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## The Uses of Oral Tradition in Senegambia : Maalik Sii and the Foundation of Bundu

It is well known that history serves many purposes, not least of which is to influence present action by inculcating appropriate beliefs about the past. History taught in European schools was, and sometimes still is, designed to teach useful lessons about patriotism, political wisdom, and moral rectitude—not to tell the unbiased truth about the past. Even today, the goal of unbiased, non-ethnocentric history is far from universal, and African oral history is not very different in these respects from European written history.

The story of Maalik Sii and his foundation of the kingdom of 'Bundu in the 1690's is a convenient touch-stone for examining the uses of history by Senegambian bards. It has a special interest as one of the best remembered and most frequently retold of all Senegambian oral traditions. Among other versions, one by Saki Olal N'Diaye (Njai)<sup>1</sup> was published in this journal in 1971, with Pulaar and English versions of facing pages. Others were recorded as far back in time as the 1840's and as far removed in space as 600 kms to the east and to the west of 'Bundu itself. Twenty-five of the more complete versions on record have been chosen for comparison. On a temporal scale, seven were recorded before 1900, five were recorded during the colonial period, while the remaining thirteen (including the version of Saki N'Diaye) were recorded in 1966.<sup>2</sup> The place of recording is not always known, but at least seven of the twenty-five were recorded outside of 'Bundu itself. The sample

1. SAKI OLAL N'DIAYE, 'The Story of Malik Sy', *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 43 (1971): 467-487 (cited hereafter as *CEA*). The spellings of Pular words are given differently here from the forms used in editing Saki N'Diaye's article, in order to conform as nearly as possible to the phonetic alphabets for Senegalese languages established by the government of Senegal.

2. These recordings (nos. 13 through 25 on the checklist below) are available on tape in Pulaar with spoken translations into French mainly by Hammady Amadou Sy and Abdoulaye Bathily, at the Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire (Université de Dakar, in Senegal) and at the African Studies Association (Center for African Oral Data, Archives of Traditional Music, Maxwell Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana in the United States) as part of the Curtin Collection of Oral Traditions of Eastern Senegal. Copies may be obtained at cost from the ASA center in Bloomington.

thus has a reasonable distribution through space as well as through time. (A check-list numbered for reference is found at the end of this article, and reference numbers in the text refer to that list.)

All versions agree at a very general level about the key event—and at this level they are consonant with the written record, such as it is. Maalik Sii, a cleric from Suyuuma (near Podor in Fuuta Tooro), came to the region southwest of the confluence of the Senegal and Faleme Rivers, the region that was to be known as 'Bundu. He and his Fuutanke followers encountered a number of other lineages or other groupings of people who were already settled there. Most of these people were also Pulaar-speaking, and they formed an alliance under Maalik Sii's leadership which secured their political independence from the Soninke-speaking kingdom of Gajaaga to the north, whose kings had a previous claim to part of the territory. They also advanced their frontiers to the south against the non-Muslim Malinke in what was to be southern 'Bundu. Ultimately, their descendents had to fight to make good their claim to independence from their homeland in Fuuta Tooro as well. 'Bundu was founded, in short, as an offshoot of Fuuta Tooro resulting from Fuutanke population movement to the southeast.

But the story also belongs to a broader category of narratives describing the foundation of a new State or a new source of political authority. These foundation stories always have some sort of chronological sequence, but they are also expected to justify the existence of that State and the authority of its rulers. They can be read simultaneously as historical narratives and as perhaps-mythic charters giving power to later rulers. Both aspects are present here, and the need to justify power was especially keen in the case of 'Bundu. Maalik Sii was not a member of any near-by ruling lineage, with a possible pretense to power by inheritance. He was, indeed, a cleric in a society where many good Muslims held that piety and the exercise of sovereignty were incompatible. He could not appeal to descent from Kooli Tengela, like the *satigi* of Fuuta Tooro, nor could he partake of the particular forms of kingship or *mansaya* common to the Malinke-speaking people he conquered or displaced.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 'Bundu was then and remained what in Western history would be called a multi-national State. It was dominantly Fuulbe, but even today only about 70 per cent of the population have Pulaar as their home language.<sup>4</sup> An effective foundation legend therefore had to appeal across

3. S. M. CISSOKO, 'La royauté (*mansaya*) chez les Mandingues occidentaux d'après leurs traditions orales', *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 31 (1969): 325-338.

4. TERRITOIRE DU SÉNÉGAL, 'Population du Sénégal 1956', Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar, lists 26.7 thousand people in the cantons of Goudiry, Sénou-débou, Koussan, and Bala (the approximate territory of the former kingdom of 'Bundu) with division by percentage speaking various home languages as follows: Toucouleur 36.7 per cent; Peul 34.1 per cent [or 70.8 per cent Pulaar speakers]; Diakhanke (Jahanka) 9.4 per cent; Soninke 8.7 per cent; Malinke 3.7 per cent; Wolof 3.7 per cent; Bambara 3.7 per cent [or 16.8 per cent Manding languages].

ethnic and linguistic lines—or else to insist on the right of one group to dominate the rest. In 'Bundu, the appeal was made to a common allegiance owed by all to the descendents of Maalik Sii.

The basic form of all the Maalik Sii stories is an oral narrative presentation from about ten minutes to an hour in length, usually spoken by a professional bard with or without musical accompaniment on the guitar-like *hoodu* in Fuuta and 'Bundu or on the *kora*, a form of harp more common in Malinke-speaking regions. Any individual narrative consists of a series of one to a half dozen separate episodes. Something like nineteen recurrent episodes are found in the sample as a whole, but no single episode occurs in all twenty-five versions. The most obvious historical fact confirmed by documentary evidence<sup>5</sup>—that Maalik Sii and his followers won control of 'Bundu by military conquest—is overtly recognized in only fourteen of the twenty-five. Nor is there a strikingly clear pattern of combinations of episodes that recur in groups. Instead, the selection of episodes for any narrative appears on the surface as a random selection at the whim of the narrator.

Any single episode, furthermore, can be told in different ways. Its meaning is not necessarily the same in all versions. Of the relatively large number that mention military conquest, for example, most simply state that it occurred or list the rulers and territories Maalik and his son Bubu Maalik may have conquered. The listeners can presumably conclude for themselves that the Sisibe (the collective name for the Sii family) therefore rule by right of conquest. Three of the narratives, however [15, 16, 17], drive the point home with more elaboration. These are incidentally the longest of all and represent the line of tradition among the bards most closely associated with the Sisibe house today. Rather than talking only about Sisibe victories, they contain a sub-episode about a defeat: in one of the wars Maalik fought against the Soninke of Gajaaga, he was crossing the Faleme at Gumbakoka (between Kidira and the confluence with the Senegal), when Gajaaga forces sprung an ambush and killed him. But even after that, his severed head continued to speak, saying 'Power is born of a drop of blood'. 'Bundunkoobe today explain that the phrase has to be understood in two senses. Most obviously, might makes right or power is born of violence. More particularly, Maalik's blood called out for vengeance, and it was the war for vengeance under Bubu Maalik that finally consolidated Sisibe control over 'Bundu.

A second common episode also occurs in fourteen of the twenty-five versions in the sample.<sup>6</sup> This time, the episode accounts for the secession of 'Bundu from Gajaaga, but peacefully this time, not a result of military victory. Gajaaga of the late seventeenth century was a comparatively

5. CHARPENTIER, quoted in J. MACHAT, *Documents sur l'établissement français de l'Afrique occidentale au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1906): 29-30.

6. Including that of Saki N'Diaye, *CEA* 43 (1971): 478-481.

large State including both banks of the Senegal from a little above Kayes (now in Mali) downstream to frontier with Fuuta, below Bakel. Most versions say that Maalik Sii came into Tiyaabu, the capital of Gajaaga, as a stranger cleric migrating from Suyuuma in Fuuta. He soon won the ruler's gratitude, either because of his piety, the power of the charms he could make, or specific miracles he performed for the *tunka*. As a result, the *tunka* gave Maalik permission to establish a separate, autonomous settlement to the south of the Senegal Valley. But soon questions arose about the precise boundary between Gajaaga and Maalik's concession. The *tunka* decided to settle it by ordering that Maalik and he would simultaneously begin walking, each from his own capital toward that of the other party. Their meeting point would then be approximately half way between the two capitals, and it would mark the boundary between them. The two rulers were to begin at dawn on a certain day, but all versions agree that the plan failed. Either Maalik started early or the *tunka* started late. In the event, they met quite close to Tiyaabu. The *tunka* was amazed and chagrined, but he kept his promise and made that spot the frontier line. It is still locally recognized as the stream (or *marigot*) of Furawol on the direct road between Tiyaabu and Maalik's capital in the vicinity of Saare.

The most obvious function of this episode was to explain—either mythically or in reality—the reason for an eccentric frontier. In most Senegambian States of this period, the ruler exercised greatest power over the seat of government and its vicinity. His authority often tended to weaken with distance from the capital. Sometimes there was no recognized frontier at all, only an ill-defined no-man's-land as between 'Bundu and Wuuli on the upper Gambia, where travellers had to spend more than a day's travel crossing from the last village of 'Bundu to the first village of Wuuli. It was therefore odd to find the frontier between 'Bundu and Gajaaga so close to Tiyaabu, but the walking grant is clearly a mythical explanation. Gajaaga, like Fuuta further down stream, was a riverine State, more densely occupiable than the land back from the river. All along the Senegal and its northern tributaries as far east as Jahunu, the agricultural system depended on the annual flooding of the river valley during the wet season. One crop could usually be grown back from the river, using rainfall alone, while a second could be planted on the flood plain as the water receded, to be harvested in the dry season. This insurance against the vagaries of uncertain sahelian rainfall, combined with easy boat transportation up and down the river, gave unity and shape to Gajaaga. Its core was the riverside, though its rulers might occasionally control the higher regions on either side. In these circumstances, the southern boundary of Gajaaga fell where it did because would-be settlers from Fuuta found the flood plain and its immediate vicinity already occupied.

Though the walking grant is probably only a mythical explanation of political geography, it has a ring of truth in that secular rulers like the



*tunka* of Tiyaabu did in fact make grants of autonomous authority to Muslim clerics. That much of the story fits into what we know about the role of Islam in Senegambian politics from other sources. The western Sudan was not yet completely Muslim. Most people in Gajaaga and 'Bundu would no doubt have identified themselves as Muslim, but secular rulers rarely enforced the full *shari'a* law. Muslim clerics were often important in politics, but they lacked the kind of influence *'ulamā* usually had in the Middle East. Then and later in the western Sudan, pious clerics had a number of alternatives. One was to participate in court life, accepting the fact that this required tolerance of non-Islamic practices they were powerless to change. A second was to seek the security of a privileged enclave within the State, where Islamic purity could be guarded under autonomous clerical leadership. A third was to seize control of the State itself and use its full power to enforce Muslim law and complete the conversion of the countryside.

According to different versions of the tradition, Maalik Sii was somewhere on the borderline between the last two alternatives. We know from other sources that only a generation earlier, in the 1670's, a Mauritanian cleric named Nāsir al-Dīn had gone into open revolt and had briefly seized power in the southern Sahara, Kajor, Waalo, and Fuuta—Maalik Sii's home country.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Maalik himself was involved in these events; though only five versions say he left Fuuta under pressure [1, 9, 15, 18, 22], and only one of these [22] says that he was driven out by an anti-clerical government.

However that may be, the weight of the tradition is clear that he began in Gajaaga seeking not revolt but autonomy. Gajaaga was already riddled with autonomous clerical jurisdictions, normally involving separate control over a town or part of a town by an important clerical lineage. The first thing a newly-arrived and prestigious cleric might seek to do was to have an autonomous town of his own—something Maalik apparently achieved some time before the walking grant was supposed to have taken place. The significance of the walking grant in this context is that autonomy within a town was changed into authority over a larger territory. At least symbolically, the story stands for Maalik Sii's actual achievement in creating the first substantial clerical State in Senegambia—in effect a passage from autonomy to authority and a precedent for the later foundation of the Almamates of Fuuta Jaalo and Fuuta Tooro.

The walking grant episode is also indicative of Senegambian norms and attitudes toward clerics on one hand and secular rulers on the other. One of the key disagreements between different versions is whether Maalik Sii cheated in starting his walk before the agreed time, or whether he came out ahead for other reasons. Nine of the fourteen versions that

7. See P. D. CURTIN, 'Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relationships in Mauritania and Senegal', *Journal of African History* 12 (1971): 11-24.

mention the walking grant at all say Maalik started early as a deliberate cheat [1, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 18, 25]. None of these portrays Maalik's act as anything but dishonorable, not even recent versions by bards who represent the Sisibe family [14 and 18]. While Maalik Sii, as the protagonist of the story is shown as a cheat, his opponent the *tunka* of Tiyaabu is shown as a true noble who made a promise and refused to go back on his word, even though he knew he was being cheated.

At first glance, this is contrary to the Western pattern of official history where a certain amount of whitewash is expected to be applied to past leaders. The Senegambian pattern, however, was different. Clerics were not expected to be moral models in the fashion of the Victorian clergy. They might excel in piety, religious knowledge, contact with the supernatural, and ability to work miracles; but ordinary honesty in the Western sense of that term was not necessarily included in the qualities of sainthood. For a noble or a secular ruler, the situation was different. Faithfulness to the pledged word was a positive attribute, and the bards who told these stories down through the centuries were principally employed to praise the qualities of the secular nobility (it should be borne in mind that, even though Maalik Sii was a cleric, his descendents have long since become ordinary secular rulers).

Even among the nobility, the principal protagonists of the great epic stories of Senegambia—men like Samba Gelaajo Jeegi or Amadu Samba Polel—were not necessarily heroes in the Western sense. They were not held up for admiration or imitation but shown as over-achievers who come out larger than life in their bad qualities as well as good. In some versions, they approach the role of anti-hero. If other great men of the past were so often evil, Maalik's descendents are hardly likely to be concerned that he occasionally cheated.

What is more surprising is that *any* of the versions in the sample include the episode of the walking grant, yet deny that Maalik cheated; to do so seems to rob the episode of the main point, but three versions do. One simply says that Maalik started early without further explanation [15]. Two others blame the *tunka's* late start on laziness or forgetfulness [2 and 5]. These two are especially interesting for the time and place they were recorded, both being taken down in the 1840's, probably in Gajaaga rather than 'Bundu. In that setting, the story could be made to serve another purpose. By then, Tiyaabu was no longer capital of a united Gajaaga, but one town among many and hard-pressed by its enemies. The physical town was actually destroyed in 1834, though the survivors took refuge for a time and came back to rebuild later. During the next couple of decades, the Tiyaabu people were almost always aligned with 'Bundu against their enemies in Gajaaga. Without the element of chicanery the walking grant becomes a narrative illustrating the amity of two sovereigns in the distant past—and the generosity of one of them. This kind of ancient tradition of friendship is precisely the kind of historical tradition that was remembered because

it gave meaning and weight to a contemporary political alliance. When the need to claim an ancient alliance with 'Bundu weakened or disappeared, Gajaaga narrators could return to the more usual account of Maalik's pettiness.

The third most frequent episode is the story of Kumba's well, and again one of its variants is found in the version given by Saki N'Diaye.<sup>8</sup> It turns on the importance of water wells in a country where surface water is very hard to find during the long dry season. A well is therefore essential to a permanent village, and to dig a well was a considerable enterprise where some wells were as much as twenty meters deep. As a result, whoever dug the first well or first cleared the land for crops held the first rights to the land surrounding, and these rights passed on to his children. The precise nature of the rights differs today from one part of Senegambia to another and has changed through time, but the general feature is a peculiarly intimate relationship between the lineage of the first founder and the land itself—a relationship that could involve religious duties, could involve the right to collect rents or other dues from those who worked the land, and could involve a hereditary right to political office such as that of village head. For 'Bundu this importance is highlighted by the fact that most of its territory is back from the flood plains and year-round water of the Senegal River. In Pulaar, *bundu* means 'well'.

The episode of Kumba's well, as most commonly told, begins with some people called the Faaduɓe, who were the first occupants of 'Bundu. They dug a well, which belonged to one of their number, a woman named Kumba, but the well was unfinished. It was deep enough but it lacked the timbering around the top that was necessary to prevent cave in. At this point Maalik Sii arrived with his followers. Versions differ greatly as to how they did it, but all agree that they finished the well. Almost all of those in Pulaar contain the alliterative saying: '*Bundu Kumba bannandu Bumaalik* or 'Kumba's well, completed by Bubu Maalik'. 'Bundunkooɓe today explain that this is why 'Bundu is called 'Bundu, and they recognize that the process of finishing the well made the Sisife participants alongside the Faaduɓe in the rights of first occupancy.

The temporal incidence of the Kumba's well episode in the whole sample is nearly the reverse of the walking grant. Where the walking grant is most common in versions recorded in the past, and comparatively uncommon in those recorded since 1960, the episode of Kumba's well does not occur in any of the versions recorded before 1950; yet it turns up in nine of the thirteen oral versions recorded in the 1960's. It even appears to have a historical development over time. The 1950 version simply says that Maalik Sii built a well with the aid of a charm—no Kumba and no Faaduɓe in this context. Other early versions mention the Faaduɓe as the first inhabitants, often making the point that they were

8. *CEA* 43 (1971): 476-477.

a hunting people without agriculture. Some versions [1, 6, and 10 for example] have some other story than the well incident to account for Faadube consent to Maalik's settlement in their country.

What appears to have happened is that a number of explanations were slowly pulled into a single parsimonious and esthetic story that could account simultaneously for the name of the country, the Faadube prior occupation, and the way the Sisibe took precedence over the earlier settlers. Story tellers are expected to heighten the dramatic quality with re-telling. In this case, esthetic considerations seem to have brought in Bubu Maalik, the son, in place of Maalik. There are no obvious historical reasons for this shift, and some versions still say '*Bundu Kumba bannandu Maalik Sii*', but the phrase obviously lack the alliterative appeal of the more common '*Bundu Kumba bannandu Buumaalik*'.

This is not to say that the simplified version has simply buried the more complex versions that were once more common. The over-simplified version is there for one audience, while the more complex variants are still available for those who want to know more. Among the lineages Maalik Sii had to conciliate and draw together were not only the Faadube but at least two other separate groups of migrants from Fuuta, known as the Girobe and Ngenar. Both groups have present-day descendents, and they preserve separate threads of oral tradition that account mythically or actually for their later solidarity with the Sisibe, even though the mainstream, Sisibe version tends to subsume a complex maze of lineage alliances under the single heading of accomodation to the Faadube.

As with the episode of the walking grant, the story of Kumba's well could be twisted slightly to give it a new meaning, and several versions did just that. Two traditions remembered by present-day Faadube [20 and 21] recall the well-finishing episode—but against Kumba's wishes. Maalik again appears as a cheat who gained control of 'Bundu by dishonest means, though the Faadube narrators concede that their ancestors became in time the willing allies of the Sisibe.

A third tradition from the Jahaanke of southern 'Bundu [25] retains Kumba and her well, but with an altogether different twist. It was Kumba's well, and it was the only one in all 'Bundu. Kumba was a monopolist who made people pay exorbitantly for the water they used and only let them draw water at all on Mondays and Fridays. This was the situation when Maalik Sii arrived with a fellow-cleric named Alaxa Suleman (Alakha Suleiman). On seeing Kumba's ruthless exploitation of the people, they prayed to God for advice. God's answer was to give success to the clerics' plan to kill Kumba and her children and to free the well for the use of all 'Bundunkoobe. The question then arose as to who should now rule over 'Bundu. At that, Alaxa Suleman declined, saying that command over men was contrary to the true claims of religion. Thus Maalik Sii was left to rule by himself.

Aside from providing still another justification for Maalik's rule,

this story illustrates some of the social attitudes prevalent among the Jahaanke. They speak a variant of Malinke and live in their own villages scattered throughout 'Bundu and near-by countries. Their ruling class has traditionally been occupied with either commerce or Islamic learning, and they have always tried for an autonomous status for their villages, whatever the political jurisdiction. They are also pacifists on principle, opposed to violence and to the coercive power of secular rulers. Their traditions again and again commemorate a man who is offered the kingship and declines because the office is incompatible with a truly religious life. The implied justification of Maalik's rule, tempered by criticism for his failure to be as religious as the Jahaanke themselves, is a neat summary of continuing Jahaanke attitudes toward religion and politics.

The incident of God's help to Alaxa Suleman and Maalik Sii is only one of many ways divine sanction of Sisibe rule is woven into these traditions. Another version [14] has it that Maalik went to Mecca, where God gave him a copper writing plaque like the ordinary wooden writing plaque (*aluwal*) used by clerics throughout the western Sudan. When Maalik reached 'Bundu, he dropped the plaque into Kumba's well, again linking the claim through well-building to a divine grant of authority. Still other versions [15 and 17] are more overt: Maalik went to Mecca, and there God gave him command over 'Bundu.

But the incidence of the *hajj* is itself curious. None of the versions recorded before 1950 says anything at all about a trip to Mecca. Yet more than half of those recorded after 1950 make Maalik into a *haji*. This suggests that the trip to Mecca may be a late accretion, and the supposition is all the more likely because of a recent and famous namesake, Al-Hajj Malik Sy (as usually spelled). This Malik was founder of the important center of the Tijaniyya order at Tivaouane in western Senegal and one of the most famous religious figures in twentieth-century Senegambia. The two are in fact distantly related, since both sprang from the same clerical family of the middle Senegal Valley, but confusion of names alone would be enough to give the earlier Maalik the title actually earned by this recent namesake.

Some form of supernatural sanction is generally more common in the later versions, where two different and recurrent episodes involve man-made charms. One of these recalls pre-Muslim ideas and practices and is mentioned by Saki N'Diaye<sup>9</sup> [also in nos. uu and uu]. The particular charm is named *Sige Jinne Jolof* 'feather of the Jinn of Jolof'. Its powers are variously said to come from the remains of a dead child, or from the wood of a bier on which a dead man had lain. In either case, the power of the dead and of tree spirits contained in the wood recall pre-Muslim magic. In Saki N'Diaye's version, Maalik Sii received *Sige Jinne Jolof* not from God but from Sunjaata Keita, the great historic

9. *CEA* 43 (1971): 474-475.



ruler of Mali. This is significant because of the way Sunjaata recurs in the oral traditions of the western Sudan as an embodiment of the idea of kingship itself. It is also significant that Maalik's only use of the charm was to cause a parting of the waters so that he and his companions could cross rivers on dry land. This seems to imply a power over the water spirits, who were also pre-Muslim. The whole episode is so little integrated with the rest of the story of a Muslim hero that it was probably borrowed whole from some other tradition.

The second episode with a man-made charm is far closer to the Muslim way. This charm was an *aaye*, the water and ink formed by washing a wooden plaque on which certain words from the Koran have been written. The special quality or merit came partly from the words themselves and partly from the saintliness of the cleric who wrote them—and they may have gained a bit in a pre-Islamic sense from the wood of the plaque. In all versions where the *aaye* appears [1, 2, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20], it was made by Maalik Sii himself. It was therefore an expression of his own powers to ask for divine intervention, and it occurs earlier in time than the *Sige Jinne Jolof*, turning up in two versions [1 and 2] recorded outside 'Bundu in the first decade of this century.

The power attributed to the *aaye*, however, varied a good deal from one version to another. Most commonly, it was said to inhibit the powers of the tree spirits [13, 15, 17, 18, 19]. Other variants said it made valueless land bloom (which may have been the result of conquering the tree spirits), or else driving crocodiles and hippopotami away from bathing places in the rivers. One Faaduḃe version claimed the Faaduḃe were made to drink the *aaye*, which accounted for their peaceful submission to Sisibe rule [20]. In all, however, the common theme was submission of local spirits, animals, or people to a new Muslim ruler.

Still another magical episode, that of the sheathed sword, recurs in six of the twenty-five versions of the sample [1, 9, 12, 13, 14, 24]. Like the story of *Sige Jinne Jolof*, it has little apparent connection with Maalik Sii's conquest of 'Bundu. The miraculous sheathed sword in question belonged to the king of Jara (Diara), about 500 kms to the east-north-east of 'Bundu on the edge of the desert.<sup>10</sup> This sword had the special power of conferring kingship on any man who laid eyes on its naked blade. While Maalik Sii was visiting the court of Jara, he wanted to see the sword, but the king refused. During his residence at court, however, Maalik made a talisman for one of the king's barren wives: she then became pregnant and bore a son. Out of gratitude, she helped Maalik catch a glimpse of the forbidden blade, but the mere act of unsheathing it caused a bright light and loud noise. The king discovered the trick, but he was also grateful for the birth of his son. He therefore merely expelled Maalik, so that he would go elsewhere to attain the kingship that was certain to be his.

10. See Gaston BOYER, *Un peuple de l'Ouest soudanais: Les Diawara* (Dakar, 1953).

Like the story of *Sige Jinne Jolof*, this one may be an accretion or borrowing from another tradition, but its incidence is very different. Where *Sige Jinne Jolof* occurs in late versions originating in 'Bundu, the sheathed sword turns up in early versions recorded elsewhere, and the two episodes never occur in the same version. No immediately satisfactory explanation of this incidence seems possible, though the sheathed-sword story fits the broader pattern of stories in the western Sudan that seek to explain the origin of kingship. Some versions, for example, trace this sword to Mecca, while others trace it to Sunjaata Keita. Both are recognized origins of kingship and both are ascribed to *Sige Jinne Jolof* as well.

The political authority of the Sisibe is most often justified as a grant from some higher authority, but a minor theme runs through the Maalik Sii stories, justifying his rule through some form of consent by the governed—sometimes tacit, sometimes grudging, but consent nevertheless. The version of Kumba, the water-monopolist, suggests that Maalik earned his kingship by saving the people from exploitation. All versions that deal with the Faadube tend to explain or justify Faadube loyalty, though they often do so in ways that reflect an underlying tension. Two versions, one Sisibe and one Faadube [17, and 20] contain a separate episode dealing with the continuing friction of the two groups. In this story, Maalik and the chief of the Faadube get together after the well incident to confirm their alliance. They swear a blood oath by drawing some blood from each, mixing it with honey, and letting each leader eat of the mixture. A little later, Maalik asked the Faadube to give him some honey, but they said they had none. After he had gone they went to their hidden honey jars and found the honey had been turned into blood by the force of the oath. The episode once more underlines the power of Maalik's magic, but it also suggests that allies kept in line by magic may not be firm allies.

The solidarity of alliance, however, represents only solidarity between different groups in the ruling class. Senegambian society and sedentary Fuulbe society in particular tended to be highly stratified on lines of caste and class. Society as a whole was divided into three broad classes—free men in command positions at the top, free peasants next, and unfree people at the bottom (*maacube*, sing. *macuudo*). These were not slaves in the sense of being saleable by their masters, but they were descended from captives or purchased from the slave trade; and they remained socially subordinate. In addition, people in certain occupations were recognized as separate endogamous groups that can be loosely called castes. They were not in the hierarchy of nobles, free peasants, and 'slaves', but set apart from the rest of society on account of special impurity associated with their occupations. The most important were the *aulube* (sing. *gaulo*), the bards, musicians, and praisers, and the *vailube* (sing. *bailo*), blacksmiths and jewelry makers, though other

groups such as leather workers, woodworkers, and so on would also be among the 'caste' occupations.

It is taken for granted in all versions of the Maalik Sii story that he came with friends, followers, and kinfolk of his own social group, though these are rarely named. Eleven versions of the twenty-five, however, make it a point to name a set of companions representing the 'caste' and subordinate groups [1, 3, 5, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 25]. These men are Sevi Layal, a *gauilo*, Tamba Kante, a *bailo*, and Keri Kafo, a *macuudo*. In this way, the non-noble part of society is given an explicit part in the foundation of 'Bundu, and historical solidarity with the Sisibe dynasty. The named companions played a significant role in the narrative at various points, and their descendents are still known and honored in 'Bundu. This device of associating social subordinates with an aristocratic leader is, indeed, one that occurs frequently in Senegambian oral literature. Other heroes often have a group of companions, and the *gauilo* reciting a narrative will sometimes use that fact to mention explicitly that men are born to different status and functions, though true achievement, even for heroes, requires the cooperation of different kinds of people.

If so much of the Maalik Sii story in any version is mythic or didactic, what can be made of it as a source of historical knowledge? It should be obvious by now that very little of the detailed narrative can be accepted as literally true. Versions disagree or, even when they do agree, need the support of other evidence to be acceptable as fact. On a point of detail, for example, five versions say that Maalik Sii studied in his youth at Piir in Kajor [3, 5, 10, 12, 15]. This is possible, but the religious center at Piir is associated with the mid-eighteenth century, not the mid-seventeenth. It was, furthermore, the place of training for Abdul Kader and other leaders of the *jihad* in Fuuta Tooro of the 1770's. To slip in the name of Piir as a symbol of good Islamic education for a much earlier, but similar religious reformer would be all too easy. The evidence therefore has to be set aside till outside confirmation is available. On the other hand, three versions [15, 16, 18] say that Bubu Maalik studied at Buria in Fuuta Jaalo. This is more acceptable because it was a famous center of scholarship in the first decades of the eighteenth century, when he was of student age. It was therefore the logical place for Maalik Sii's son to have studied, and the fact that he studied there is confirmed by the oral traditions of Fuuta Jaalo itself.<sup>11</sup>

One might hope that the names of near-by rulers would provide synchronisms to help solve chronological problems, since the reign of Maalik Sii can be dated to the 1690's on several kinds of evidence;<sup>12</sup> but the names of other historical figures are not treated with enough accuracy for that. The king of Jara who owned the famous sword is given various-

11. CURTIN : 22-23.

12. Philip D. CURTIN, *Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1974, 2 vols.): *Supplement*, appendix 8.

ly as Fié Mamadou, Farègne, and Fodé Silimaxa [1, 9, 11, 14]. Maalik's opponent, the *tunka* of Tiyaabu is named Ali Winji Wanja in only one version; the others simply identify him by title. Chronological clues seem to lie elsewhere in the oral literature of the region, where Maalik Sii is identified as a contemporary. Amadu Awa of Xaaso, for example, is shown in the oral history of Xaaso to be Maalik's contemporary,<sup>13</sup> and this makes sense in terms of other evidence.

We are left, it seems, with a series of narratives that tell a good deal about political philosophy by showing how political authority is legitimized. They tell something about the political and social circumstances in which 'Bundu was founded. But they have to be taken as unreliable for any specific point of narrative detail. Even the teachings about the foundation of kingship have to be understood and interpreted in the light of a much broader cultural and intellectual setting. This may seem a slight contribution to historical knowledge, especially after a decade of high expectations for African oral traditions among historians. But, even if these traditions seem to be good evidence only for things already known, that alone should not be discouraging. One of the oldest rules of historical criticism is that no piece of information, taken by itself, is valid evidence on its own. The Maalik Sii stories, like other kinds of evidence about the past, can only make their maximum contribution when they are examined comparatively and in the fullest possible cultural context.

## CHECK-LIST OF RECORDED VERSIONS OF THE STORY OF MAALIK SII

### I. *Written Versions*

- [1] ADAM, M. G., *Légendes historiques du pays de Nioro* (Paris, 1904): 47-54.
- [2] BÉRENGER-FÉRAUD, L. J. B., *Recueil des contes populaires de la Sénégambie* (Paris, 1885): 175-184 and *Les peuplades de la Sénégambie: histoire, ethnographie, mœurs, et coutumes, légendes, etc.* (Paris, 1879): 219-223.
- [3] BRIGAUD, Félix, *Histoire traditionnelle du Sénégal* (Saint-Louis du Sénégal, 1962): 218 ff. and 289.
- [4] CARRÈRE, Frédéric et HOLLE, Paul, *De la Sénégambie française* (Paris, 1855): 159-161.
- [5] DIENG, Doudou, 'Cercle de Bakel' (Saint-Louis, CRDS, unpubl. ms.): ff. 6-8. This version is also reported in BRIGAUD: 292-293.
- [6] LAMARTINY, J.-J., *Études africaines. Le Bondou et le Bambouc* (Paris, 1884): 6. This version is also reported by Paul MARTY, *Études sénégalaises* (Paris, n.d. [c. 1926]): 103.
- [7] LY, Djibril, 'Coutumes et contes des Toucouleurs du Fouta Toro', *Bulletin du Comité des Études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique occidentale française* 21 (1938): 316-317.
- [8] M'Bow, Amadou Maktar, 'Enquête préliminaire sur le village de Sénoudébou, canton de Boundou septentrional, subdivision de Goudiry, cercle de Tambacounda' (Mimeographed, Archives Nationales du Sénégal, dated May 1954, in series 'Territoire du Sénégal, éducation de base').

13. Charles MONTEIL, *Les Khassonké* (Paris, 1915): 19-22 and 363.

- [9] RAFFANEL, Anne, *Voyage dans l'Afrique occidentale exécuté en 1843 et 1844* (Paris, 1846): 269-272.
- [10] RANÇON, André, 'Le Boundou', *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Bordeaux* 7, n.s. (1894): 433-463, 465-484, 497-548, 561-591, 593-647.
- [11] ROUX, Émile, *Notice historique sur le Boundou* (Saint-Louis, 1893): 3-7.
- [12] Sow, Alfâ Ibrâhim, *Chroniques et récits du Fouta Djallon* (Paris, 1968). Quoting a recitation by Farba Sek: 55-61.

## 2. Oral Versions

### *Representing the Sisiŋbe and their associates*

- [13] Maimouna Mamadou SY, widow of Sada Abdoul Sy, who was 'chef de canton' for 'Boundou méridional' in 1918-1954.
- [14] Hammady Amadou SY, grandson of informant **13**.
- [15] Demba Simbalou SOCK, the principal bard serving the branch of the Sisiŋbe family located in Senodebu.
- [16] Maki DIÈNG, bard in Senodebu and former student of informant **15**.
- [17] Demba Sali DIÈNG, principal bard serving the Kusan branch of the Sisiŋbe.
- [18] Saki N'DIAYE, bard originally from 'Bundu but resident in Dakar in 1966. His great-great-grandfather was chief bard of Almaami Saada of 'Bundu (d. 1852).
- [19] Toumané KANTÉ, blacksmith of Kusan and direct descendent of the smith, Tamba Kante, who accompanied Maalik Sii to 'Bundu.

### *Representing other ethnic groups of lineages in 'Bundu*

#### *— Faaduŋbe*

- [20] Hammady Samba FADÉ, elder of the village of Sare and spokesman chosen to represent the Faaduŋbe of that village.
- [21] Ali N'DIAYE, from the village of Sintiou Bokar Ali in the Ferlo Mbal district in western 'Bundu.

#### *— Soninke*

- [22] Sassana SISSOKO, from the village of Dembacane in Gajaaga, but for many years the personal servant of the chef de canton of Damga in upper Fuuta.
- [23] Samany SY, from Bakel in Gajaaga (not of the Sisiŋbe family of 'Bundu). Born in 1892, fought in France during the First World War.
- [24] Bagnou DIAWARA, from the village of Gabu in 'Bundu, but considered head of the Diawara family in 'Bundu, a family originating in the Sahel region of Mali.

#### *— Jahaanke*

- [25] Bouyagui MAKANERA, a leather worker of Bokolako, a Jahaanke town in southern 'Bundu.

P. D. CURTIN — *Utilisation de la tradition orale en Sénégal : Malik Si et la fondation de Boundou*. La tradition historique orale en Afrique vise moins à un rappel objectif du passé qu'à fournir une justification idéologique et politique de telle situation de fait. Ce principe est illustré ici par la comparaison de vingt-cinq versions, recueillies de 1840 à nos jours, du récit de la fondation (*ca* 1690) du royaume musulman de Boundou par Malik Si, fondateur de la dynastie Sisiŋbe. Rapportées à des événements contemporains authentifiés et datés, ces traditions ne fournissent que très peu d'information factuelle. Par contre, leurs différences mêmes sont riches d'enseignements sur le contexte socio-culturel et idéologique : c'est dans ce domaine que l'utilisation de la tradition orale est la plus fructueuse.