known.[54] When he died later that year, Kamissoko was buried "with national honors" in a state-funded funeral, even if Cissé felt that such recognition had come later than it should have.[55] The irony goes ever deeper: Kamissoko—who insisted on Sundiata's opposition to slavery, who celebrated the hunters and the junta, who stood accused of revealing secret knowledge—did not publicly recite the Hunter's Oath. Rather it was Cissé, his intellectual ally and amanuensis, who would almost single-handedly launch the Oath's strange career.[56]

The Hunters' Oath in Translation

What does the Oath say? The hunters summon the world to "hear it," but of course, the world will not, and cannot, listen. I know of no original recording of the text. Those who encounter it read it in French translation, or perhaps in an English translation derived from the French.[57] However, those translations elide key passages and obscure others. Here then is the English from the Mandenkan. The text begins with a preamble.

> The Manden is founded on honesty and love, on nobility and cooperation. This means that there should never again be discrimination based on descent in Mali. This was the meaning of our struggle. As such, the children of Sanènè and Kòntròn [aka, the hunters] proclaim to the fourteen parts of the world and in the name of all the Manden:[58]
>
> The hunters declare
> That every life is a life;
> It is true that some have come into existence before others,
> But no soul is older than another,
> And no life is better than another.
>
> The hunters declare
> That every life is a life,
> That for every injury, amends must be made.
> That being so,
> Let no one bicker with their neighbor
> Let no one trouble their neighbor
> Let no one harass their neighbor.[59]
>
> The hunters declare
> That everyone should watch over their neighbors
> That everyone should respect their parents
> That everyone should educate their children
> That everyone should look after the members of their households.
>
> The hunters declare
> That everyone should watch over their fatherland
> Understanding that by country or fatherland

Is really meant "the people"
Because a country without people, or one that has been abandoned,
That country, and the land itself, will only know regret.[60]

The hunters declare
That hunger is an evil thing
That slavery is an evil thing
That in this lowly world there is no greater evil
Than these two things together;
That so long as we hold the quiver and the bow,
Hunger will never again kill in the Manden
Should drought return;
That war will never again destroy a village in the Manden
So that its people can be taken as slaves;
That in the Manden, no one will ever again put iron in the mouths of others
In order to sell them;
And that no-one in the Manden will ever again be beaten or killed
For being the child of a slave.

The hunters declare
That, as of today, slavery is uprooted
Within the frontiers of the Manden
That slave-raiding ends today in the Manden,
That the scourge of poverty ends today in the Manden.
Hunger is a bad thing,
And the hungry know no dignity;
Poverty is a bad thing,
And the poor know no respite;
The slave knows no respect
Anywhere in this world.

Those who came before us say:
A person's body
In bones and flesh,
In marrow and sinews,
In skin and hair,[61]
Is sustained by *tô*[62] and water
But a person's soul is sustained by three things:
To see whom it wants to see
To say what it wants to say
To do what it wants to do.
If the soul must do without one of these things,
It will suffer,
It will weaken.
Thus the hunters declare
That everyone's happiness is their own,

And everyone is free to respect the taboos of their fatherland;
That everyone is free to dispose of their own property.

Such is the Mande oath,
May the whole world hear it.

What can be learned from "listening" to the Hunter's Oath? First, one has to separate the signal from the noise, and there is a good deal of noise. Even in its published Mandenkan versions—from 2003 and 2008—the text is not particularly clean. There are minor variations, but also errors. The 2008 text, ostensibly the most scholarly version, introduces mistakes that may be the result of poor scanning or machine reading of the version printed against a page decorated with calligraphy in 2003: for instance, "Ko kèle tè dugu *ti tukun* (to destroy, again), Manden" becomes "Ko kèlè tè dugu *tit un* Manden," which means nothing at all. The 2008 version also records two lines in French that are entirely absent from the facing Mandenkan transcription, but that do appear in 2003: "*de peau recouverte de poils et de cheveux*" and "*chacun dispose désormais des fruits de son travail.*" Are these significant errors? Is this a tear in Barber's durable "tissue of words?" Only if the Mandenkan text is intended to be read. I suggest that that is not its function. Rather, the publication of the Mandenkan text is performative. It buttresses and supports the French language text. It is there to be seen, offering a kind of authenticity or authority. It is not there to be studied in its own right.

Still, an attentive reading of the Mandenkan texts reveals that the two versions coincide in a significant omission and misrepresentation of what the text actually says. Let us listen again to what may be the key passage in the Oath, as it appeared in 2003. It begins with "*Donsolu ko,*" or "the hunters declare":

Ko dyònnya shi lasala bi
Manden dènèn n'a dènèn,
Ko binkanni dabilala bi, Manden,
Ko nyani dyugu banna bi, Manden.
Kòngò ma nyi,
Malo te gòngòtò la;
Nyani ma nyi,
Dyò-yòrò tè nyanibagatò la;
Danbe tè dyòn na
Dunya yòrò shi.

And let us listen to an English translation of the French rendering of these lines, as reproduced by CELTHO in 2008:

The hunters declare:
The essence of slavery is extinguished today,
"From one wall to the other," from one frontier to the other of the Manden;
Slave-raiding is banned from this day forward in the Manden;
The sufferings born of these horrors are finished from this day forward in the Manden.

What a trial such torment is![63]
Especially when the oppressed has no recourse.
What a degradation slavery is![64]
Nowhere in the world [sic].[65]

Absent here, but present in the Mandenkan original, are poverty and hunger.[66] The copy, over time, has become degraded, producing a different text. From the Mandenkan original, listen again:

The hunters declare
That, as of today, slavery is uprooted
Within the frontiers of the Manden,
That slave-raiding ends today in the Manden,
The scourge of poverty ends today in the Manden.
Hunger is a bad thing,
And the hungry know no dignity (*malo*);
Poverty is a bad thing,
And the poor know no respite;
The slave knows no respect (*danbé*)
Anywhere in this world.

In this more precise, and perhaps less poetic, translation, three evils appear intertwined. Slavery, hunger, and poverty threaten the human dignity that is at the core of the Hunters' Oath, and that attracts philosophers to it as a proclamation of rights. Yet when its ideas are rendered more clearly, the text says even more than those philosophers may realize. The key themes become *malo*—shame, modesty, or dignity—and *danbé*—honor, respect, or renown. *Malo* is a complex term, usually rendered in English as shame or modesty and in French as "*la honte*."[67] But are the hungry shameless? Perhaps it is more exact to recognize that their dignity may be lost. Is a slave without honor—an internal quality—or is she denied respect by others? The critique, although one doubts the hunters would phrase it this way, is not of the person enslaved, but of the social matrix in which slavery is tolerated.

Slavery, then, becomes a key theme of the Oath, transforming the text from a pact among hunters to an attack on slavery, slave-raiding, and the poverty and insecurity that result. The Oath becomes a deeper recognition of human dignity, without losing sight of what threatens it. Recognizing the emphasis on slavery linked with insecurity helps us to think through two other problems. First, it sharply distinguishes the Oath from the "other" Mande charter, the Kurukan Fuga, with its Islamic inflections. The Kurukan Fuga counts a "group of slaves" among the component parts of Mande society, alongside the craftspeople, the carriers of quivers, and so on.[68] In a passage echoing a well-known *hadith*, it goes on to remind its listener—assumed to be among the class of owners—that "you are the master of the slave, and not of the sack that he carries."[69] In contrast, the Oath does not explicitly draw from the Islamic ecumene. Rather, Cissé presented the Oath as a reaction to slave-raiding that he portrayed as Muslim and Arab in origin.[70] Cissé's position helps us to situate the text ideologically, but it does little to locate it in time. Nonetheless, the vivid opposition to slavery expressed in the Oath does offer clues to another great interpretive challenge, namely the origins of the text.

Origins

One common line of analysis is that the Oath is quite recent, that it can be dated only from the 1960s, at the earliest. Strictly speaking, this is true. There is no record of its existence before then. The counter-argument is that, as part of an "enormous Manding corpus," the text of the Oath is stable, and that it dates from the thirteenth century.[71] It is of course impossible to know. The former position may be unduly cynical, while the latter is an article of faith, one that may be misplaced and that hardly attempts to persuade skeptics. The text itself offers only one significant clue, which supports neither case. If, as we ought to, we recognize the Hunters' Oath as a powerful antislavery text, we might ask when enslavement last posed such a vivid danger in the Manden. Slave-raiding was not a threat there in the 1960s. Why then emphasize it? Was it a threat in the thirteenth century? Maybe, but the evidence is thin, perhaps irredeemably so. We do know, however, that warfare and slave-raiding threatened the very same region in which Cissé met Kanté, and for a radius of hundreds of miles around it, from the 1860s and increasingly through the 1890s, several decades before Kanté shared the oath with Cissé.[72] This suggests that—in much the same way that Kamissoko's rendering of *Sundiata* contains nineteenth-century "anachronisms"[73]—the Oath can be located in a specific, lived history, one still faint on the horizon of living memory in the 1960s, in which endemic conflict generated displacement, famine, and poverty on a broad swath of territory radiating out from what is now southern Mali.[74] By the 1890s, armed columns of French and African troops crisscrossed the country, ravaging villages, burning crops, and capturing people to sell for horses and guns, or to exploit as camp followers, cooks, and porters. As the Oath suggests, the hungry knew no dignity, the poor no respite, and the slave no respect. In 1898, the last great pockets of African resistance to colonial conquest in the region collapsed. Kénédugu and its fortress fell, and a French column captured Samory Touré after a long pursuit across the forest and the savannah. French colonial rule, more or less fixed in this region by the World War I, would bring new forms of suffering and depravation—ranging from forced labor to conscription and the requisitioning of crops. But in Wasulu, Kénédugu, and Bafoulabé—as in the Manden—slave-raiding had ended, and refugees returned to the ravaged lands, the dolorous lands of regret the Oath invokes.[75] They built new settlements on the ashes of the old. In Wasulu, hunters were key to this taming of the land, teeming once again with wildlife.[76] The icon of the hunter, his mystical paraphernalia, his knowledge of the savannah, his muskets and shotguns, remains largely associated with this region. Hunters' music, with its distinctive rhythms, vocal styles, and instruments like the *donso ngoni,* or hunter's lute, flourished here, at this time, and it remains associated with an ideal of rural, agricultural, and self-consciously "traditional" life.[77] What more propitious place and time for the hunters' societies to flourish, and for the Hunters' Oath to emerge? The Oath may indeed be older than this late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century moment—nothing *disproves* the thirteenth-century claim, and it may have more than one point of origin—but it is not likely to be "younger" than the period of conquest.

There is a third position, not without merit, on the question of origins. Some hold that the question is insignificant, arguing that the value of the text lies not in its venerability but in the ideas it expresses. If we take the Oath to heart, this position is entirely consistent with it: "no soul is older than another / and no life is better than another." The merit of this position—listen to the Oath, do not date it—is that it offers a welcome exit from a sterile debate that represents the question of origins as a zero-sum contest between a unitary Africa and an equally unitary West over who can claim to have produced the first human rights texts. In this line of argument, for instance, the thirteenth-century date is linked not to the appearance of Halley's Comet, or by working backward from Arabic-language accounts of West African kingdoms, but to a competition with the Magna Carta for a kind of "first-comer" status.[78] This zero-sum game is a false contest, an intellectual snare that thoughtful commentators, each in their own way, have rightly dodged.[79] Still the weakness of this third position is that, while it may satisfy the philosopher, it cannot satiate the historian. It asks us to restrain our historical sensibilities and to suspend our curiosity. It risks reducing African history to legend. Surely, we can do more.

Conclusion

What have we learned by listening to the Hunters' Oath? The text is a rich one. Its keen refusal of indignity in a time of tumult and trauma reverberates in our own. Its origins, disputed as they are, do not represent its value, but they are part of the story. Whether its roots lie in the time of the founding of the Mali Empire, they do not lie in the Sundiata epic itself. Rather, the Oath is a text distinct from both the Kurukan Fuga and from *Sundiata*. Youssouf Tata Cissé's original move—filling the hole Wâ Kamissoko left in his version of *Sundiata* by wedging in the Hunters' Oath—has allowed the fusion of two different, independent texts. It also has led to confusion as to the existence or identity of a "Mande Charter," a term applied liberally to two texts as fundamentally different as the Oath and the Kurukan Fuga.

Despite this confusion, we are richer than we think. We have three texts: *Sundiata*, the Hunters' Oath, and the Kurukan Fuga. Each is an oral text. Many versions of *Sundiata* exist, but until the last few decades, neither of the Mande charters had been captured in writing. Still, we know that the different variants of *Sundiata* represent a relatively stable narrative. Even if many may be agnostic about when the epic emerged, it clearly refers to the establishment of a vast, heterogeneous, and expansive polity that is well attested by myriad other sources dating as far back as the fourteenth century. Likewise, while the text of the Kurukan Fuga is difficult to trace historically, one can recognize that the actual "kurukan fuga" is both a place and a synecdoche for an event that gives *Sundiata* meaning. The arc of the epic's narrative ends with the creation—or the affirmation—of a social order largely visible today. The contrast with the Hunters' Oath could hardly be sharper. The Oath is radically—and literally—emancipatory. It is a Mandenkan text that not only condemns slavery but seeks to rip out its roots. It asserts, unequivocally, the value of individual freedom. Irrespective of its origins, the very existence of the Oath demonstrates that African-language thought can contribute to anti-slavery and human rights discourse, and meaningfully so. Yet for all its worth, the Oath has been obscured not only by Cissé's divergent accounts of its origins, but also by inexact translations and irregular transcriptions of its original Mandenkan. Very few scholars who invoke the Oath read its original. They rely instead on a series of translations that omit or occlude some of the key themes of the Oath. The effect has been both to blur important clues to its origins and to muffle its voice. In a clearer translation, will the world listen?

NOTES

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1. Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

2. Éric Jolly, "l'Epopée en Contexte: Variantes et Usages Politiques de Deux Récits Épiques (Mali/Guinée)," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 65, no. 4 (July–August 2010): 885–912.

3. On the Mali Empire in particular, and the "imperial age" in the Sahel in general, as a treasured past, see Hadrien Collet, "Landmark Empires: Searching for Medieval Empires and Imperial Tradition in Historiographies of West Africa," *Journal of African History* 61, no. 3 (October 2020): 341–57; Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

4. CELHTO [Centre d'études linguistiques et historiques par la tradition orale], ed., *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga: Aux Sources d'une Pensée Politique en Afrique* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2008); Bonny Ibhawoh, *Human Rights in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 42–43; Modibo Diabate, *Kurukanfuga: Miroir d'une Culture Universelle* (Bamako: Donko-Ba, 2018), 81; Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé," in *In Search of Africa(s): Universalism and Decolonial Thought*, ed. Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), 131–35. For various reasons, the charters have attracted greater attention in the Francophone than in the Anglophone African world. The Anglophone parallel to the Mande Charter phenomenon might be the invocation of "*ubuntu*" in post-apartheid South Africa or the recognition of the "African Renaissance." On the latter, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic*Civitas* Books, 2009).

5. D. T. Niane, "Introduction," in CELHTO, ed., *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 12; UNESCO, "Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 4.COM 13.59 [Oct., 2009]," https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/4.COM/13.59 (accessed January 21, 2022); François Simonis, "Le Griot, l'Historien, le Chasseur et l'UNESCO: Conte Mandingue d'aujourd'hui," *Ultramarines* no. 28 (2015): 12–31.

6. Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé"; Michael Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom in Africa: Toward a Theory of Emancipatory Politics* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016).

7. Jean-Loup Amselle, "Were Human Rights Born in Africa?," in *In Search of Africa(s)*, 120–30; Jan Jansen, "A la Recherche d'autochtonie: Pourquoi les Maliens acceptent la Charte du Manding et la Charte du Kouroukanfougan," *Mande Studies* no. 18 (2016): 57–73; Mamadou Diakité, "Analyse du discours, tradition orale et histoire: Et si la charte de Kurukan Fuga n'avait jamais existé avant 1998?" *Sudlangues: Revue électronique international de Sciences du Langage* no. 11 (June 2009): 107–30; Stephen Belcher, "Some Observations on the Textualization of the 'Charte du Kouroukan Fouga,'" in *Mande Mansa: Essays in Honor of David C. Conrad*, ed. Stephen Belcher, Jan Jansen, and Mohamed N'Daou (Zürich: Lit, 2008), 48–60.

8. Amselle, "Were Human Rights Born in Africa?"; Jolly, "l'Epopée en Contexte"; Simonis, "le Griot, l'Historien"; Etienne Smith, "Des Arts de faire société: Parentés à plaisanteries et constructions identitaires en Afrique de l'Ouest (Sénégal)" (PhD diss., 2 vols., Institut des Etudes Politiques [Paris], 2010), 752–67.

9. Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Steven L. B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); cf. Fabian Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

10. See, for example, Abena Ampofoa Asare, *Truth Without Reconciliation: A Human Rights History of Ghana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch. 6, 209–42; Meredith Terretta, "From Below and to the Left? Human Rights and Liberation Politics in Africa's Postcolonial Age," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 2 (June 2013): 389–416; Ibhawoh, *Human Rights in Africa*; John Straussberger, "Entangled Political Histories of Twentieth-Century West Africa: The Case of Guinean Exile Networks," *Journal of Global History* (January 2022): 1–19; see 15–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022821000437.

11. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs*, 214.

12. The quotation is from Eunice Sahle, ed., *Human Rights in Africa: Contemporary Debates and Struggles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 5.

13. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

14. Mamadou Diouf quoted in Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 285–86. Over the last decade, political crises in which constitutionalism was at least nominally at the center have arisen in Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, to name only Sahelian countries.

15. Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé," 135.

16. Jolly, "l'Epopée en Contexte," 901–4.

17. CELTHO, *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 39–57. On joking relationships, see Etienne Smith and Cécile Canut, ed., "Parentés, plaisanteries et politique," special issue, *Cahiers d'études africaines* no. 184 (December 2006): 687–1034.

18. Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé"; Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom in Africa*.

19. Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé," 134–35.

20. See, for example, CELTHO, *la Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 145; Modibo Diabate, *Kurukanfuga*; Méké Méïté, ed., *Le Peuple Mandéka et la Charte de Kurukan Fuga* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2019).

21. Harri Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 61.

22. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs*, 237.

23. Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom*, 57.

24. Karim Traoré, "Les Enfants de Saane et de Kontoron: A Propos des Chasseurs du Manden," in *Echanges Franco-Allemands sur l'Afrique*, ed. János Riesz and Hélène d'Almeida-Topor (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1994), 231–43; Youssouf Tata Cissé, *La Confrérie des chasseurs Malinké et Bambara: Mythes, rites et récits initiatiques* (Ivry: Editions Nouvelles du Sud, Association ARSAN, 1994); Ministère de la Culture du Mali, ed., *La Chasse Traditionelle en Afrique de l'Ouest, d'hier à Aujourd'hui: Actes du Colloque International de Bamako, 26–27–28 Janvier 2001* (Bamako: Graphique Industrie, 2001); Vladimir Arseniev, "Les Chasseurs donso du Mali à l'épreuve du temps," *Afrique contemporaine* 223–224, nos. 3–4 (October–December 2007): 341–61; Brahima Camara, "The Hunter in the Mande Imagination," *Mande Studies* no. 10 (2008): 121–32; Jan Jansen, "Hunter and Civil Society in Present-Day Mali," *Mande Studies* no. 10 (2008): 49–58; Agnieszka Kedzierska-Manzon, *Chasseurs Mandingues: Violence, Pouvoir et Religion en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Paris: Karthala, 2014); Joseph Hellweg, "Songs from the Hunters' Qur'an: Dozo Music, Textuality, and Islam in Northwestern Côte d'Ivoire, from the Repertoire of Dramane Coulibaly," *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1 (January 2019): 120–47; Dorothea Schulz, "The Hunter Hype: Producing 'Local Culture' as Particularity in Mali," in *Ethnicity, Commodity, In/Corporation*, ed. J. P. Mieu, J. L. Comaroff, and J. Comaroff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 168–94.

25. Joseph Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical State: The Benkadi Movement of Côte d'Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Ismaël Compaoré and Heidi Bojsen, "Sécurité d'en bas au Burkina Faso: Koglweogo, Gardiens de la Brousse, Gardiens de la Société?" *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* no. 239 (October 2020): 671–97; Kedzierska-Manzon, *Chasseurs mandingues*, 76–83.

26. V. F. Vydrin, *Manding-English Dictionary: Maninka, Bamana* (Lac Beauport, Quebec: Meabooks, 2015 [orig. 1999]), 4–7; see also Konrad Tuchscherer in David C. Conrad and Djanka Tassey Condé, *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), xxxii–xxxiv.

27. Gomez offers an extensive list of versions of the epic in English and French, with reference to a checklist composed by Stephen Bulman; Gomez, *African Dominion*, 390–92, note 2.

28. Conrad and Condé, *Sunjata*; Gomez, *African Dominion*.

29. Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: the Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Jansen, "A la Recherche d'autochtonie."

30. Madina Ly-Tall, Seydou Camara, and Bouna Diouara, ed. *l'Histoire du Mandé d'après Jeli Kanku Madi Jabaté de Kéla* (Paris: Association SCOA pour la recherche scientifique en Afrique noire, 1987); John William Johnson and Fa-Digi Sisòkò, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Jan Jansen, "L'épopée de Soundjata d'après Lansine Diabaté," in *Epopée, Histoire, Société: Le Cas de Soundjata: Mali et Guinée* (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 225–87; Conrad and Condé, *Sunjata*, 196. Niane refers to the meeting at Kouroukan Fougan [*sic*] as "the division of the world," but establishes only the most anodyne elements of the social structure; *Sundiata*, 73–78.

31. The text does not appear in Wâ Kamissoko and Youssouf Tata Cissé, ed. *l'Empire du Mali (Premier Colloque International de Bamako, 27 janvier–1er février 1975)* (Paris: Fondation SCOA pour la recherche scientifique en Afrique noire, 1975); Wâ Kamissoko and Youssouf Tata Cissé, eds., *l'Empire du Mali, suite: l'Enfance, l'Exil, le Testament et les Funerailles de Maghan Sondyata; Les Peuls du Manding (Deuxième Colloque International de Bamako, 16 février–22 février 1976)* (Paris: Fondation SCOA pour la recherche scientifique en Afrique noire, 1977).

32. Youssouf Tata Cissé, *La Charte du Mande, T1: Du Serment des Chasseurs à l'abolition de l'esclavage (1212–1222), d'après des récits de Faguimba Kanté et Lassana Kamissoko*, vol. 4 (Bamako: Editions Triangle Dankoun, 2015), 147–54.

33. See also Jolly, "l'Epopée en Contexte," 908, 76n.

34. Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 112–13.

35. On this partnership, see P. F. de Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist as Critic and Intellectual Producer: An Example from Contemporary Mali," in *African Historiography: Essays in Honor of Jacob Ade Ajayi* (Essex, UK: Longman, 1993), 14–37, 21; Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 1–22.

36. de Moraes Farias, "Oral Traditionist as Critic," 23.

37. Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wâ Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali: Des Origines à la Fondation de l'Empire*, vol. 1 (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1988), 8–12; Cissé, *Chasseurs mandingues*, 14; Almamy Maliki Yattara and Bernard Salvaing, *Almamy: l'Age d'homme d'un lettré malien* (Brinon-sur-Sauldre: Grandvaux, 2003), 369–70.

38. Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 3, 7.

39. Indeed, the first volume of *La Grande Geste du Mali* appeared with Malinké and French text on facing pages, the second volume uniquely in French.

40. David C. Conrad, "A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital," *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (October 1994): 355–77.

41. Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wâ Kamissoko, *Soundjata, La Gloire du Mali: la Grande Geste du Mali*, vol. 2 (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1991), 9.

42. Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata*, 9.

43. Cissé and Sagot-Duvauroux, *La Charte du Mandé et autres Traditions du Mali*, n.p. [1].

44. Conrad, "A Town Called Dakajalan," 374; on Kamissoko—rendered as Waa Kamisòkò—see the authoritative text of de Moraes Farias, "Oral Traditionist as Critic."

45. On *nwâra,* Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 1, 21; as *nyara,* CELHTO, *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 19.

46. de Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist as Critic," 14; Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 21.

47. de Moraes Farias, "Oral Traditionist as Critic"; Mamadou Diawara, "The Time-Tested Traditionist: Intellectual Trajectory and Mediation from the Early Empires to the Present Day," in *Landscapes, Sources, and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past: Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias*, ed. Toby Green and Benedetta Rossi (Boston: Brill, 2018), 277–95; Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata*, 241.

48. Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata,* 207–08; see also Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 37.

49. Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 54–56.

50. Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata*, 240; Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 203, 229.

51. Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 192–95.

52. Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 200–01.

53. Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 232–33.

54. Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata*, 207–08.

55. Cissé and Kamissoko, *La Grande Geste du Mali*, 20–21.

56. The most complete accounting of the career of the Oath appears in Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 46–58.

57. Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom in Africa*, 85–87; Nubia Kai, *Kuma Malinke Historiography: Sundiata Keita to Almamy Samori Toure* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 237–41.

58. On the mythical figures Sanènè and Kòntròn, see Traoré, "Les Enfants de Saane et de Kontoron"; Cissé, *la Confrérie des Chasseurs Malinké et Bambara*, 37–49. Note also that while the Mandenkan original specifies fourteen parts of the world, French translations consistently refer to twelve; see Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 48, no. 1.

59. Pronouns in Mande languages have no gender, but here they are in the singular. I have rendered them in the plural in English so as not to gender them. However, hunters are male, and one interpretation of the Oath sees it as a pact *between hunters*. For that reason, male pronouns would not be inapt. On gender and hunters' mythology, see Traoré, "Les Enfants de Saane et de Kontoron," 234–36; Karim Traoré, "Bee Y'i Ba Bolo (Everybody lies in her/his mother's hands): Gender issues in the Hunters' Songs of the Mande," in *Gender and Identity in Africa*, ed. M. Reh and G. Ludwar-Ene (Münster: Lit, 1994), 85–97.

60. "Fatherland" (*faso*) is a literal translation, gendered male: *fa* means "father;" *so* is the house or home, by extension the homeland.

61. This and the preceding lines vary from one version to another of the printed Mandenkan versions of the Oath.

62. *Tô* is a staple dish of millet or sometimes corn.

63. The 2003 French translation offers a different account of these lines: "What a horror famine is! A hungry person has no shame, no restraint"; Cissé and Sagot-Duvauroux, *La Charte du Mandé*, n.p. (17).

64. Cissé's French translations offer variants of another line following this one, the more literal being "the slave is not respected anywhere in the world"; Cissé and Kamissoko, *Soundjata*, 40. See also Cissé and Sagot-Duvauroux, *La Charte du Mandé*, n.p. (17); and Cissé, *La Charte du Mande,* 52.

65. CELHTO, *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 149.

66. Albeit the theme of hunger appears in an earlier verse; CELHTO, *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 147.

67. See Catherine Baroin and Barbara MacGowan Cooper, ed., *La Honte Au Sahel: Pudeur, Respect, Morale Quotidienne* (Saint-Maur: Editions Sépia, 2018), 15 and *infra.*

68. CELHTO, 40–41.

69. CELHTO, 48–49; cf. *Mi'raj al-Su'ud: Ahmed Baba's Replies on Slavery*, trans. J. O. Hunwick and Fatima Harrak (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, University Mohamed V Souissi, 2000), 35.

70. Cissé and Sagot-Duvauroux, *La Charte du Mandé*, n.p. (1–3); Cissé, *La Charte du Mande*, 25–26, 47. Both Cissé and Kamissoko were Muslim—the former at least by name—but Kamissoko was particularly open in his critique of Wahhabi "reform" in Mali; see de Moraes Farias, "Oral Traditionist as Critic," 15–20.

71. Niang in CELHTO, *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga*, 6.

72. On the Manden in particular, Yves Person, *Samori: Une Révolution Dyula*, 3 vols., (Dakar: I.F.A.N., 1968–1975), I, 387–91. On the region more broadly, Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West*

Africa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Brian Peterson, *Islamization from Below: The Making of Muslim Communities in Rural French Sudan, 1880–1960* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

73. de Moraes Farias, "Oral Traditionist as Critic," 28–29.

74. Amselle, "Were Human Rights Born in Africa?" 129.

75. Peterson, *Islamization from Below*, chs. 1–2, 24–86.

76. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule,* 121–22, 203–4; Peterson, *Islamization from Below*, 58–62.

77. Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ch. 2, 63–89; Schulz, "Hunter Hype."

78. Amselle, "Were Human Rights Born in Africa?"

79. Diagne, "On the Charters of the Mandé"; Amselle, "Were Human Rights Born in Africa?"; Ibhawoh, *Human Rights in Africa*.