

ZARMA-SONGHOÏ VERBAL ARTISTRY AND EXPRESSION: FROM THE EPIC TO THE
FRANCOPHONE NOVEL, WITH A FOCUS ON INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE ACROSS
THE GENRES

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
Of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of French

2013

This thesis entitled:
Zarma-Songhoï Verbal Artistry And Expression: From The Epic To The Francophone Novel,
With A Focus On Intertextual Dialogue Across The Genres
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

ABSTRACT

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Zarma-Songhoï Verbal Artistry And Expression: From The Epic To The Francophone Novel,

With A Focus On Intertextual Dialogue Across The Genres

Thesis directed by Professor James Andrew Cowell

My dissertation considers West African Francophone literature in its relationship with local traditional oral literature. This study examines the intertextual dialogue between the Zarma-Songhoï oral narrative, *The Epic Of Askia Mohammed*, and the modern fictional tale of *Toula*, by contemporary Zarma-Songhoï writer, Boubou Hama. The study emerges from the necessity to correct persistent and inappropriate appreciations of local ethnographic specificities in the current academic treatments of West African Francophone literature. Aimed as a modest contribution to the study of the relationship between oral traditions and modern literature in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, this study is divided in three parts.

Part I considers Askia's transgressions against fundamental cultural values as ground to disqualifying him as an epic hero. To that end, Chapter One of Part I engages the problematic of the affiliation of the African corpus to the epic genre. Chapter Two reviews Thomas Hale's *The Epic Of Askia Mohammed*. Chapter Three and Chapter Four contextualize the textual analysis within the Zarma-Songhoï cultural base and against the relevant local ethnographic specificities. Chapter Five concludes Part I with the exploration of Askia's dualing Islamic and Songhoï profile.

In Part II, I present Boubou Hama's *Toula*. This section examines, in Chapter One, the different versions of the *Toula* story and how Hama responds to them. Chapter Two contextualizes the legend of *Toula* within a tense geopolitical context where co-existent ethnic communities clash around the control of access to natural resources.

In Part III, I explore *Toula*'s intertextual dialogue with the Zarma-Songhoï oral tradition. I propose that in response to *The Epic Of Askia Mohammed*, Boubou Hama's Francophone text, *Toula*, operates a corrective ritual designed to cleanse the entire culture from the stain of Askia's crimes, crime which represent the act of forsaking traditional values and laws. Ultimately, I argue that Hama's relationship with not only the oral legend of *Toulé* but with other oral traditions, such as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and *Wagadu*, should be envisioned as a form of cultural resistance based upon a skillful integration of symbolic ethnographic elements that frame a dialogue with his own Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions.

DEDICATION

To my mother **Zeinabou Mahdi**

To my father **Hamadou (Seini) Gozé**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to Dr. James Andrew Cowell, my mentor from The University of Colorado at Boulder. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. James Andrew Cowell, my major advisor, for his intellectual guidance, inspiration, and encouragement throughout all these years. I am equally indebted to Dr. Mildred P Mortimer under whose guidance this project emerged and who, despite having retired, nonetheless has generously accepted to accompany me through these years of journey. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Michael J Preston for his guidance. A special thank you to Dr. Elisabeth M. Bloomfield and to Dr. Kieran Marcellin Murphy for their invaluable guidance and support. Finally, I am grateful to my entire family for their encouragement, patience and support.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Any serious study of contemporary African literature must consider the influence of colonialism on both the texts in question and critical responses to those texts. The colonial experience provided a European education to many African writers. Consequently, a significant number of African texts follow Western literary models and, until quite recently, were written in European languages. This would suggest that Western literary models gave birth to modern African literature. While recognizing the undeniable influence of the Western model upon modern African literature, there exist pronounced differences between African literary styles and those of the West. The acknowledgement of these differences has forced a shift in current research paradigms. At present, research is rightfully centered upon the links between contemporary African literature and local indigenous oraliture (Koné 1985; Scheub 1985; Dabla 1986; and Kehinde 2003). In recent years scholars have ceased stressing only Western *influence* and have instead begun to highlight the *intertextuality* of contemporary written works and local oral traditions. Because of the Eurocentric posture of earlier studies on African literature (Jabavu, D. D. T. *The Influence of English on Bantu Literature*, 1943: 24; Ménil, Alain “*Rue Cases-Nègres* ou les Antilles de l’intérieur” 1984 : 96-110) and the persistently erroneous appreciations of local ethnography (Hale 1990; Konaté 2010) there is much need for serious reevaluations of contemporary meaning of African literature. In moving the critical focus from western influence to local intertextuality, the depth of the relationship between contemporary African literature and the local indigenous oraliture comes clearly into view.

Those pioneering efforts to study relationship between text and oraliture are Amadou Koné (1985), Séwanou Dabla (1986), and Ayo Kehinde (2003). In their studies on the interplay between oraliture and modern literature in contemporary African literature, the question of form

dominates (Koné, 1985: 133-134; Dabla, 1986 : 209). While they demonstrate the ways in which the form of oraliture shapes contemporary writings, they persistently neglect questions of content. They do not make a serious study of the dialogues between contemporary writings and oraliture. Indeed, what remains a blind spot in critical research and writings on contemporary African literature is this issue of how the African writer uses literature to communicate with, to respond to, and to engage with their culture. To go beyond an interrogation into form, to fully grasp the content and significance of an intertextual dialogue between a contemporary writer and an oral narrative one needs turn rather to Harold Scheub (1985) and Eileen Julien (1992).

There thus exists a body of important works of contemporary African oral literature that have been undervalued, if not ignored, because they have not been properly studied. It is important to note that, since I am a native of the Zarma-Songhoï culture of Western Niger, the correction of misconceptions and faulty readings of texts that emerge from this culture is a prominent component of my scholarly agenda. As I hold that only an adequate knowledge of local culture can produce completely accurate understandings of texts, I limit the scope of my study to Zarma-Songhoï texts and narratives. Expanding upon the work of Koné, Dabla, Kehinde, Scheub and Julien, my project demonstrates the value of moving beyond questions of influence toward full considerations of intertextual dialogue between modern written narratives and traditional oral narratives. Here, I have narrowed my culturally-centered intertextual investigation to two texts: Boubou Hama's *Toula* and the 15th century oral narrative to which it responds, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, transcribed by Thomas Hale. What emerges in my analysis of the way in which Hama engages with *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* is a lesson that encourages a reinvestment in local cultural values. We will see that Hama's gesture stands as a

unique sort of literary transfiguration of local magical practices designed to compensate for grave cultural transgressions.

Research on the interplay between oraliture and modern literature in African literary studies has a peculiar history in that, as already noted, it stands as a reaction against research that focuses solely on European influences on African literature. Theorists like Koné argue that the greater aspects of the African novel escape a purported Western influence (Koné, Amadou. *Du Récit Oral au Roman*. 1985). In many respects, the modern African “novel,” to use the Western designation, is different from its European counterpart as Jahn (1969) and Larson (1972) argued decades ago.

The critical stance of Jahn and Larson has motivated different considerations of contemporary African narratives. The major contribution of their works has been to shift researchers’ focus toward local indigenous culture not only for sources of influence to African authors but also for deeper forms of relationship between the modern African literature and the local oraliture. While these scholars argue for different critical approaches to contemporary African narratives, their work does not involve rigorous textual analyses. For this work, one must look to Ayo Kehinde (*Intertextuality and the Contemporary African Novel*) as well as to Amadou Koné (*Du Récit Oral au Roman*), Séwanou Dabla (*Nouvelles Ecritures Africaines*). This new guard of African literature scholars places culture and interplay at the center of their work.

In *Intertextuality And the Contemporary African Novel* Kehinde explains that the critical shift away from influence and toward intertextuality has roots in the flaws inherent in the notion of influence. Kehinde argues that “influence” contains certain author-centered and evaluative qualities that carry a degree of usefulness for literary historians. Ultimately, intertextuality, as

Kehinde sees it, aims at broadening the conception of influence so as to take into account richer, more complicated relationships that can exist between African authors.

In Africa, the novel is an imported genre and a twentieth-century phenomenon. Those African authors who have adopted this genre as a form of expression meld two traditions. They rely on both the European model of fiction writing and the autochthonous model of oral narratives. Because of this, the African novel is a curious amalgamation of traditional epics, folk traditions, legends, myths, folktales and history.

In this “indigenizing” of a foreign genre, interplay between oral tradition and modern literature stands as a central component. It allows for the “synthesis,” to borrow from J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada of Western and autochthonous cultures, storytelling, and narrative norms. Such is the case with the Nigerian novel, according to Nwachukwu-Agbada. He states that “the Nigerian novel is a synthesis of foreign and local elements in terms of characterization, structure, theme and ideology” (68). When one generalizes this notion across postcolonial African literature, one arrives at a view of literature that Lekan Oyegoke (158) rightly puts as a type of literature made of “fragments, views from other texts, codes which disappear and mysteriously re-appear.” Importantly, this literature fuses both oral African texts and written ones from both the West and Africa.

When approaching African novels with the intent of locating and evaluating the significance of oral traditions in these works, it goes without saying that one must have a thorough knowledge of local themes, mythologies, oral texts, and culture. With this knowledge, the reader is able to grasp the stakes of an author’s interplay with the local oral tradition. While Kehinde holds that contemporary African writers engage intertextual interplay with colonial culture and writers, he also demonstrates the prevalence of intertextual dialogue among contemporaneous African

writers. One of such poignant comparison allows us to see a direct intertextual dialogic within the African cultural space between a Francophone West African text (Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*) with an Anglophone West African text (Ndubuisi Umuunnakwe's *Dear Ramatoulaye*).

Kehinde notes the following:

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is an exposition of the dehumanizing behavior of a male chauvinist. It is subtle and positive propaganda on the emancipation of womenfolk. Actually, the epistolary novel is a treatise on polygamy and its side effects. In the main, the novel foregrounds a catalogue of problems resulting from the traditional system of marriage which allows polygamy. Bâ, in the text, employs the mode of a ventriloquist to condemn the excessive practice of patriarchy in African societies. Fourteen years after the publication of Bâ's anti-sexist discourse, Ndubuisi Umuunnakwe, a budding Nigerian novelist, writes a rejoinder to the novel, on behalf of the menfolk. His novel is titled *Dear Ramatoulaye*. It is a male oriented reply to the letter of Ramatoulaye to her friend, Aissatou. Umuunnakwe's counter-text is a patriarchal deconstruction of the feminist claim in the precursor text. In the dialogue between feminine and masculine texts, the reader witnesses a situation whereby the 'other' (menfolk) now becomes the self. Also, the two antagonistic texts provide a forum for a counter discourse between menfolk and womenfolk, between the liberative feminist consciousness and the patriarchal consciousness. Both texts also intersect in characterization, themes, plot, mode of discourse (epistolary technique) and conflicts. (381).

Kehinde's study, which aims to study intertextual interplay in African literature, neglects a vital component; the relationship between contemporary African literature and local indigenous oraliture. In relation to Achebe's works, Kehinde does note that

The reader comes across Igbo Customs, myths, legends, folk tales and beliefs in magic, superstition, omens and spells. In the same novel, Achebe foregrounds some Igbo folktales with a view to deconstructing the jaundiced portrayal of African history and culture. The folktales include "How the Birds and Tortoise were Hosted in Heaven" and "The Earth and the Sky". These folktales give the African concepts of creation, communality and diligence (377).

This incorporation of folktales is visible elsewhere in Achebe's writings. For Kehinde, there exists an "intertextual link between the novel and African ritual drama (*Egwugwu* - Masquerade), proverbs and festival institutions (*Akwu Nro*). With these fragments from his cultural environment and traditions, Achebe, like many other contemporary African writers, is able to enrich his creativity" (377). Although one finds here mention of an interterplay bond between contemporary African literature and indigenous oral traditions and culture, Kehinde does not sustain a more substantial investigation into this relationship. He never explains the meaning of

the powerful cultural symbolisms such as the *Abiku*, the *Egwugwu*, the *Akwu Nro* that he believes serve as unifying platform between contemporary African literature and African traditional literature.

While Kehinde has successfully advocated for critical attentions to be brought to relationships between contemporary and traditional African narratives, other scholars, namely Amadou Koné (*Du Récit Oral au Roman*, 1985) and Séwanou Dabla (*Nouvelles Ecritures Africaines*, 1986), have given this issue the study it merits. Both Koné and Dabla have focused their work on ways in which technical features of narratives reveal a unity between the two literary genres. Thus in *Du Récit Oral au Roman* Koné states that “le roman modern emprunte au récit héroïque des procédés comme la conduite de l’action, la présence de nombreuses formes simples” (141). He continues, noting that :

L’étude des éléments d’unité ou *topoi* du récit héroïque traditionnel, celle des mêmes unités dans le roman du passé précolonial et dans le roman moderne permettent de constater d’une part une certaine continuité – une certaine permanence – de ces éléments et d’autre part l’apparition d’autres éléments qui peuvent paraître s’opposer à ceux du récit traditionnel. [...] Les techniques narratives et procédés traditionnels persistent autant que le permettent le nouveau mode d’expression qui est l’écriture et aussi le nouveau statut du créateur. (133-134).

In *Nouvelles Ecritures Africaines*, Dabla echoes both Kehinde and Koné in their discussion of the permutation of orality into contemporary African literature. Dabla asserts that:

Si les différents résultats de l’entreprise novatrice de nos romanciers se signalent souvent comme autant d’originalités intéressantes, on y retrouve globalement des constances et des échos qui inscrivent leur nouveauté dans une parenté ancienne ; cette dernière indiquant d’ailleurs que la métamorphose du roman africain, illustrée par notre corpus, exprime d’abord un double souvenir. Il s’agit en l’occurrence de « souvenirs autochtones » relevant à la fois de l’oralité et de la première littérature africaine écrite. (209).

To speak of a continuity of narrative strategies, as Koné does, or of echoes, as Dabla does, is certainly to move the critical lens toward the question of how contemporary and traditional texts communicate. Thus, the Afrocentric approach based on a rigorous cultural textual analysis that this previous generation of Afrocentric scholars (Koné, Dabla and Kehinde) apply to the study of

the relationship between African oral traditions and modern (written) literature certainly places these scholars among the veritable precursors of the study of intertextual interplay in African literary criticism.

Yet, despite the foundational aspect of the works of these precursors, their views pose three serious problems. First, their argumentation seems to re-actualize an untenable simplistic conception of oral and written literary genres as two mutually exclusive media, a misbelief that was once at the root of the orality/written-literacy antithesis which was profoundly tainted with ideological biases that associated one genre to one particular culture (oral = Africa; written = Europe/West) as well it dangerously established a faulty sense of hierarchization between the two genres. Not only does such misconception seem to underlay the views of this group of scholars (Koné, Dabla and Kehinde), but also through this oral/written literatures antagonism, these scholars seem to locate signs of a purported “Africanness,” a reference to an African “authenticity,” not only within the African oral literature as opposed to the “Western” written literature but also the works of these scholars seem to indicate that the “authenticity” of the “Africanness” aspect of the novel resides through the African novel’s reappropriation of elements of the oral tradition. Finally, the perception of continuity between oral tradition and modern literature by the previous generation is rather limited to a repertory of “traces” of the oral tradition within the modern literature. Thus, by insisting on how elements of the oral tradition shape the African novel, the works of these precursors still remain confined within the limits of “influence” even when they seem to be calling for uncovering a much more deeper and meaningful relationship between the oral tradition and modern literature in Africa. Consequently, the views of this previous generation of scholars appear rather insufficient to truly capture the nature and depth of the fruitful interaction, the profound intertextual dialogue, that I

perceive happening between Zarma-Songhoï author Boubou Hama and the relevant local oral tradition.

One needs turn to Eileen Julien and Harold Scheub as a bridge away from the rather superficial studies of the above previous generation of local scholars. In effect, the fruitful interaction between *Toula* and *The Epic Of Askia Mohammed* appears to me better revealed when approached from the argumentations that Julien and Scheub propose through, respectively, *African Novels And The Question Of Orality* (1992) and “A Review Of African Oral Traditions And Literature.” (1985). It is in these two studies that one can truly appreciate efforts to approaching the relationship between African oral tradition and modern literature in a manner that goes beyond the rather simple repertory of elements of the former within the latter.

In effect, on one the one hand, through the intertextual dialogue between *Toula* and *Askia*, the concern of the author to preserve a certain didactic bridge between oral tradition and modern literature aligns with Julien’s questioning of the rigidity of the generic borders between oral and written literature. On the other, the unforgivable transgressions against cultural values that *Askia* commits through the oral text can be read, through Scheub’s argumentation, as constituting a metaphorical core, a proverb, that places the modern text, *Toula*, in Scheub’s category of “Wisdom literature,” the often missing link in the media transitional process from oral tradition to modern (written) literature in Africa. In *Toula*’s absorption of *Askia*, we observe the author’s purposeful as well as meaningful “cultural” processing of the experiences of the characters in the oral text in a manner that resonates with contemporary Zarma-Songhoï audience of the oral tale of *Askia* also readers of Hama’s fictional tale, *Toula*. In the dialogue between the modern author, Hama, and the local Zarma-Songhoï oral tradition, the concern for Hama to preserve a didactic bridge between *Askia*’s violation of cultural values and the dire consequences of socio-

cultural dislocation in the modern text seems not to be concerned as much about recognition of a conception of rigid generic borders (oral/written) as it is about maintaining the integrity of the verbal expression, from yesterday's oral tale to today's written literature. Thus, Hama's dialogue with the zarma-Songhoï oral tradition essentially aligns with the argumentations of both Julien and Scheub.

First of all if in *African Novels And The Question Of Orality*, Julien questions the very rigidity of the generic differentiation between oral and written literature. Julien argues that t such rigidity is tainted by ideological biases which attribute to the genres some "intrinsic" cultural values as evidence of either the superiority or decadence of European civilization and, concomitantly, of the inferiority or wholesomeness of non-European civilizations (11). In the first instance, as Julien explains:

Written literature was an implicit norm against which oral literature was judged. The latter was seen as simple, uncrafted, and generally the product of the communal mind, whereas written literature, especially the novel, was held to be the opposite and final end of the developmental process: it was complex, deliberate, and the work of a single author. (12).

Equally troubling attitude is the more subtle idealized exaggerated claims for oral literature that followed the shift of opinions:

Whether in an attempt to rectify prejudiced views of oral traditions or for other reasons, what was once deemed the primitive nature of oral literature and viewed as deficient is now proclaimed as pure and virtuous, as in the following passage from Paul Zumthor's broad and provocative study, *Introduction à la poésie orale*. [...] The old interpretation that held oral literature to be impoverished is, as we have seen, well known and ably refuted. The second, manifest in Zumthor's remarks and often in African literary criticism, assumes or implies it to be morally superior to writing, good, even glorious. This interpretation goes unremarked or unquestioned and is, of course, equally inaccurate and obfuscating (12-13) ... To exalt orality and oral traditions, then, is ultimately as sterile and as blinding as to malign them (23).

Thus, for Julien, these biases are often at work in our perception of African literature and that they skew the questions we ask and the conclusions we draw:

Since we situate the tale's particularity in its orality and the novel's particularity in its writing and subsequent printing, it follows that if there is continuity between the two, the novel must contain or reveal orality. It is this assumption, orality as origin and authenticity, which must be examined. (7). [...] To designate orality as the locus of originality and thus the source of continuity mystifies and disregards, then, the tradition that evolves within. (25)

Because they are rather counterproductive to the study of the relationship between the two genres, Julien perceives in the rigid generic differentiation but "... a futile exercise to insist on establishing a hierarchy between orality and literacy, based on their "intrinsic" qualities, because these categories are imbued with cultural biases" (14). Therefore, generic difference must be somewhat nuanced:

Generic tendencies are not the trace of authenticity but more nearly a tool of social vision. In their patterns we can grasp the underlying assumptions of a work, its struggle to reconcile new historical situations with what we might call – following Frederic Jameson's lead – the "ideology of form." (46).

Even more important, Julien contends that rigid generic differentiation tends to ignore the co-existence between oral and written literature in many cultures as well as the fruitful interaction that two genres have entertained through much deeper interplay:

The evidence suggests that cultures are neither entirely and exclusively oral nor singularly literate. Terms such as *transformation* and *substitution*, even more than *transition* and *passage*, tend to obscure the coexistence and reciprocity of oral and written languages that characterize most societies, regardless of their degree of technology. (22).

This view finds echo with Scheub when he demonstrates instances where the concern of verbal expression seems to ignore the media difference:

The Arabic tradition, in which *adab* refers to both the oral and written word, may provide another clue to this critical relationship [between oral and written literature]; it makes no distinction between them. The verbal expression is the key; the vehicle for communication may be secondary. (24).

Thus, Julien's definition of intertextual interplay prefers the term "acts of speech" in lieu of a generic difference between oral and written:

The history and contradictions of language (and literature) are present in my new act of speech (or writing), which – being particular to the historical moment and social circumstances in which I live – necessarily reconfigures language (textual signs) and its (their) meaning. The recombination of elements from other texts gives not the same elements with old meaning but new elements with new meaning. Semiotically speaking, repeating an utterance is not, in fact, to repeat it but is, rather, to speak in a new context and thus create a new utterance. So the elements of traditional oral genres repeated, as it were, in new forms mean something new, accomplish something different. An argument such as this is analogous to Jameson’s concept of the “marbled” structure of the novel, which strives to accommodate heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting narrative paradigm (144). (47)

The insistence on oral tradition *influencing* modern literature by previous scholars seems to indicate that the elements of the oral literature (riddles, proverbs, songs, etc.) are identifiable within the modern literature because they have been merely transposed and did not undergo any form of “cultural processing.” In this, the scholarship of influence conflicts with Julien’s above view. Thus, for Julien, the very idea of searching for continuity is misleading because it obscures the meaningful interplay between the two literatures:

When we abandon the search for *influence*, we cease to be guided by the misleading urge to prove continuity, the preservation of some authentic element from one mode to another. If it is the wholeness and unity of African cultures that we wish to make manifest, we accomplish this less, it seems to me, in defensively trying to establish the derivation of one thing from another, than in asserting coequal terms, each to be illuminated by the other, both in what they share and how they differ. [...] Thus I distinguish between genre (narrative structure and impulse) and the inclusion of proverbs, songs, tales, riddles and other forms of speech, as we find them in *Things Fall Apart*, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, and a great many other [African] novels. Those forms, along with the characters and settings, establish the locus of action; I view them primarily as topographical rather than constitutive. An analogous distinction in the visual arts might be that between the *portrayal* of an African mask or statute in a contemporary painting and the *adaptation* of traditional aesthetic principles in such a painting. The former are present as an object of the novel (or painting) to which the work calls attention, but they do not reveal the rules or processes by which a work has been constructed. (46).

Julien’s call for the abandonment of the pursuit of *influence* and raw *continuity* finds echo with Scheub’s position against the rigidity and insurmountable gap between oral tradition and modern written literature in Africa:

To insist upon an insurmountable barrier between the two media – Albert B. Lord writes, “The written technique ... is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly

combine ...” – is to deny an extraordinary fruitful interaction. To exclude the oral tradition from any influence on literature except for “residual oralism” ignores this rich interplay and the fact that the novel form, for example, is prefigured in the oral epic. (15).

Unfortunately, comparative studies are still influenced with ideological categorizations that do not favor a monolithic study of African verbal arts, an approach that would favor uncovering deeper levels of relationship between oral tradition and modern literature in Africa as Julien states:

Even when evolutionist theories per se are put to rest (even if yesteryears’ simplistic biased views are of course no longer tenable – 12), comparative studies of oral and written texts are still plagued by notions of progress and by linear thinking. Orality and writing are seen not only as exclusive domains but as successive moments – whether stated explicitly or implicitly, whether the advent of literacy and written literature is hailed or decried. (21).

Julien’s statement finds echo with Scheub when he regrets that:

The compartmentalization of oral tradition and the written word is only the most dramatic, and injurious, of the many separate categories in which literary and oral scholars work, and this is not only in Africa. But in Africa, the problems seem most manifest – and grievous, for they have led to misconceptions about the verbal arts. The potentially most fruitful scholarly work will surely be in the relationship between oral and written materials; it has scarcely been touched. (45).

The compartmentalization of African verbal arts that Julien and Scheub seem to denounce is even deepened through the very fragmentation of African literary studies as Julien observes:

The multiple designations for African literatures, including terms such as *francophone* and *of French expression*, have ideological significance, as Guy Ossito Midiohouan demonstrates in *L’Idéologie dans la littérature négro-africaine d’expression française* (14-22). His careful discussion reveals the acuity of this issue, which is bound to be with us as long as African writers write in European languages and the geopolitical order remains what it is. (4).

The fragmentation of the study of African aesthetics that Julien is pointing at is shared by Scheub:

[The various categorizations applied to African literary studies] have themselves been atomized, into “African literature in English,” “in French,” and “in Portuguese.” This fragmentation has become sanctified in universities where the separate literatures are taught in the relevant departments, so that there is not a chance that they will be seen as part of a

monolithic African tradition. Moreover, the Sahara Desert continues to act as a barrier, so that the oral and written arts of the north are only infrequently tied to those of the south. (45).

Thus for Julien, if the previous scholarship of the relationship between oral tradition and modern literature in Africa led to rather faulty findings, the responsibility should be directed to Eurocentric approach of African aesthetic production:

It is surely to the Eurocentric reception of African literature that we owe the current orientation in studies of oral traditions and literature. If there had not been the Eurocentric annexing of African texts, the issue of continuity might never have arisen as it did – with its urgency and emphasis on the “Africanness” of literary texts. The exploration of links between oral and written art forms might then have taken a less ideologically motivated course, and studies of orality and literature might have examined the two, not in their supposedly essential nature as African and European, but in the interplay of aesthetics and social context that they imply. (25).

Scheub does not deny imparting such responsibility to the Eurocentric reception of African literature as Julien argues; however, for Scheub, such responsibility must also be shared by a certain literature practice whose engagement with oral traditions is rather limited to a simple imitation, transposition, recasting and retelling of elements of the oral tradition into the written literature. The works of this category of African writers of “museum pieces” (37), represent frozen retelling of ancient tales, veritable *exotic culs-de-sacs* (34) that lack organic development and growth of the oral tale within the written literature. It is in its meaningful reappropriation of an oral narrative genre that *Toula* stands, not as a mere derivation of an oral tradition, but rather as an artistic complex medium of dialogue between contemporary Zarma-Songhoï audience/readers and their oral traditions. In considering reading *Toula*'s intertextual dialogue with *Askia* along the argumentations that Scheub and Julien propose, the question to consider becomes: why would a contemporary author choose to welcome into his or her work the echoes of tradition? What purpose does this dialogue serve?

This project works to answer these fundamental questions regarding the relationship between contemporary and traditional narratives. I contend that the relationship is more significant and more substantive than one of stylistic continuities or an embrace of echoes. In order to delve into the richness of this relationship, one must adopt an anthropological approach. Such a step brings directly into view indigenous spiritual beliefs that penetrate African oral tradition. Consequently, this study confronts the place of spiritual beliefs and, more specifically, the supernatural, in the intertextual dialogue between contemporary and traditional texts. At present there exists no study into these issues as they relate to such texts in Francophone West Africa. The relationship between such texts demonstrates that for the ancient and contemporary Songhoï people of Mali and Niger, the supernatural is more than a mere ornamental accessory in a narrative. It occupies a central place in every aspect of human existence in this culture. To place the literary supernatural at the center of this study into the relationship between contemporary and oral Songhoï narratives restores the importance of the supernatural and spirituality to any thorough study of this region's written and oral literature.

This study begins, in Chapter One, with a more detailed presentation of the theory of intertextual dialogue as it relates to African literature and of the nature of this field of study. Having properly framed the questions at stake in the analysis of intertextual relationships between contemporary and traditional narratives, I present in the second chapter the culture at the center of this study: the Zarma-Songhoï culture of Western Niger. In order to grasp the import of local spiritual beliefs, it is crucial to provide a foundational knowledge of the concept, role and function of the supernatural in this culture. It is with this knowledge that, in Chapter Three, I provide an initial presentation of the two texts at the heart of my study: *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and *Toula*.

In Chapter Four, I engage with the problematic *Epic of Askia Mohammed*. In 1980 the Songhoï storyteller Nouhou Malio of Niger recited the fictional tale of Askia Mohammed to scholar Thomas Hale. After transcribing, translating, and titling the story, Hale published this tale with the title: *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Because of Hale's translation, this ancient Songhoï oral narrative has been widely interpreted as a story that celebrates the epic heroism of the 15th century Songhoï Emperor Askia Mohammed Touré. However, contemporary readings of this purported "epic" are not compatible with Songhoï ethnography and oral tradition. In this chapter I argue that the misconceptions derive from rampant decontextualized analyses that include the egregious warping of Zarma-Songhoï mores, traditions, and oraliture

By placing supernatural and spiritual beliefs at the center of my analysis, it becomes clear that the narrative ceases to reflect any characteristics of an epic narrative. It turns from being a glorification of Askia Mohammed's heroism into a poignant display of his abject failure to adhere to sacred Songhoï values. Here I make three principle findings. The text served as: 1) a text primarily used for genealogical purposes as opposed to previously-believed epic text; 2) a political statement against Askia's usurpation of power; and 3) a cultural resistance against Askia's transgression of sacred ancestral values, especially against the principles of *boro-tarey*, the unbreakable "link of the milk." Askia's transgressions, especially as they relate to his violation of *boro-tarey*, exemplify moral decadence of the most abominable nature for which Askia receives bitter, swift and inescapable retribution. The type of punishment he receives can, then, only be envisioned as *hasan nda hini*, the imminent and inescapable supernatural retribution that mercilessly afflicts violators of the *boro-tarey*. Thus, his acts enter a category of cultural wrongs that can be spiritually righted through ritual.

In Chapter Five, I present Boubou Hama's *Toula*. Through this work, the Nigérien author poses a fundamental question: in the face of overwhelming adversity or an overwhelming threat to the existence of the community, is our culture capable of summoning an adequate and culturally authentic response? In response to this question, Hama operates a profound denaturation and manipulation of one of the most important Zarma-Songhoï supernatural practices, the occult worship of the Gorou-Gondi, or the water snake spirit. This chapter examines the different versions of the Toula story and how Hama responds to them. I argue that his relationship with not only these antecedents but with other oral traditions, such as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and *Wagadu*, should be envisioned as a form of cultural resistance based upon a skillful integration of symbolic ethnographic elements that frame a dialogue with his own Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions. The most salient aspect of the cultural resistance found in *Toula* rests on the distortion of an inviolable institution in traditional Songhoï culture: the sacred separation of powers between the political powers held by the masculine branch of a family and the spiritual powers held by the female branch of a family.

This issue becomes the angle at which Hama engages *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. In Chapter Six, I fully explore how the contemporary writer Hama responds to 15th century griots around the critical issue of sacrifice as a tool to manage tensions between the female branch and the male branch. More specifically, this chapter examines how the traditional storyteller and the modern writer exploit the thematic of the supernatural in a manner that accentuates the conscious call-and-response efforts between authors distanced by at least three centuries and expressing themselves in two different languages and in two different modes. In this way Hama's work reads as a reaction against Europeanized African writers' total rejection of what they perceive to be obsolete ancestral practices. Hama embraces what they find to be incompatible with

Eurocentric “modernism.” Consequently, one finds in Hama’s work advocacy for a return to indigenous values and ideals.

This move has, as I argue in this chapter, significant political import. For Hama, who was the President of the *Partie Progressiste Nigérien* (PPN-RDA), progress does not necessarily come from the wholesale rejection of one’s own cultural identity. Nor does it mean adopting imported values whose incomplete assimilation frequently leads communities into complete chaos. In *Toula*, Hama works to show how progress is indigenous to the Zarma-Songhoï culture. To be progressive does not mean to attempt to assimilate to foreign values. Rather than accepting an uneasy integration of these values, a Zarma-Songhoï needs only to look within his own culture to find authentic strength and confidence. This call for authenticity and this advocacy for conceiving of one’s own culture as a source of progress is conditioned, however, by the respect that one has for one’s own cultural identity. This respect is the hallmark of Hama’s work and forms the didactic character of Hama’s identity as a writer.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of how Hama, through *Toula*, operates a corrective ritual designed to cleanse the entire culture from the stain of Askia’s crimes, crime which represent the act of forsaking traditional values and laws. When Hama takes up the story of Toula, he engages in a compensatory practice that, I argue, subtly aligns Hama’s gesture with those who practice such ritualistic magic. Put differently, I contend that Hama arrogates for himself the powers of a Songhoï sorcerer and uses his text to simulate a corrective, magical ritual. *Toula*’s intertextual absorption of *Askia Mohammed* is, on one level, certainly a case of traditional oral literature influencing contemporary written literature. Such an observation is commonplace and follows the tack of much current research on Francophone texts. A thorough study of these texts indicates something much different than a simple case of oral traditions

influencing contemporary writers. It is my argument that the intertextual relationship between Hama's text and the tale of *Askia* plays at something deeper: a stylized, ritualistic act designed to have concrete, corrective effects in real life. Hama operates within the literary environment of *Toula* a veritable magical corrective ritual that parallels such rituals that real-life Zarma-Songhoï practitioners undertake.

In my final chapter, I present the conclusion of my findings. Through the close study of Zarma-Songhoï culture and history and of the levels of intertextual connection between the Hama's work and various indigenous, oral traditions related to *Toula* and to *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, one confronts a rare sort of intertextuality. It is at once a political gesture and an act that collides with Zarma-Songhoï spiritual practice. With *Toula*, Hama offers a symbolic response to two different but related provocations. The first is the destruction of ancient Zarma-Songhoï society as depicted in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. The second is the destruction of contemporary Nigérien society at the hands of Hama's former political ally and the then Nigérien President Diori Hamani. As Hama penned *Toula* during the drought of 1970s, one must see Hama's literary presentation of the manner in which a leader works to alleviate the suffering of the drought-stricken Zarma-Songhoï as paralleling the Nigérien governmental response to the drought in the 1970s. Benefitting from this angle of approach, the reader arrives at a special function of intertextuality in this work. Here, it serves as a veil to conceal a bitter political satire against the government of President Diori Hamani. Hama effectively uses intertextual interplay to condemn Hamani's and the government's failure to look inside the culture for appropriate authentic solutions for the terrible drought of the 1970s, a drought that decimated communities, livestock, vegetation and other resources of post-independence Niger.

Beyond serving as a tool for discrediting the negligent Hamani government, intertextuality also serves a ritualistic function. When considering Zarma-Songhoï spiritual practices, Hama's cautionary tale against violating sacred cultural rules place in direct dialogue with figures from oral narratives, such as Askia in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Through this literary dialogue, Hama symbolically rectifies the ruinous mistakes of Askia whose irresponsible conduct, according to the oral traditions, symbolically destroyed and eventually dislocated the once-prosperous Songhoï Empire. If Hama is able to entertain a veritable dialogue with his ancestors when they are framed as characters in oral narratives, and if the complicity between the literary and the supernatural in Zarma-Songhoï traditions allows the contemporary author to be able to symbolically correct previous fatal errors, it is because Hama already has models within the Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions for such action. In both oral tradition and magico-religious practices, collusion between the literary and the supernatural opens the possibility for future corrective action to be taken. What is more, these narratives provide concrete models of conduct for the future generations who would undertake these rituals.

While I have restricted my study of intertextuality between Hama's *Toula* and indigenous oral narratives, leaving out other stories related to water serpent spirits and *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, this area of research demonstrates considerable depth. In the conclusion of this study, I delineate potential areas for future projects related to intertextual relationships between contemporary Francophone African narratives and oraliture, particularly as it relates to questions of spiritual practices and the supernatural.

The value of continued work in this field emerges, in part, from an initial critical responsibility to correct previous misleading and erroneous scholarly research. Through the application of ethnographic and cultural knowledge, textual analysis stands on firmer ground.

The restoration of these texts to their socio-cultural context allows for deeper levels of understanding and analyses, particularly as it relates to issues of intertextual relationships between contemporary and traditional narratives.

PART I

ANALYZING THE EPIC VALUE OF THE STORY OF ASKIA

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 the Songhoï storyteller Nouhou Malio of Niger recited the fictional tale of Askia Mohammed to scholar Thomas Hale. After transcribing, translating, and titling the story, Hale published *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Because of Hale's translation, this ancient Songhoï oral narrative has been widely interpreted as a story that celebrates the epic heroism of the 15th century Songhoï Emperor Askia Mohammed Touré. The most recent significant acceptance of Hale's position appears in Mariam Deme Konaté's 2010 *Heroism and the Supernatural in the African Epic*. However, contemporary readings of this purported "epic" are not compatible with Songhoï ethnography and oral tradition. I argue that the misconceptions derive from rampant decontextualized analyses that include an inappropriate appreciation of ethnographic specificities as well as oral tradition. The aim of this section is to present irrefutable evidence that disqualifies, in terms of form, content and context, whatever epic essence may be perceived in this story.

Thus, considering four versions of the same story, this study first compares key technical characteristics of Hale's version of the text with the Homeric référence-étalon, the "universal" and transcultural archetype, and most importantly with local Zarma-Songhoï definition of epic narrative to explain the insufficiency and/or irrelevance of technical characteristics to support an epic text.

Second, this study addresses ethnographic specificities of Songhoï culture, specifically as it relates to the supernatural and other related cultural practices, to explicate Askia's crimes from a Songhoï perspective and to demonstrate the inevitability of his punishment. By stressing Askia's asocial nature, this study claims that the story suddenly ceases to reflect any characteristics of an

epic narrative for in the local tradition the hero's upholding of and conformity to social rules found the basis for his epic heroism. Thus, viewed from this angle, the story turns from being a glorification of Askia Mohammed's heroism into a poignant display of his abject failure to adhere to sacred Songhoï values.

Ultimately, for the purposes of my study, Askia's transgressions must be viewed as belonging to the category of serious socio-cultural wrongs that must necessarily be corrected through appropriate rituals. In lieu of a real-life expurgatory magical performance, I argue that Hama's *Toula* can be read as an imitation of such corrective rituals, an attempt through the literary to undertake a symbolic correction of Askia's transgressions following a model of real-life rituals of correction.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE AFFILIATION OF THE AFRICAN CORPUS IN THE EPIC GENRE

In *L'Épopée : Unité et diversité d'un genre*, Jean Dérive poses the following question that relates to the object of the current study aimed at disqualifying Askia's epic heroism as proposed by Thomas Hale (1990) and perpetuated by scholars such as Konaté (2010):

Est-on toujours sûr que, dans les volumes qui présentent les récits africains dont nous parlons ou dans les articles qui leur sont consacrés, le choix de les baptiser "épopées" soit toujours le fruit d'une analyse développée et cohérente? (77).

In re-actualizing the now age-old view that 'The African epic is a subject that is not widely known by African studies specialists of West Africa, but then is still less known in the northern hemisphere' (Kesteloot, *The African Epic* 203), Dérive's above question engages the whole problematic of the affiliation of the African corpus not only to the traditional Homeric definition but also to the idea of a possible universal and transcultural archetype as pursued by scholars such as Jean Dérive.

I. FRAGMENTATION OF THE DEFINITION OF EPIC GENRE

Today, the issues of the definition of the epic genre (once strongly associated with the Ancient Greek model as *référence-étalon* and the Greek cradle) is long since settled. In effect, efforts of the cultural comparatist approach, especially as undertaken through the approach of the *Oral Poetry* school of thought, the definition of the epic witnessed a healthy fragmentation along local cultural tones that often fundamentally diverge, on essential defining characteristics, with

the initial European (Ancient Greek and Medieval) models as is illustrated in the following comparison between the worlds of West African Mandé and Fulani epic heroes and their European counterparts:

En Afrique noire par exemple, chez les Manding où les griots louangeurs jouent dans la société réelle un rôle essentiel auprès des notables, le souci de se voir glorifié par un tiers est considéré comme une aspiration légitime et même indispensable à l'exercice du pouvoir. En revanche, dans le cas des épopées produites dans le cadre de l'Occident chrétien, le héros, même s'il a un sens aigu de l'honneur qu'il doit éviter de perdre à tout prix, ne peut se permettre une telle attitude qui serait considérée comme un péché d'orgueil incompatible avec les valeurs du christianisme. De la même façon, les héros grecs comme les héros des gestes médiévaux, qui relèvent du même berceau de civilisation, sont des personnages très sensibles et extravertis qui n'hésitent pas à pleurer abondamment, de peine ou de joie, et qui peuvent même aller jusqu'à perdre le sens en cas d'affliction extrême. Ils s'opposent aux héros peuls qui, dans une civilisation où la retenue est un élément capital de l'idéal de l'« honnête homme », sont beaucoup plus intériorisés. (Dérive 141).

One would have expected that in the study of the African corpus, the settlement of the issues of multicultural fragmentation of the definitions of epic narrative would result in a practice of active cultural textual analysis that places at its center local ethnographic specificities in order to bring forth precisely the specificity of the African model. Yet, despite the rather dépassée practice of evaluating African texts along Eurocentric definitions, one can observe in Dérive's renewed call toward the establishment of a universal and transcultural archetype of epic genre (Dérive 2002) a counterdiscourse to the intercultural comparatist approach that could undermine the enormous progress towards decentralizing the definition of the epic genre.

II. TOWARDS AN AFRO-CENTRIC APPROACH TO STUDYING African EPIC PRODUCTION

Generally, the African epic literature, like the other African aesthetic productions, has been traditionally studied through a comparative approach with European counterpart. In many instances, when African scholars engage the African corpus in such comparative approach, their

studies, that almost always consider the European culture as cultural reference, appear to be heavily tainted with rather strong reactionary affirmations such:

[The African epics were transmitted by] specialists undoubtedly, but who could no more be considered as ‘learned’ or ‘erudite’ than were the troubadours of Europe. The equivalent of the Gallic bard, they were not at all specifically under the control of a class of ‘priest’, with all due deference to Dumézil and to the ‘Latinists’. (Kesteloot, *The African Epic* 203).

Although I’d nuance Ben Amos’ proposal to limit criticism of African literature to an Afro-centric approach, I do share his basic position that:

The literariness of African verbal art does not depend upon its similarities or differences with other literary traditions. Rather, it is possible to discern its aesthetic qualities, as the African people do, by relating epics to other forms of communication in culture and to the language of other verbal performance. The poetics of African epic, in other words, has its basis in the poetic system of each culture. (*Africana Journal*, 7 (1980): 69).

Equally do I share the approach of Mariam Deme Konaté in her study titled *Heroism and the Supernatural in the African Epic*.

Instead of defining African epics by comparing them to the European ones or to other literary genres, it is high time that we shifted the equation and started using the inherent characteristics of the African epic itself to reach a definition that takes into account the cultural realities of each African society. (6).

Ironically, as I discussed later, Konaté and Thomas Hale, to whose views this current study responds, though they incessantly call away from generalization to cultural-specific, both fall in the same trap they endeavored to warn us about: they fail to realize that there is no such “African” culture and that even between two fundamentally unitarian people as close as the Zarma-Songhoï, there could exist fundamental cultural nuances with profound effects and implications to a proper understanding of the literary productions. In a way, as I partake in the Afro-centric approach, my disqualification of Askia’s epic heroism is founded on Konaté’s fundamental vision that:

I would suggest that every heroic exploit or deed be studied in relation to the total image of the mythological, religious and cultural beliefs of the hero’s society... This movement from the

text to the societal beliefs and customs is of paramount importance, because the context of the verbal performance of the epic, along with various narrative devices (setting, bard's mood, arrangement and presentation of the story, audience's response) informs the text in any literary work, especially in the epic which, according to Christiane Seydou "remains a living, spoken act of expression in those societies where orality still dominates." (*Folklore Forum*, 16 (1983): 49). Indeed, the narrative devices, as well as the performance itself constitutes the literary and aesthetic context on which the perception and appreciation of the oral tale depends. (20-21).

In aligning with Konaté, I also share her upholding of Welsh-Asante's view that the Africa-centered technique "cannot contribute to an aesthetic without a sound cultural foundation that includes the philosophical underpinnings of that society" (14).

In attempting to define the epic genre, as it relates to the traditional oral societies of Africa, it is important to arrive at a definition that distinguishes between epic and other closely associated genres such as myth, legend, chronicle which is not an easy task since as very often epic does greatly call forth to genres such as myth and chronicle to build its material and it may not always be easy to discern when it is appropriate to say that a myth, a legend or a chronicle has become epic narrative. Thus, the usefulness of the following characteristics by Jean Dérive that could help somewhat differentiate epic from closely-associated genres:

Un énoncé ne sera épopée qu'interprété par un spécialiste (caste ou non, mais reconnu comme tel) selon une diction qui le distingue nettement des autres formes de discours et qui fait apparaître une mise en rythme particulière. Celui-ci, en principe accompagné de musique, mais nous laisserons à ce propos le débat ouvert, sera nécessairement, dans la tradition de l'école de l' « *Oral Poetry* », consommé oralement par une communauté. (81).

Derives' definition joins Okpewho's for whom:

An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a person or persons endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists. (*The Epic* 34).

John William Johnson, on the other hand, proposes the following features which he believes are common to African epic and useful for analysis:

Epics are poetic narratives of substantial length, on a heroic theme; they are also multigeneric and multifunctional, incorporating more of a community's diversity than might have been expected; and they are transmitted by culturally "traditional" means. They are not the overnight creation of visionaries, whatever the role of individual creativity in the generation of a specific performance version. (Johnson et al. xviii).

Contextually, the epic, in its African understanding, is a genre whose essential function, according to Dérive, would be to justify the founding values of the cultural identity of a group through a particular association of myth and history (79). Other functional definitions of epic in the African context contribute to presenting a credible status. Thus, while Danaï sees epic as the deformation, transformation and transfiguration of historical facts (188), Lilyan Kesteloot sees epic as history that art transformed into poetry and that imagination changed into legend (*L'Épopée* 3).

However the African epic is approached, the centrality of its live, cinematic oral performance, the captivating and charming spell of the storyteller cannot be underestimated as Okpewho and Kesteloot so poignantly present:

A good oral performance depends on the maintenance of a healthy balance between the tale, the music, the histrionics, and everything else to which the performer lends his genius in a live context. (Okpewho, *The Epic* 93).

Il faut avoir observé les gens captives par un griot bien en forme : ils réagissent à la moindre de ses saillies, ils retiennent leur souffle dans les instants de « suspens », ils éclatent de rire à ses bons mots, ils approuvent ou répondent à ses questions, bref ils sont au cinéma. (Kesteloot, *Acteurs et valeurs* 32).

The fervid atmosphere of the open performance of African epic, as Okpewho has it, is such that, as Okpewho cites, J. P Clark and Smith and Dale recommends that a tape recorder cannot render this magnitude:

...not just the tape recorder or bound volume which records the sound alone, but perhaps a full-length color film appears to be the one medium that can catch and convey something of the complete, complex and magnificent texture that is the [Ozidi] epic. (J. P Clark qtd. in *The Epic* 52)

It would need a combination of phonograph and kinematograph to reproduce a tale as it is told... Every muscle of face and body spoke, a swift gesture often supplying the place of a whole sentence. (Smith and Dale qtd. in *The Epic* 52).

If we use the above characteristics to present epic production in Sub-Saharan African, then William Johnson's "Epic Belt" in Africa (running across the Sahel and down into Central Africa) is only but an underestimation as the continent does proliferate of oral narratives that satisfy some aspects or others of epic literature. I highly recommend the reader to the following sources for a complete panorama of epic literature in Sub-Saharan Africa: Dérive, Jean et al. *L'Épopée : Unité et diversité d'un genre*. Paris, Karthala, 2002; B. Dieng et L. Kesteloot. *Les Épopées d'Afrique Noire*. Paris: Karthala, 1997; Johnson et al. *Oral Epics from Africa*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997; Okpewho, Isidore. *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979; and Kesteloot, Lilyan. *L'Épopée Traditionnelle*. Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1971. I will end this section with a general introduction of the Zarma-Songhoï corpus and a presentation of the Zarma-Songhoï storyteller.

III. THE ZARMA-SONGHOÏ EPIC

A very prolific zone for epic production, the Zarma-Songhoï society possess at least six *Djesserédounka*, master-storytellers, who have well over twenty recorded stories, without mentioning the numerous versions of each of the stories:

1. Anonymous: *Issa Korombé*
2. Badjé Bania: *Babatu; Garba Dicko; Manta*
3. Djado Sékou: *Dondu Gorba Dicko; El Hadj Oumarou Foutiyu;*

- Hama Bodeïzé Paaté; Hamala Seyni Gakoye; Bakary Dja;
Awli Djawando; Bubu Ardo Galo; Sombo Soga; Lobo
Django*
4. Djéliaba Badjé: *Garba Mama; Damonzon; Hama Bodeïzé Paaté;
Mamoudou Djawando; Zabarkane*
5. Koulba Baba: *Mayyahi; Djikan Djibrilla; Sombo Sogo Lobo Soga;
Soumangourou Kanté*
6. Tinguizi: *Silâmaka – Poullôri; Fatoumata Bidani; Samba Tchiam;
Labdiedo*
7. Nouhou Malio: *Mamar Kassai Deeda*

IV. THE ZARMA-SONGHOÏ STORYTELLER

In Niger, as in many parts of Africa, the term *griot* is rather a much despised one associated with the practice of *parasitage* (known as *griotage*) by streets griots that happens to be very annoying. These parasites are traditionally and commonly referred to as *Gawlo*. The *Gawlo* is usually considered the ambulant griot that goes from one social ceremony to the other to entertain. They are usually experts in praise songs and good singers too. However, it can happen that even within the *Gawlo* profession there arises a hierarchization and condescension of more expert singers upon those who are accidentally in the profession just to make a quick buck.

The true storytellers are very offended to be referred to as *griots* and are quite offended to be associated with the *Gawlo* whom they despise a lot. This is understandable because the very terms that identify them socio-culturally confer to them great social advantages. To the

derogatory terms ‘griot’ that they do not even understand, the true professionals, these descendants of the *Djesserédounka*, the original master-griots of the ancient times, along with the society at large prefer the terms *Djesseré*, and *Timeï* to designate the storytellers with a primarily Zarma-Songhoï autochthonous background and *Mâbo* for those of originally Fulani background. In addition, the term *Djéliba* is also used invariably to designate any competent, socially-recognized, storyteller. Of all these terms, *Djesseré* stands as the noblest appellation for a Zarma-Songhoï storyteller. It is the term that identifies such great figures, also renowned genealogists as Badjé Bania, Nouhou Malio, Djéliba Badjé, Djado Sékou, Koulba Baba or Tinguizi. Some of these well-respected figures have become State-Djesseré.

While the *Djesseré* and the *Timeï* are considered to be indigenous to the Zarma-Songhoï society, the originally-Fulani *Mâbo*, on the other hand is believed to have been introduced, as war trophies, to the Zarma-Songhoï society by Askia Daoud around 1550 as the medieval Songhoï *Tarikh-es-Soudan* chronicle reports:

A la fin de l’année 957 (fin de l’année 1550), il [Askia Daoud] fit une champagne contre Tagha, nom d’une localité sise dans le pays de Bâghena et qu’on appelle encore Tirmissi et Koma. Là il fit la guerre contre le Fondoko Djâdji-Tomân, et ramena de cette expédition des chanteurs et un grand nombre de chanteuses dites Mâbi ; il les installa à Kâgho (Gao, capital of Old Songhoï) dans un quartier spécial. (Es Sadi 168).

Unlike their Fulani brethren who remained in the Macina and have conserve the usage of the *Fulfuldé* language, the *Mâbo* of the Songhoï have quickly adopted the Zarma-Songhoï language. Today fort densities of *Mâbo* are mostly found in the following villages: *Bongou*, *Dibilo*, *Firowkoïré*, and *Dartchendé*. The *Timeï*, former tam-tam players, are found everywhere, particularly in *Koulikoïré*, *Dartchendé* and *Saya*. (Hama, *Songhay* 199). Finally, the term *Timeï* refers, today, more to mean “the house of the storytellers” as in for example “I’m looking for a good storyteller. Then, go find one in the *Timeï* in such and such villages”.

These Djesserédounka, masters of the words, undergo formal training in veritable schools or colleges which are divided into the Songhoï zone and the Zarma zone. In the Songhoï, we have the following schools: *Bongou*, *Dibilo*, *Firowkoïré*, *Dartchendé*, *Karma* and *Namaro*. In the Zarmatarey, we have the major center of *Liboré* and we can also find minor centers in neighboring *Ndounga* and *Saga*. In these schools, around the doudhal, hearth, apprentices, usually sons of professionally-established storytellers, undergo a lengthy training, many years, not only in memorization of the stories, but also in verbal art, linguistics and history, not only on the Zarma-Songhoï but also on the neighboring groups such as the Fulani and the Bambara. Modeled around learning modules in local Koranic schools, Djesseré Iliâssou Mâmourou illustrates an apprentice's day's learning the following way:

Vous êtes assis, l'enseignant vous appelle et vous enseigne, petit à petit. Il appelle chacun pour lui dire trois unités ; quand il a donné à chacun les trois unités, il vous autorise à aller vous coucher jusqu'au lendemain. Le lendemain, à chacun de réciter ses trois unités. Ces trois-là, si tu arrives à les réciter ensemble, on t'apprend trois encore. Si tu ne les récites pas correctement, on te les redonne jusqu'à ce que tu les aies bien en main. Le métier de Djesseré a son syllabaire. (Laya, *Textes Songhay-Zarma* 7-8).

During this training, the apprentice also learns to play the moolo, the indispensable musical instrument that accompanies any epic enunciation in this society.

The six Zarma-Songhoï attested professional epic poets (Badjé Bania, Nouhou Malio, Djéliaba Badjé, Djado Sékou, Tinguizi and Koulba Baba) can be distinguished according to their narrative styles as well as reception by the local audience. By far the most charismatic, and uncontestedly the best Zarma-Songhoï epic narrator ever, Djado Sékou, is the storyteller whose style of declamation truly aligns with the school of the Oral Poetry when we consider epic in all what it involves of poetics, pertinence of accompanying music and respondent and local audience's reception. Not only is he credited with more than fifteen pure epic narratives, in the cassette-tape black market, Djado Sékou represents the bestsellers top hit artist. Local audiences

are drawn to this artist for his unmatched verbal art. On the other hand, Badjé Bania, Nouhou Malio and to some extents Djéliaba Badjé (the only living *Djesserédounka*) are considered as true patriarchs, well-respected as such, who have trained countless of juniors Djesserés. This group is known more for its orientation in historiography and genealogy than to exclusive epic narration although Djéliaba Badjé is certainly an epic poet who may rival with Djado. However, while Djado's style is a "living" style, full of poetics, play of words and until he reached a certain age full of explicit content that younger audiences crave, the style of Djéliaba is more "pose," a flat narration that captures older audiences. In addition, the two greatly differ in terms of logistics. In effect, while any narration of Djado involves a respondent, the same renowned Karimou Saga, an independent moolo player, either Alou or Maïssamari or a woman, the staff of Djéliaba is more modest as it is reduced to his person both narrating and playing the moolo and even often mimicking the respondent.

If in many aspects, it conforms to much of West Africa, however, the style of epic enunciation of the Zarma-Songhoï Djesseré fundamentally deviates from the West African norm in that it is never sung. The Djesseré, when he is autochthonous to the Zarma-Songhoï culture (like Djado Sékou or Djéliaba Badjé) never sings nor chants and the use of mimics is at its minimum although Sékou tends to be more gesticulated than Badjé for example. The only storyteller who sings is the late Tinguizi who, it should be mentioned, is of Gourmantché origins. Singing especially, and to some extent abundant gesticulations, is not considered "admirable" behavior past a certain age. In addition, singing in this culture is reserved to a class of people whom the Djesseré consider as inferior them.

If they do not sing and their mimics are kept to a bare minimum, the Zarma-Songhoï storyteller, on the other hand, goes some great length to using current events and/or topography

to contextualize their narrative with the cultural and physical realities of their audiences. For example, distances are always compared with familiar locations. Djado Sékou for instance routinely uses as landmarks the following: the well-known villages of Saga, Kollo, Ndounga, etc., the National Radio station where the recordings take place, Ouagadougou, etc. In addition, though none of them ever attended modern school, the Djesseré strive to incorporate deformations of French words because more and more audiences are becoming westernized. Thus we have such words as *abio* for avion, *ambitacio* for invitation, *aradjio* for radio, etc.

Having thus succinctly explored issues relating to the problematic of the affiliation of the African corpus to the epic genre and introduced the Zarma-Songhoï epic and storyteller, the following undertakes to evaluate the canonical epic value of Hale's text as well as Askia's own epic heroism. The examination begins with the literature review of Thomas Hale's version of the text.

CHAPTER II

REVIEWING THOMAS HALE'S *SCRIBE, GRIOT, AND NOVELIST*

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Epic of Askia Mohammed appeared first in Thomas Hale's *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist* in which the author published both the transcription as well as the translation of the original story, recited in Zarma-Songhoï language in 1980-81, by storyteller Nouhou Malio of Niger. In addition, the book also attempts a diachronic and comparative analysis between the oral text recited by the Zarma-Songhoï traditional storyteller and the sixteenth and seventeenth-century chronicles (*Tarikh el-Fettach* and *Tarikh es-Soudan*) written in Arabic by autochthonous Songhoï (not Arab) scribes assigned to the court. In claiming that Askia's tale is an epic sung to glorify the heroic deeds of Songhoï 15th –century ruler Askia Mohammed, Hale drew upon the chronicles and the oral text in order to analyze Askia's rise to power, his reign and fall from power, the description of his successors, and the fall of the Songhoï Empire. Thus, to date, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, along with widespread reviews accepting Hale's position and argumentation, represent the most important comprehensive study of the so-called *Epic of Askia Mohammed*.

Except for two critiques (Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Isidore Okpewho) that indicate serious flaws in Hale's analysis, as shall be discussed further, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist* has been largely embraced. Scholars have for instance eloquently and profusely praised the supposed "originality" in Hale's comparative examination of the oral tradition and the chronicles. For

example, while Graham Furniss finds that "...the strength of Hale's book lies his detailed comparison between the chronicles and the oral narratives" (Graham 316), F. P. De Moraes Farias believes that "The originality of this book lies in the juxtaposition of three very different genres, usually dealt with by separate specialisms, but here examined together in their literary and historical imbrications" (Moraes 145). Finally, Ronald Niezen sees in Hale's work a "...new material...for those interested in the West African empires; there is a compelling comparison between oral and written narratives" (Niezen 186).

However interesting the comparative approach might be, what is ignored is that this style of comparative study between the *Tarikhs* and the oral traditions is far from original. Decades before Hale, at least three scholars had already undertaken strikingly similar studies. Almost 40 years earlier, in 1953, Jean Rouch published his *Contribution à l'histoire des Songhay*, through which Rouch engages in a point by point comparison between the oral traditions and the *Tarikhs* chronicles incessantly reaching conclusions such as: "On voit la différence des traditions et des chroniques. Là, c'est l'Islam, ici c'est la magie qui sauve Mamar" (*Contribution* 197).

Then, twenty years earlier, in 1970 at the University of Wisconsin, David Bellama completed a Master's thesis titled "Si Ali and Askia Mohammed – Two Interpretations / The Muslim Chronicles vs. Songhoï Oral Tradition" Which appears, much like Hale's work, as a point by point paralleling between the two sources:

If the consideration of *Tarikh* and tradition side by side demonstrate anything, it is that, for the Songhay, this ever present conflict between old, particularist Africa and modern, universalist Africa had its beginning long ago, far back in the history of the Empire of Gao. (47).

Each of the following quotes represents introductions or conclusions of extensively detailed chapters in Bellama's work that engage the same topics as Hale does:

Thus, if Si Ali was the most despised villain of the Songhay history, the Muslim chroniclers give us a completely opposite view of Al-Hajj Askia Mohammed Touré...(19).

Once again, Kati's chronicle, *Tarikh el-Fettach*, provides several parallels to the oral accounts... (39).

The parallels continue in further traditions... (40).

Here, too, as in other cases, there is an Islamic counterpart to the traditional story, this one again related by Mahmoud Kati in *Tarikh el-Fettach*... (41).

A comparison of the two versions is telling: in Kati's story, it is Islam which saves Askia; in the traditional version, it is magic – not his magic, but Si's magic. (42).

Si Ali and Askia Mohammed take on completely different characters, according to whether one consults the *Tarikhs* or the oral traditions of the Songhay people. (45).

Finally, in 1978 Boubou Hama produced his *Ecrits sur le Soudan* followed in 1980 by *Askia Mohammed Aboubacar, l'élhadj et le Khalife, à travers la tradition et le "Fettach,"* which both, as well as the above, approached the issue in a similar manner. Whoever takes the time to read both Hale's study and Bellama's will undoubtedly see an almost point by point resemblance between the two on exactly the same topics.

Now, not only does de Sardan claim that in reality Hale's comparative approach does not teach us anything new for he mostly paraphrases or restates either the obvious or what has already been discussed, but most importantly, de Sardan questions the deliberate "parti pris" of the scholar:

L'entreprise comparatiste de l'auteur laisse [...] le lecteur assez perplexe. Pour l'essentiel il s'agit d'une mise en parallèle des *Tarikhs* et de la tradition orale, sur la base d'un découpage chronologique des faits évoqués. L'auteur veut examiner "the literary and historical linkages" (p. 4) entre ces deux "récits", mais en se défendant aussi bien de vouloir "réécrire" l'histoire du Sahel que de procéder à une analyse textuelle... Il semble ainsi prendre son parti de ne satisfaire véritablement ni l'historien, ni le critique littéraire, tout en se rabattant sur un objectif énigmatique : "I want to explain what the texts say to each other and to the people who produced them" (p. 7). Ce flou n'est hélas jamais dissipé : après une bonne présentation du contexte social et historique de ses sources respectives, Hale se contente en fait de paraphraser tantôt les *Tarikhs* tantôt la tradition orale... Or l'auteur ne nous fournit pas vraiment cette caractérisation des séquences... Car la comparaison elle-même ne nous apprend pas grand-chose. (*Un barde* 205-206).

If Hale's analysis does not greatly contribute to discussions on comparative readings of chronicles and oral narratives, it does produce something new in its misinterpretation of Askia's story. Like Samba Gadjigo, a few scholars who are truly familiar with Songhoï culture have sensed through *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, a certain unease in reference to fundamental flaws in Hale's grasp of the Songhoï culture that he aims to study. Thus, Gadjigo states that "Hale's view of the Songhay society and the use to which he puts African literature are highly questionable." In his criticism, Gadjigo finds that one of several fundamental research mistakes that Thomas Hale made was to neglect to integrate works by local scholars who, have already researched on the same issue (213). It comes as no surprise, then, that scholar Rodney Vlasak has correctly noted that "It would require a review of epic proportions to enumerate the flaws in Hale's book" (236).

If de Sardan has indicated several deficiencies in Hale's book, the most important critique to Hale's study, however, comes from Okpewho's *How Not to Treat African Folklore*. Sensing what he believes to be a missing "dialogic rapport with the culture," in Hale's work, Okpewho points at several pertinent linguistic and cultural deficiencies in order to point out the "...glaring distance between the foreign scholar and his [Songhoï] material" (124). Thus Okpewho speculates that the several gaps in Hale's studies (reference to the famous undecipherable lines), which hinder a complete transcription, and thereby understanding, of the full story, could only have come from a distance between Hale and the Songhoï life (124). Julius O. Adekunle in fact points at the rather frustrating aspect of the large number of these undecipherable lines in Hale's rendering which only function to expose Hale's unease with his material: "The Epic does not appear to capture the entire historical life of Askia Mohammed and the undecipherable lines subject the reader to the difficulty of figuring out what has been omitted" (200). In addition,

Okpewho castigates Hale for his overreliance on secondary sources, or simply accepting hearsay, instead of basing his conclusions from his own observations of Songhoï life.

Although I do not share the rather too personal tone of Okpewho's very severe charges against Thomas Hale, this study does notice some serious limitations (linguistics indeed, but certainly cultural) that may greatly explain how Hale comes to erroneously title and interpret his story as a Zarma-Songhoï epic tale sung to glorify Askia's epic heroism. For example, when Okpewho attacked Hale's *parlist* competencies in Songhoï language as well as his general knowledge about the Songhoï people and culture, Hale, in his response to Okpewho ("Misrepresenting and Misreading The Epic of Askia Mohammed") indicated his extensive time living among the subjects of his book:

In fact, I worked with farmers throughout the Niger river valley and in the area between the river and the Burkina Faso border... During that period, I learned Songhay [language] well enough to conduct all work in the language, including interviews with farmers... (129).

Yet, three simple errors unequivocally betray him. [3 errors:] These signs, discussed later, form the base of this study that refuses Hale's treatment of this text as an "epic" meant to be sung to glorify Askia's heroic deeds. They also put into question Hale's personal linguistic abilities in Songhoï language as well as his personal cultural knowledge of the Songhoï.

II. LINGUISTICS LIMITATIONS

First, in *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, Hale's *parlist* competencies in zarma-songhoï, to borrow from Okpewho, are seriously compromised by his misinterpreting line 37 "*A na se, To bissimila*" as "*She said, Good in the name of Allah.*" Although *bissimila* is a borrowed word from Arabic which indeed contains the word *Allah*, Hale was confused by the regular use of

“Bissimila” which can range from exclamation of surprise to greeting, etc. In reality what Hale has missed is the function of the particle “*to*.” In effect, adding the interjection “*to*” to the expression “*bissimila*,” to make “*to-bissimila*,” (a zarma-songhoï re-appropriation of the Arabic) gives permission to an interlocutor to “*go ahead*,” “*have your way*.” This episode contains scenes of sexual acts, acts that the conservative Nouhou Malio could not express openly. Kassaï telling “*to bissimila*” to the male djinn who has come to propose a sexual encounter with her is simply the griot’s euphemistic way of having Kassaï reply to the djinn “*Ok, let’s have sex*”. Although Hale did not make any reference of it, such a scene would have been interpreted as humorous. The storyteller’s recourse to euphemism as well as the laughter that such a euphemism would have provoked conveys more about the culture and the oraliture than Hale acknowledges. When Okpewho charges Hale of misrepresenting the erotic sections of the story, Hale insists upon the supposedly “reserved” nature of the Songhoï of Niger.

Second, Hale’s claim of personal knowledge of the Songhoï is compromised by a seemingly minor cultural error, but it is one that demonstrates much larger limitations in Hale’s personal linguistics as well as cultural grasp of the Songhoï. On page 49 of *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, talking about the island of *Argungu* (in present-day Sokoto in Northern Nigeria) Hale interprets *Argungu* as “Island in the water” (49). In actuality, the word *Argungu* is made up of two words *Aru* (male) and *Gungu* (island). Hale confused the words *aru* and *hari* (water). Beyond this, Hale’s error is even more monumental when the island of *Argungu* refers to a well-known legend about a Songhoï princess who created *Weyza-Goungou* (island of the female; *way* = female) in opposition to *Argungu* (island of the male). To commit such a fundamental error simply sheds light on Hale’s superficial knowledge of the Songhoï language and culture. Hale could not have possibly undertaken a serious study and end up with such an unacceptable error

regarding widely-known and fundamental element of Songhoï culture and history. Though insignificant in appearance, this error, for the Songhoï, destroys Hale's credibility because beyond the linguistic error, the cultural symbolism associated with Argungu is such that one cannot claim *knowing* Songhoï culture and yet make such a terrible mistake. What is even more astonishing is that one of Hale's interlocutors in Niger, Boubou Hama, has even published the legend of *Weyza-Goungou* which details the creation of the *Argungu* Island (*Songhay* 106, 112, 123; *Enquête* 183). Why, instead of risking such incredible mistakes, Hale wouldn't simply solicit the guidance of the local people familiar with the local folklore remains a mystery.

Third, Hale claims that the Zarma branch of the greater Zarma-Songhoï culture "...do not have griots, and consequently the Songhoï provide this function for the Zarma" (180) and reports that he got this information from Nigérien author Boubou Hama. This comment illustrates the concerning lack of seriousness with which Hale conducted his research. If Hale has assiduously researched this issue, he would have seen in two books by Boubou Hama, whom Hale himself extensively cites, reference to Zarma griots. For exemple in Hama's *Enquête sur les Fondements et le Genèse de l'Unité Africaine*, one finds Hama's confirmation that "[la caste des griots Timeï] habitent Dartchendé, Koulikoiré et Saya. Le pays zarma en compte aussi" (183) or "Un témoin que nous allons citer est Badio Bania, griot Zarma du clan des Diécéré-Dounka" (309).

Indeed, Hama classifies Hale's primary source, Nouhou Malio, as a Zarma griot. This classification directly contradicts Hale's statement about Hama as well as about Nouhou Malio. Also, if Hale had used his *parlist* linguistic ability in Zarma-Songhoï, to conduct interview in Niamey, he would have discovered in the early 1980's, as well as in today, that the Zarma by far outnumber the Songhoï in terms of professionally-recognized griots. Apart from Nouhou Malio, whose Songhoï origin isn't clearly established, all the Djesserédounka, master griots, at the time (*Badjé Bania*, *Djéliba Badjé*, *Djado Sékou* and *Koulba Baba*) are of Zarma origin. Most importantly, while Badjé Bania, a Zarma, is widely considered as a patriarch in the griot clan, the undisputed master griot in all Niger was and is also the *Zarma* Djado Sékou. Compared to Hale's

primary source, Nouhou Malio of Saga, who only has on his credit one text “*Askya Mohammed*”, the Niamey-based CELHTO (Centre d’Etudes Linguistiques et Historiques par Tradition Orale) credits Djado Sékou alone with over fifteen epic stories, Djéliba Badjé and Koulba Baba each with at least four epic texts. The notoriety of the Zarma griots is well-known and irrefutable in the whole Niger Republic. To be in Niamey in 1980 conducting a research on Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions and to dare proclaim that the Zarma do not have traditional storytellers is beyond surprise. The limitations in Hale’s linguistics capabilities may explain another serious issue involved in his work, the famous undecipherable lines that so hinder a complete understanding of the story.

III. UNDECIPHERABLE LINES

The so-called undecipherable lines represent a number of the original lines in Nouhou Malio’s recitation that Thomas Hale has been unable to figure out the meanings because so many of these words and phrases are indeed uttered in an archaic form of the Soninke language often used by the Zarma-Songhoï storytellers. Isidore Okpewho has extensively criticizes Hale for mishandling these undecipherable lines:

So we are hardly surprised to find the text yawning with so many “undecipherable” lines and phrases. Of the total 1602 lines of the text, at least 97 are wholly undecipherable; of the rest many are either partially decipherable or else filled in conjecturally (*italics*)... So we still have a conservative total of some 200 out of the 1602 lines, over 12 percent of the story! (123).

Placed in the proper traditional context, they may not all be undecipherable as presumed.

The solidity of Hale’s cultural and linguistic knowledge becomes increasingly questionable when examining his treatment of the undecipherable lines of the text. Interestingly enough, most undecipherable lines occur around Askia’s pilgrimage journey to and from Mecca. One such

recurrent line is “*Tuuri Siini*” (lines 352-368), which Hale consistently misinterprets as the “*Indigo Tree*” because *Tuuri* in Zarma signifies tree and *Siini* could either signify indigo or a razor blade. This phrase should rather be interpreted from the context of the episodes in which it occurs in the text. In effect, in this text, as in many other oral texts by other Zarma griots, the phrase *Tuuri Siini* occurs almost always only in episodes relating to a pilgrimage journey to Mecca, and I believe that this phrase is referring to *Mount Sinai* as the same phrase occurs in the Holy Quran Surah 95 *At-Tin* verse 2 which opens as “...Watteeni wazzaytoon / wat-Toori Seeneen...” In the context of Islamic tradition, invariably re-appropriated by Zarma griots, Surah *At-Tin* refers to the pilgrim circling a certain *Tuuri Siini* a certain number of times, precisely as Hale correctly saw. The only problem is that the *Tuuri Siini* in question in Hale’s text should not mean *indigo tree*, which makes no sense and explains the indecipherability of the line. Instead, the *Tuuri Siini* should be understood as the same *Mount Sinai* that Surah *At-Tin* of the Holy Quran refers to. In the context of West African Medieval times, Mount Sinai must have certainly stood on the trajectory of a pedestrian route from the African continent over the Red Sea into Saudi Arabia.

In the same Mecca episode context, Hales translates line 349 “*..a zure Makka*” as “*...he ran to Mecca.*” Here, Hale confuses the verb *zuru* (to run) and the noun *zure*, which should have been correctly spelt *zuuré* (a sojourn). Thus, “*..a zure Makka*” should be understood as “*...he sojourned in, or visited, Mecca.*”

Next, Hale translates line 351 “*A jingar Makka, a koy salam Madina*” as “*He prayed at Mecca and went to visit Medina.*” This translation proves Hale’s complete ignorance of the Muslim traditions. First of all in Islam the last step that concludes the daily prayer is called the *Salam*. Thus, “*...a koy salam Madina*” should not be translated as “*he went to visit Medina*” but

rather as “...*he completed his prayer in Medina.*” Hale made the interpretation error because he does not know that this line is making a powerful reference to the renowned Songhoï Sohantché magicians. As reflected in the episode about the war against the Bargantché in the story, Songhoï Sohantché magicians are particularly notable for their magical ability to fly over great distances at once. Thus, during the battle against the Bargantché, the Sohantché soldier is able to fly the great distance between Northern Benin and Gao to inform Askia’s mother Kassaï of her son’s troubles and to fly back within 24hrs with magical items from Kassaï aimed at ensuring Askia’s escape from his opponents. Now, a Muslim prayer typically is completed within five to seven minutes and to suggest that Askia started his prayer in Mecca (*A jingar Makka*) and completed it in Medina (*a koy salam Madina*) is to endow Askia with Sohantché magic. Much more is going on in this single line than Hale thought as to attribute to Askia the fundamental power of a Sonni is not without implying a powerful cultural statement. The great irony that Hale missed, through his faulty translation, is that the line is attributing to Askia a magical property that belongs to the Sonni (because the Sohantché trace their ascendance to Sonni Ali Ber) from whom the Askias seized power. This line in fact represents one of the many oblique mockeries against Askia: that the fundamentalist Islamist Askia despises the Sonni dynasty, yet again and again he has his life saved only through use of the Sonni’s animistic magic).

Finally, in the Mecca episode Hale translates lines 356 and 370 “*A n’i sunsum, a n’i kulu gisi*” as “*He put them all together, and he put them all there.*” Zarma-speakers can notice that Hale subtracts a translation for “*A n’i sunsum.*” At the Kabba mosque in Mecca there is a holy fountain, the Zamzam, from which pilgrims suckle, or drink as the water of the fountain is believed to possess curative properties that cleanse one from previous sins. “*A n’i sunsum*” literally means “He suckled them” as in “he suckled the Zamzam fountain” and not “he put them

together” as Hale erroneously suggests. Though the lines may be undecipherable, their replacing in the proper context of the episodes in which they are uttered can tremendously help provide decoding leads to at least some of them. If Thomas Hale could make available the original zarma-songhoï recording, currently unviable, many other lines could be decoded.

I will end this literary review section by discussing Hale’s interpretation of the cause of the fall of the Songhoï Empire where I point at Hale’s misguided displacement of the cause for this fall from Askia onto secondary characters, a move that preserves Askia’s integrity and builds the basis for Hale’s misperception of Askia’s epic heroism.

IV. (MIS)INTERPRETING THE CAUSES OF THE FALL OF THE SONGHOÏ EMPIRE

In *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, Thomas Hale rightly observes that the story encourages the view that moral decadence and moral corruption were the root causes for the downfall of the Songhoï Empire, a view, as mentioned above, already advanced forty years ago by Rouch and Bellama. He is perceptive in noting that it was, more specifically, the moral decadence of the elite class that was in question. His interpretation goes askew when he attempts to preserve Askia Mohammed’s integrity in spite of his central position within this power elite. To accomplish this, Hale works to displace Askia’s prominent moral failings onto less-prominent characters and onto the wrong social issue.

Throughout his study, especially under his chapter entitled “Disrespect for the Social Hierarchy as a Cause of the Fall According to the Griot,” Hale persists in repeating his claim that according to the oral accounts, the fall of Songhoï Empire was due to the moral decadence of the elite class which supposedly corrupted the organization of the social hierarchy. Additionally,

Hale claims that, “Throughout the entire oral account of the Moroccans’ defeat of the Songhoï, the griot weaves this motif of tension between captives and nobles” (124). While the question of the social hierarchy is an important one in Askia’s story, Hale leaves this central issue underdeveloped as he fails to provide concrete evidence of the how the nobility’s perversion of the social hierarchy caused the downfall of the empire.

Hale tries to exploit the episode of Amar Zoumbani, Soumayla Kassa and Sagouma but none of the three incidents actually work to support his claim. Even if an issue of class tensions did trigger the incident of the Moroccan Arma’s war against the Songhoï city of Gao, such an illustration fundamentally refutes Hale’s claim simply because the Songhoï won the war against the Arma. The griot explains: “Now the war of the Arma ended in failure” (*Scribe* line 1370).

In this particular incident, there is no evidence that supports the notion that a subversion of social rules sparked the war against Gao, let alone caused its downfall. Hale’s contention hinges upon the idea that Amar had violated the restrictions placed upon the slave class. However, Amar was unaware of his slave origin. As a result, when he begins his bid to court a lady, he is simply exercising his role as the son of a rich chief and not as an individual conscious of his slave origin. In no way was Amar knowingly attempting to reach equality with his challengers of noble origin for he believed himself also to be of noble origin. It is, in fact, Soumayla’s killing of Sagouma brother that triggers the war, not Amar’s interactions with nobles.

Second, Hale also promotes the idea that there is a violation of social structures in the marriage of Soumayla to a woman of captive origin without having ever been emancipated. This notion is faulty in that there are no existing Songhoï rules that that compel a nobleman to emancipate his wives of their captive origins. In fact, it has always been a practice for rulers to have hundreds of concubines of captive origins. Interestingly, children born of these women

were able to exercise authority as many of the Askias who occupied the Songhoï throne, for example, were sons of concubines taken as war captives. The story does not convey the view that the episode of the war against the Arma was a result of Soumayla's captive wife. Instead, the veritable motive of the war comes from this wife's anger that her husband killed her brother.

Third, Hale highlights instances where the lowly behavior of Amar, the son of a captive, is exposed as examples of his belief that class tensions caused the downfall of the empire. Hale begins by noting the incident where Amar Zoumbani found some dirty water and drunk it. In spite of his base conduct, there is no subversive behavior in this scene. Amar is simply exercising his lowly social status as his own father reminds him: "You have returned home, Amar Zoumbani, you have returned home, you have returned home" (*Scribe* line 1412). Even though this incident does not support the claim of rampant violations of the social hierarchy by ruling elite, Hale pursues this episode as yet another incident which functions more as a counter-argument.

"News of Amar's error might go no farther than the shade of the kokorbey tree that he and his father share for a few moments. But the incident of the dirty water offers a prelude to a much more significant mistake – attributable only to one of captive condition, it seems – when the pair go to spend a night in a village. Against the advice of Songhoï seers, Amar violates a taboo against sleeping with women in the village. The result is that the pursuing Arma soldiers catch up with the retreating Songhoï and inflict many casualties." (130.

The custom of abstaining from a sexual relationship before any major undertaking is the norm in the magic system of the Songhoï. It has no connection to an individual's social standing, and even if there was, Amar, by violating a taboo, is merely reflecting his lowly origins. Amar's actions relate more to a violation with the local magic system than it does to a violation of class distinctions. Thus, it seems to me highly unlikely that the initial authors of the story would want to exploit the issue of inappropriate class behavior as a cause of the fall of Songhoï.

Rather than presenting the downfall of the empire as the result of violations of supernatural rules, or of the behavior of those of slave origin, or of purported violations of social rules, the story places the role of women at the center of struggles that lead to the loss of the major city of Gao. Even if Amar's irresponsible behavior spoiled the war, the Songhoï ultimately emerged victorious. After the people shouted "Amar Zoumbani, you have ruined our war" (*Scribe* line 1439), Amar asked them to re-saddle his horse. Thereupon:

Towards the middle of the day/The Arma came in their dugout canoes/...The horses of the Arma did not return home/The horses, every one of them, perished. Wherever they go, the Songhoï gather them up and kill them. All the Arma horses did not return (*Scribe* lines 1443-1453).

All the three incidents that Hale exploits to support his interpretation work to refute his contention. Whatever base behavior the slaves exhibited, they are simply behaving in the expected way within the appropriate limits socially set for them. Thus they cannot be taken accountable for behaving in a lowly manner. Also, the story does not make a direct link between the downfall of the kingdom and the corrupt and decadent behavior of individuals of low social standing, or the opposite, as Hale believes. Finally, the strongest counter-argument to Hale's position is that regardless of any violation of social rules, the Songhoï were victorious in all of the battles that Hale tries to use to illustrate his point. Nowhere does the griot give any hint that a weakening of the social hierarchy, by the slave class, caused the kingdom's fall.

V. HALE'S COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Finally, it is important to discuss the potential limitations and issues involved the very type of methodology that Hale adopted to conduct his study, comparison and reconciliation between the 15th century Tarikhs historical chronicles and the oral text. For, while the confrontation of the

literary text with the historical accounts *may* well provide invaluable information, the approach may not be the appropriate one to get the epic value of the literary text. While the historical model, or Dérive's historico-mythique type is fundamentally built upon historical events, the literary text, the epic tale, is not so much concerned neither in reflecting historical accuracy nor even in serving as a necessary historical source for the epic tale, in its essence as a fictional literary, fundamentally falsifies history as Dérive contends:

Ce fondement historique est en effet plus un alibi qu'autre chose et le récit épique, le plus souvent, ne se réfère à l'histoire que pour mieux la trahir. Quels que soient les récits épiques qu'on étudie, on s'aperçoit que l'histoire est largement réinterprétée, soit qu'on attribue à des événements des motivations qu'ils n'avaient pas – d'après les historiens – soit qu'on en déforme les modalités, soit qu'on en bouleverse la chronologie, soit enfin qu'on mêle événements historiques et événements fictifs pour les besoins de l'interprétation idéologique. (173).

Dérive even theorizes that the epic tale exploits historical events because these events have so deeply marked the imaginary that they leave an emblematic stamp on such collective memory:

La référence à cet événement [historique] s'explique par son caractère suffisamment exceptionnel pour qu'il ait pu marquer la mémoire collective et surtout par le fait qu'il peut donner lieu à une interprétation emblématique par une combinaison de ses propriétés intrinsèques avec la relecture qui en est faite. (172-173).

In addition, and most importantly, while the historical accounts, the *Tarikhs*, may well serve to situate a story of Askia within its historical context, they must themselves in the first place be truthful and accredited as such. Indeed, one must not forget that the credibility of the *Tarikhs'* texts should not continue to remain unchallenged insofar as they were written by Songhoï natives serving as scribes for the royal court. As such, the interpretation of history by the authors of these sources may well be one-sided. Thus, the pursuit of verification through the oral literary text of the historical account of the *Tarikhs* chronicles would but inevitable lead to faulty analysis because the two sources operate on very different ideologies. The historically-proven hero Askia should not be view through a reflection of the fictional character. Nor are the events

in the two sources. For example, the worlds and worldviews of the two environments are not only different, they are conflicting. In effect, for one thing, against historical account, the literary story attributes Askia with the symbolic parental relationship of maternal nephew to the king Sonni Ali Ber that he later assassinates. Second, while the historical Askia evolved in a patriarchal environment, the fictional representation of him evolve in a matriarchal world with all what this historical falsification entails in terms of ontological differences between the two worlds as well as the power struggle involved in the confrontation of these two entities. Thus, the characters portrayed through the so-called *Epic of Askia Mohammed* should not be seen as necessary reflection of their historical counterparts.

Another potentially faulty analysis involved in the type of the above approach is looking at the oral text as window of the past (*Scribe 54*) exactly as any historical account. This rather functions to keep epic tales stagnant within the past whereas one of the essential functions of the enunciation of the epic tale in the oral traditions, of African for example, is not so much to relate the past as it is to relate to the contemporary issues of the contemporary audience as Dérive believes “C’est pourquoi la fonction culturelle de l’épopée doit toujours se lire aussi par rapport à l’époque de son énonciation et non pas seulement par rapport à l’époque suppose des faits qu’elle relate dans l’anecdote qu’elle rapporte” (187).

To whom this story speaks to “currently” and what are the “contemporary” issues of this community and how does the *communal* oral performance of the story opens a window, not on the past as Hale sees it, but forward? These should be the pertinent questions that should have guided any analysis of this story. Thus, one better approach to judging the epic value of the text or the epic heroism of a character would be to confront the version with other existing versions, if available, and to also appreciate the reception of the story by the primary local audience. In

this view, reliance solely on the verbal matter, especially on only one version, while neglecting other necessary components such as primary audience and socio-political and cultural setting involves great risk to arrive at faulty interpretation. The specific conditions of a communal performance of a Zarma-Songhoï epic tales are part of the larger context that should direct our appreciation of the internal motives and help arrive at elucidating whether or not the story of Askia, as recorded by Hale, satisfies the local definition of epic narrative and whether or not the fictional representation of Askia conforms or deviates from the historically-proven brave hero?

Hale's argumentation leaves unanswered the above five fundamental questions which the text invites. These questions prompt reflection upon the considerable distortions and alterations to fundamental cultural values. Second, Hale's interpretation of the fall of the Songhoï Empire leaves out intact the integrity of Askia himself who should have been the main player. The story does not provide enough evidence to support Hale's claim nor does the story support the notion of Askia's epic heroism. This leaves the story open to other, more valid angles of interpretation. In the one that I attempt in the following pages, the text is appreciated against internal as well as contextual pertinent ethnographic information.

CHAPTER III

CONTEXTUALIZED ANALYSIS OF *THE EPIC OF ASKIA MOHAMMED*

I. REPLACING THE STORY OF ASKIA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE ZARMA-SONGHOÏ CULTURAL BASE

The story of Askia Mohammed is well known in Niger where it is recorded in several versions. Of these several versions, I have retained the following four for this study: a prose version, *La Légende de Mamarou*, in Boubou Hama's *L'Histoire Traditionnelle d'un Peuple: Les Zarma-Songhay* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967); Thomas Hale's bilingual text, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, in *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1990); Sandra Bornand's bilingual text, *Askiya Mohamed*, in *Le discours du griot généalogiste chez les Zarma du Niger* (Paris, Karthala, 2005); finally a Zarma-Songhoï language CD audio recording of Djéliba Badjé's recounting the story in a compilation of oral stories titled *Jibo Baje. Epopées Zarma Et Songhay*. Audio CD Ocora France ASIN: B00000I4KH (February 9, 1999). All these versions conform to general divisions of the story in the following episodes: the conditions of Askia's birth and how through his mother's subterfuge he escapes a certain death from his uncle also the King; his childhood; Askia's killing of his maternal uncle; the war against the Bargantché and finally his destitution by his son, Askia Moussa, and his ostracization into an infested island.

As Okpewho noted, and as de Sardan clearly understood, scholars like Thomas Hale have consistently misinterpreted this oral text because they failed to realize that within the same recitation one finds embedded three different sub-stories. This being the case, any attempt to

interpret the story as a coherent whole risks ignoring this fundamental subdivision and necessarily involves errors in interpretation. The sub-stories present in Hale's version of the text are the first one about Askia Mohammed, the second one about Soumayla Kassa, and the third one about the Zarma legendary hero, Mali Béro and his nephew Yéfarma Issaka. Each of these distinct stories, though recited in one string, are clearly demarcated in Nouhou Malio's oral text by the use of the well-known Zarma-Songhoï interjection "tô." This interjection signals the intended ending of a cycle in the recitation and the starting of a new one.

The first section, the story about Askia Mohammed, runs from the opening line to line 590 (*Tô, Dauda Mamar izé*). Thereupon starts the second story, that of Soumayla Kassa, which continues to line 1456 (*I go no ga dandi, sohon kay ay si bay nan kan Irkoy ni gayi*). The story of Mali Béro begins immediately at line 1457 (*Tô, nga ga ti kan Maali tun*). Each of these stories responds to a very different socio-cultural as well historical contexts. For example, the organization of the matriarchal regime that was valid for the Askya portion loses potency in the story of Soumayla Kassa section. It loses further valence in the final section on the Zarma Mali Béro. Thus, the three sequences (*Askia, Kassa* and *Mali Béro*) must not be examined as components contributing to a harmonious whole. Thus, de Sardan is correct to point at the following composition that Hale fails to consider in his examination of the story:

En effet, on retrouve dans la déclamation éditée par Hale une série de séquences autonomes, assez caractéristiques des multiples versions de cette geste, au-delà des variantes apportées tel ou tel griot : la séquence Kasseï (comment Kasseï, en échangeant son fils avec celui de sa captive, déjoue la méfiance sanglante de Sonni Ali Ber) ; les séquences Mamar (comment le fils de Kasseï prend le pouvoir et devient l'Askia Mohammed ; le pèlerinage à La Mecque ; la guerre contre le Borgou) ; la séquence Daouda (les hauts faits de l'Askia Daoud) ; la séquence « chute du Songhay » (comment la vengeance d'une femme livre Gao aux Armas, et comment les Songhay en fuite leur échappent). On y trouve même une séquence en général incorporée non à cette « geste du Songhay » mais à la « geste des Zarma » ou « geste de Mali Béro » (la participation du guerrier zarma Yéfarma Issaka à la lutte contre les Armas). Or l'auteur ne fournit pas vraiment cette identification et caractérisation des séquences. (*Un barde* 206).

The multifaceted nature of this story supports Okpewho and de Sardan's contention that Hale's reductive title of "The Epic of Askia Mohammed" inappropriately narrows the focus of the story to the sole character of Askia. In actuality, Askia shares the narrative space with other characters such as Yéfarma or Amar Zoumbani who have even a greater presence and significance in the story than Askia himself. In keeping with Okpewho and de Sardan's rightful assertion that such a title is inaccurate, it is crucial to realign the text's title with its Songhoï origin as the viewpoints of both Okpewho and de Sardan already point that a more appropriate title for Hale's version would be something like *A Gest of Gao* or *The/A Gest of Songhoï*. Thus, to correctly understand the text's value, it is important to begin with a proper title.

II. TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS

II-1-Issue Of Appropriate Title

One of the major errors that Hale commits in his misconception of the story of Askia as an epic narrative concerns the very misguided title that Hale chooses to baptize his version of the text against his primary source, Nouhou Malio. In effect, while in accordance with the local tradition Malio appropriately terms his version as *Mamar Kassai Deeda*, while Hale deliberately chooses to translate Malio's title as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. The various levels of distortions involved in Hale's move must start with the problematic of the appropriate Zarma-Songhoï word to designate epic, which issue in turn fundamentally relates to that of the indispensable musical element that certifies performance of epic enunciation in the local oral traditions.

II-1-1-Issues of Terminology And The Problematic of Music “Accompaniment”

In *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, Thomas Hale proposes that the term *deedée* would be more suitable to define the long narrative that he collected from Nouhou Malio, which as Hale argues represents an epic narrative. This misunderstanding results in Hale’s positing that the Zarma-Songhoï terminology for epic would be *deedée*: “In the Songhoï world, however, the verb to recount the past is *deedée*. *Deedeyan* is the narration of a story. *Deeda* is the noun that describes most closely the kind of long narrative I recorded from Nouhou Malio” (*Scribe* 66).

The term *deedée* in Zarma language can invariably mean an anecdote, a rumor, a story of any kind, and indeed a long narrative. When it is used in the context of a long narrative, *deedée* mostly refers to the unfolding of the story. *Deedée* represents a weak term with several possible meanings whereas a potent and distinctive important case as the epic rather deserves a more stable, reliable and most important potent reference. *Deedée* simply does not convey any of such. Thus, applying the term *deedée* to mean an epic gravely weakens its potency and undermines its credibility basis as the term pejoratively lends itself to meaning rumors or anecdote. In contrast, as I detail below, the term *moolo* is associated with ownership obtained through extreme hardship just as epic heroism reflects. Thus, Djado Sékou, the greatest epic poet of all times never fails to open an epic enunciation with the consecrated formula: *moolo koy sé ni ga né filana = the owner of this moolo is such and such*. In the same way, the end of the narration is always referenced to the ending of the *moolo* in this way: *moola bananta né = this is the end of the moolo*. The evidence that I gather below, to support the above claim, reviews the problematic of the musical accompaniment in live African epic performance.

II-1-2-Musical Accompaniment

A few years ago, Lilyan Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng made quite an astonishing affirmation that they made discoveries in Africa of a series epic tales that could be enunciated without any musical support like notably, as they claim, the Swahili epics, the Soninke epics, and the Wolof and Sérères epics among others (Kesteloot and Dieng 35).

If, as Dérive informs us, within the Mandinka society of Guinea or within the Fulani society of Macina (Mali Rep.), one can well observe cases where stories could alternate between being enunciated with or without music, Christiane Seydou, in “Comment dire le genre épique,” cautions about the unavoidable loss of the epic “essence” when the stories are enunciated without musical support: “Le même récit simplement raconté sans son support musical perd – nous en avons fait l’expérience – son caractère d’épopée pour devenir une anecdote, intéressante, assurément, mais sans autre finalité que d’information ou de distraction” (95).

And in reality, the above affirmation contradicts Kesteloot’s own earlier observations and experiences (“Acteurs et valeurs dans l’épopée Bambara de Ségou”) that proved that to take the musical element from the African storyteller is equivalent to deny him usage of his wings:

En écoutant un enregistrement réalisé par le linguiste Charles Bird qui avait empêché le griot d’utiliser son instrument de musique, nous avons constaté que ce griot était très gêné dans son récit ; non seulement il « déclamaient » difficilement, mais il avait tendance à retomber dans le style narratif, il perdait son rythme. (31).

And even if Seydou herself, as I quoted above, presents the Fulani corporate epic as sung without musical accompaniment, she quickly relatives and points at other supplemental elements fulfilling the role of the musical accompaniment:

The Pekaan, in Senegal, is the only epic that does not call upon an instrumental accompaniment, a fact that may be explained partly by the fact that this text is a component in

a complex ceremony in which effects of a different order assume the function otherwise played by music. (*The Fulani Epics* 17).

As Dérive posits, even if the importance of the scholarly debate resides in the debate, one certainly cannot ignore that a whole tradition has made of the music accompaniment a universal defining trait of epic genre delivered orally across cultures:

Il semble que l'épopée se caractérise comme un énoncé recevant toujours un accompagnement musical. Certes, il est difficile de dire ce qu'il en était des conditions d'énonciation pour les textes les plus anciens remontant bien au-delà des poèmes homériques. Mais partout où il est possible d'avoir des informations sur ces conditions d'énonciation, cette présence d'un accompagnement musical semble attestée, qu'il soit le fait de l'énonciateur de l'œuvre lui-même (cas le plus fréquent) ou d'un acolyte. (100).

This view is extensively detailed by Okpewho whose view radically contradicts with the claim by Kesteloot and Dieng. Okpewho starts by summarizing the tradition what places music at the center of the live performance of epic narration in oral societies:

In tales traditionally told to the accompaniment of music, it is interesting how much influence the music exerts on the narrative element. Once the music is removed, something strange begins to happen to the words of the tale – if the remarks of field researchers on this subject are any guide. For instance, Bruno Nettl has reported from his recordings in Africa how seldom could the “narrative singers ordinarily give either text or music alone without difficulty.” Similarly, from his work among bards in the modern Grecian world, Notopoulos confirms that “singers. [...] find it difficult to dictate their versions without the aid of the music.” Among Yugoslav guslars, the musical element is evidently equally important: under interrogation from Nikola Vujnovic, Milman Parry's field assistant, the guslar Sulejman Makic acknowledges that the principal mark of a good singer is his ability in playing the gusle. In his field notes, Parry reports how difficult it was for Vujnovic, on one occasion, to go beyond the first twelve lines of a poem in the absence of accompaniment on the gusle. [...] In Africa at least, then, we cannot easily accept the claim that “the tale's the thing” if we give due consideration to the role of music in an oral performance... Music, therefore, is “the thing” in traditional African [epic songs]; as the old Mandingo griot puts it, “Music is the griot's soul” (Sunjata IV.39). the performance will simply not come alive if the musical support is either defective or oppressive, if the right sort of warmth has not been generated. (*The Epic* 59).

Christiane Seydou sums it up with posing the musical element as a sine qua none of the definition of the epic genre in the oral traditions of many African societies: “For even though the text has a well-determined structure and the hero a specific type of behavior, this is still not

sufficient to define completely the narrative genre as epic. It absolutely requires its musical accompaniment, supplied by the lute” (*The Fulani Epics* 17).

This situation becomes clear when we understand that in reality the musical presence represents a tremendous support to the vocal recitation. It is the music that opens the narration and the storyteller never says a word without first attempting a few notes; then he starts speaking. When the storyteller errs, the music brings him back on track. When in the middle of the narration a changing circumstance unexpectedly occurs (a V.I.P. joins the audience for example), or when the attentive respondent, gazing he audience, feels boredom, the music can be used to appropriately adjoin the new circumstance so smoothly as no distortion is caused to the unfolding narration. The flow is not ruined and the cohesion is maintained. All the player has to do is to *dondoru tamuuyan*, a sort of *embrayage* technique aimed at changing pace or adjoining a new air harmoniously. Finally the music creates the necessary sound effects that animate the story as Seydou explains:

The epic narrative is sustained from beginning to the end in its declamation by a musical theme... Each melodic theme has a proper name. on this canvas, woven at will from an infinite number of variations on the basic theme, are grafted at times motifs common to the whole range of epic texts – muster drums, military cavalcades, vultures feeding on the dead on the battlefield – and at other times more personal and less conventional interpretations, kids of original descriptive tableaux in which language sometimes gives way to music. (16).

The situation in the Zarma-Songhoï society of Niger respects all the above views in that a live epic performance is never done without the presence of the music. A focus on the Zarma-Songhoï moolo can help understand why the music is so central in the epic narrative in this society so much so that the term moolo ought to define epic genre. However, if I argue below that in some circumstances, the musical element may express a higher canonical value of the total epic tale over the vocal element, it is because in this culture, like in many neighboring ones, the distinctive musical element that uniquely identifies particular epic heroes during every

enunciation in West Africa is fundamentally associated with the motto, a cultural element much prized in this part of Africa. Referred to as *Zammu* in the Zarma-Songhoï tradition, Christiane Seydou paints the following vividly portrayal of the Fulani equivalent, which appears identical to the Zarma-Songhoï *Zammu* in that it is:

...a concise, pithy and metaphoric formula that is a sublimated definition of the person and identifies him in an ideal manner. [...] By the power of words and his specific status, the *maabo* griot wields with the motto a means of influencing not only the personality of the person whom he addresses but even his destiny; indeed, by declaiming to him the motto or by playing it on his lute, he compels the person to conform to the ideal image given of him. And through the exaltation produced by the motto, the *maabo* forces the “master” into fulfilling his most authentic self. Many anecdotes and episodes of epic narrative illustrate this. (16).

Thus, any accurate and complete understanding of the place and function of the musical element of the epic oral performance must necessarily take into great consideration this proximity with the concept of the motto because the two are interrelated as Seydou confirms: “The Fulani epic, with its compulsory musical accompaniments, is in fact directly related to an important cultural element: the motto. In traditional Fulani society one of the main functions of the *maabo* griot was to play on his lute the musical motto of his master” (16). In addition, as the issue relates to the Zarma-Songhoï tradition, it is indispensable to properly replacing the moolo musical instrument in its original mythological context.

II-1-3-The *Moolo*, A Primarily Ritual Music Instrument Won As War Trophy By Humans And Relegated To Profane Usage

When we know about the Zarma-Songhoï mythology, it becomes clear why the moolo would be the appropriate term to designate epic genre as opposed to *deedée*. The moolo, as Hale accurately presents it, is a three stringed guitarlike instrument similar to the Mandé *ngoni*. It has a hollow, oblong wooden body covered with cowhide and fitted with a wooden neck 50

centimeters long topped by a rattle made of a piece sheet of metal fringed with small wire rings.
(*Scribe 60*)

Before it is relegated to profane usage, the *moolo* was part of the ritual musical instruments belonging to the Zîñ deities. It was a human being, Faran Maka Boté, the eponymous ancestor of the Sorko, who, during an epic battle (the primordial epic???) won the *moolo*, as a war trophy, from Zînkibarou, the almighty chief of the Zîñ.

According to the Zarma-Songhoï mythology as related by Jean Rouch in *In La Religion Et La Magie Songhay*, God's first creatures were the Zîñ, supernatural beings, who became the rightful owners of the land, water and air since they were the first population. God's second creatures, also supernatural beings, were the *Holley*, much resembling humans which whom they have closely cooperated especially in dethroning the Zîñ. Human beings represent the third creation. Since the resources of Earth are finite, soon the three populations, the Zîñ, the *Holley* and the Humans, find themselves in fierce competition for the control and exploitation of fertile lands. During such battles, Zînkibarou, the Chief of the Zîñ deities, vanquished the *Holley* who become his slaves in his island. There, the *Holley* entertain Zînkibarou by playing music with the Primordial ritual musical instruments while Zînkibarou plays the *moolo*, the Zarma-Songhoï guitar. Then, came about the battle between Zînkibarou with the Humans which resulted not only in the freeing of the *Holley* who eventually become subservient to the Humans, but most importantly, by winning over the supernatural creation, the Humans took away the primordial ritual musical instrument of which the *moolo*. Jean Rouch introduces the mythical battle between Faran and Zînkibarou as a veritable epic battle which I summarize here:

Faran habitait Gao. Il avait des champs de riz. Toutes les nuits Zînkibarou venait y jouer de la guitare (*moolo*), et les poissons du Niger, en entendant cette guitare, venaient et mangeaient le riz de Faran... Un jour, Faran...partit dans sa pirogue pour combattre Zînkibarou...Faran trouva Zînkibarou dans une île au croisement de sept fleuves. Zînkibarou jouait de sa guitare,

des Zîn du fleuve jouaient du tambour *dom-dom* et du violon *godye*. Et les génies Tôrou dansaient. Faran dit à Zînkibarou : « Donne-moi ta guitare ! » Zînkibarou dit : « Nous n'avons qu'à lutter. Si tu gagnes tu auras ma guitare et mes captifs Tôrou. Si je gagne, je prendrai ta pirogue. » (*La Religion Et La Magie Songhay* 68).

Vividly described by Jean Rouch, I highly recommend reading the full story. In the end, Faran vanquished Zînkibarou and:

Les Zîn musiciens se sont sauvés dans la rivière en laissant leurs instruments de musique... Faran a pris la guitare de Zînkibarou. Il a pris le harpon *hargyi* de Zînkibarou, il a pris les Tôrou captifs de Zînkibarou et les a mis dans sa pirogue. Santama, l'aide de Faran, a pris le tambour *dom-dom* et le violon *godye*. Faran est monté dans sa pirogue. Il a amené les Tôrou au Niger. (68-69).

In *Histoire des Songhay*, Boubou Hama relates the emphasis on Faran's seizing the musical instruments, among which Hama uses the term *molo* while Rouch kept only the French translation/equivalent, *guitare*:

Après sa victoire, Faran s'empara des Tôrou. Les Sorko, de nos jours encore, ne s'occupent que [du culte] des Tôrou... Comme trophées, Faran prit :
Le *Tourou* (tam-tam formé d'unealebasse trouée et couverte de peau de bœuf).
Les *Gasseï* (alebasses renversées sur lesquelles le joueur frappe avec les lattes flexibles).
Molo (guitare à trois cordes).
Godié (violon indigène à une corde).
Dondon (tam-tam en bois recouverts de peau de bœuf aux deux bouts, capables, chacun, d'émettre des sons). (96-97).

Subsequently, while some of the panoply of the Primordial musical ritual instrument remained attached to religious ceremonies (Godié, Gasseï and Tourou), the Moolo and the Dondon eventually became relegated to profane usage whereby they are associated with non-religious entertainment such as storytelling for the moolo.

The encounter between Faran Maka Boté and Zînkibarou places the moolo, as well as other musical instruments, at the center of the mythical and epic battle between humans and gods which the mythology has fixated as the *sacre* of the humans over the gods precisely by seizing the moolo and other instruments. Already we see the moolo becoming an important stake in a

mythical battle, thus an exhibition of epic substance. The moolo possesses an inherent epic substance.

This inherent epic property of the moolo, that it carried from mythological source is reinforced by the central position that it occupies in Zarma-Songhoï epic heroism. In effect, with the same importance as the *Zammu*, the praise devise of the epic hero, every epic narration is enunciated against a background of a distinctive moolo tune that uniquely identifies a particular hero and no two epic heroes have the same tune. Even when the instrumental version of the hero's tune is played, the audience knows who the owner is. And epic heroes are not attributed specific tunes by chance. The same way that the Primordial Sorko Faran Maka Boté earned the Primordial moolo through overcoming a qualifying challenge, any epic hero in the Zarma-Songhoï oral tradition must earn his distinctive moolo tune through overcoming a qualifying challenge. Thus Seydou is quite correct about the centrality of the musical element in the Fulani epic (exactly like in the Zarma-Songhoï) when she affirms that:

The paramount importance of the musical motto in the epic of this society as well as in that of the neighboring Bambara society is such that people hold that there can be no epic for a person who has not won his own motto: only those who have deserved a motto can be celebrated. The very concept of the epic genre, in fact, comprises this fundamental constituent element: the musical expression (or, more accurately, instrumental music) of the lute. (*The Fulani Epics* 16-17).

In fact, there exist in zarma-Songhoï oral traditions epic narratives, such as Hama Bodéji Pâté by Djado Sékou, that are entirely devoted to crafting of the most adequate moolo tune that respects the hero's many personalities. The moolo tune is such fundamentally associated with epic essence that in the zarma-Songhoï tradition, humans do not own the monopoly of the moolo air. Everything, animate or inanimate, concrete or abstract, that proves itself through overcoming a qualifying challenge is attributed a distinctive moolo tune.

An understanding of the place of the *moolo* is, however, not complete until we discuss the role and function of the *moolo kogo*, the instrumental version of the epic tale, which in some circumstances is more valued than the vocal to convey the canonical value of the story or the epic essence of a hero. This discussion stresses the importance of the pure canonical value of the musical element which has been often arbitrarily undervalued against the vocal component of the epic narrative. Thus, what is currently believed to be “accompaniment” or “background” is by far undervalued than what it truly represents in the oral traditions of various African societies.

If it is already known that in the oral traditions of many African societies epic performance is “accompanied” with a “background” music, there exists in the Zarma-Songhoï society of Niger a practice known as *moolo kogo* = dry *moolo*. This is the instrumental version of the complete epic tale and is played as is, dry, without any vocal support. Each Zarma-Songhoï epic tale has an integral instrumental version which is equal in length as the complete vocal recitation and is performed in the same enunciation context as the vocal recitation. Contrary to Hale who felt that Nouhou Malio’s musical accompaniment felt as ‘though it did not often appear to match in any regular pattern the delivery of the lines (*Scribe* 60), audiences who have grown up within this tradition know that the *moolo kogo* speaks. However it speaks differently than the vocal narration. Its purpose is to “take hold” of the person whom [it] addresses. The lute, then, exercises a power, an influence over every listener (*The Fulani Epics*17). Hence, the seemingly divergence in terms of social function between the performance of the *moolo kogo* and that of the “regular” vocal enunciation. With the vocal enunciation we have a shared focus on both the epic hero and the audience in that while the audience feels exalted by the performance, the focus is also placed upon the hero of the story who is depicted as being exalted. On the other hand, the aim of the *moolo kogo* is solely on the listener/auditor who receives upon himself the motto that

the vocal sends towards the hero. There is indeed a usurpation and transference of power from the hero onto the listener/auditor who substitutes himself to the epic hero and would likely literally behave like him in some circumstances. In Niger, for example, when the National Radio plays a *moolo kogo*, immediately the whole nation knows that a military coup is undergoing. This practice has been inaugurated by the late General Seyni Kountché during whose 1974 coup, the first broadcasted *moolo kogo*, a practice that has been continued by leaders of subsequent military take overs. The preparation of any military regime change involves a careful pre-selection of *moolo kogo* tunes that when played would communicate to the populations a certain message perhaps about the identities, ideologies or direction of the putchists. Such powerfully symbolic is the *moolo* tune on the imaginary of the populations. Indeed, before any Zarma-Songhoï would embark on a major life journey of any kind, traditionally the individual would spend the entire eve listening to the *moolo kogo* of a particular epic hero, depending on the desired outcome. If he could, he would hire a professional Djesseré to visit him and play for him. This contrasts with the “regular” vocal recitation whose communal aim has both audience and hero share and partake in the exaltation.

Two major findings conclude this discussion of the place of the musical element of oral epic performance in many African societies indeed in the Zarma Songhoï society of Niger. First, in many ways it is inherently associated with the essence of epic. From its mythological origins,, the *moolo* musical instrument has retained its essence of representing a stake of powerful epic value and as such it must be won by the epic hero through overcoming a qualifying challenge with the same epic prowess that Faran Makan Boté exhibits during the mythical battle in which the humans won the *moolo* as war trophy from the Zîn. When it became relegated from mythological to profane usage, it retained its mythological power while evolving into a

compulsory element of any epic performance in the Zarma-Songhoï tradition. Thus even in its profane usage the power of the moolo tune, in its function as motto, exalts the audience in a manner that transports the audience into mythical realm. Before any word is spoken, it opens the enunciation with the consecrated routine formula: *moolo koy sé ni ga né filana = the owner of this moolo is such and such*. In the same way, it ends the narration: *moola bananta né = this is the end of the moolo*. Its presence alone serves as the motto that identifies and addresses the epic hero while at the same time invites the audience to partake in communion with the hero. Thus, the moolo musical instrument is appropriate to designating epic genre in the Zarma-Songhoï oral tradition, a practice that follows patterns observable in other parts of the African epic belt. In effect, as Dérive notices it, in Africa it even often happens that the name of the musical instrument coincides with that of the genre as is the case of the “mvet” in vigor with the Fang of Southern Cameroon and Gabon (101). In addition, whereas the vocal recitation of any Zarma-Songhoï epic tale can never be done without the presence of the music, the *moolo kogo*, the instrumental version of the story represents a stand-alone, integral, *other* version of the original epic. Thus the canonical value of the musical element must be re-evaluated.

III. HALE’S INAPPROPRIATE TITLE

From the preceding argumentation for the term *moolo* to better convey and indeed designate epic, I argue that, had Askia’s story been meant to sing the epic heroism of Askia Mohammed, it would have been explicitly *named* either *Askia Mohammed moola*, or simply *Askia Mohammed*, and the storyteller would always open the story with: “*molo koyo sé ni ga né Askia Mohammed*”. In Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions, epic narratives are identified with the name of the eponymous

epic hero. Thus the “*Epic of Bakary Dia*,” would be identified as “*Bakary Dia moola*” or *Bakary Dia*. The distinctive moolo tune that would accompany this story would be immediately recognizable by the audience.

Interestingly, as the zarma transcription indicates, Askia’s story, in Hale’s own bilingual text, is not referred to as *moolo*, but as *deedé* which as previously mentioned invariably refers to “anecdote,” “story,” or a “happening.” The term *deedé*, as opposed to *moolo*, when referred to storytelling establishes an unmistakable difference between an epic narration and other forms of lengthy recitations that are not related to epics. I have already presented earlier evidence that *moolo*, the name of the musical instrument be appropriate, more than *deedé*, to designate epic genre in the Zarma-Songhoï language and culture. Hale transcribed the Songhoï title of Askia’s story as *Mamar Kassaye Deeda*.

In a most perplexing move, he chose to translate this title as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* (*Scribe* 184-185). What Hale offers is a double alteration of the original Songhoï title. Not only does Hale transform a “story” into an epic, he baptizes the central figure Kassai as Askia. This move ultimately evacuates from the title and the text cultural components that are necessary for a correct interpretation of the text’s meaning and value.

Throughout Hale’s transcription of Nouhou Malio’s recitation the name “Askia Mohammed” never appears. Should this story have been composed to refer to Askia, Songhoï storytelling conventions would have made explicit reference to him. Instead, one finds that Malio uses the name “Mamar Kassai.” The significance of Malio’s usage of the name “Mamar Kassai” rather than “Askia Mohammed” is to be found in the cultural symbolism associated with both names “Mamar” and “Kassai.” A brief examination of these names reveals that their usage relates to a specific type of political resistance. Namely it evokes the context of the fifteenth-

century clash between Islam and the traditional Animism that occurred with the Islamic revolution in Medieval Western Soudan. It is in this context that Askia came to power. First of all, as Hale accurately reports, the name “Mamar Kassaï” detaches “Askia Mohammed” from the Islamic tradition by suppressing “Mohammed.” Malio instead re-attaches Askia to the old Songhoï animistic tradition through the name “Kassaï,” a name that represents a female mythical figure associated with the Songhoï magic system. According to Songhoï mythology, Kassaï received her initiation to higher magic as well as the *Gendjizé jinaa*, the primordial *Korté*, or magic charm, directly from *Ndebi*, the powerful demiurge of the Zarma-Songhoï pantheon. The mythical Kassaï is reincarnated into the human Kassaï, a powerful sorceress in Wanzarbé, the capital of Songhoï sorcery and magic. While mostly linked to the older Songhoï animistic tradition, American anthropologist Paul Stoller remarks in his work *In a Sorcerer's Shadow* that he, himself, was physically handicapped for a moment by a magical attack from Kassaï. Stoller's anecdote conveys the contemporary resonance Kassaï possesses in Songhoï traditional animism.

Apart from linking Askia to Songhoï animism through the name “Kassaï,” this name doubly divorces Askia from Islamic tradition because it has Askia taking the name of his mother, rather than his father, as the Islamic tradition recommends. A text celebrating Askia's Islamic profile would have followed Islamic naming tradition and chosen his name to be Askia Mohammed Aboubacar. The addition of “Mamar” further distances Askia from Islam as “Mamar” is a local deformation for the Arabic “Mohammed.” Here, this deformation is understood through the Songhoï magic system to symbolize the confiscation of a principle of the Islamic tradition and the domestication of it through local deformation. Embedded in the name “Mamar Kassaï” one finds an attachment to powerful magical symbols related to Songhoï animist traditions and a conscientious refusal of Askia's Islamic profile. In reality, as will be detailed in the discussion of

the Islamic section later, this story must be read through a power struggle between the invading Islam and the old indigenous animistic base.

While Hale provides Malio's version of Askia's story, it is important to note the aforementioned reference to the existence of many other versions of the story. These versions are found not only in pure Songhoï tradition, but also in Zarma-Songhoï culture. What unites these multiple versions is the uniformity of titling. Never does one encounter this story titled as an epic. In the Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions, this story has never been understood as an epic story. In examining the name "Mamar Kassaye" in the original Zarma-Songhoï title of *Mamar Kassaye deeda*, which Hale strangely and inappropriately translates as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, it seems instead that this text was used for genealogical purposes. Supporting this reading are the text's lengthy segments that are devoted exclusively to establishing genealogical lines.

IV. A TEXT LOCALLY USED FOR GENEALOGICAL PURPOSES

The Zarma-Songhoï distinguish various types of lengthy oral narratives as cosmogony stories (mostly mythological texts such as the texts of *Tôrou*, of *Gandji Kwarey*, or of *Haouka*, which, as myths, are literary texts in nature), genealogy stories (*Mali Béro*, *Mamar Kassaye*), epic stories and texts relating to the topic of *amour courtois* (*Sombo Soga nda Lobo Soga*). The genealogical characteristic of Askia's story is reinforced by the fact that *Mamar Kassaye deeda* is always recited in combination with other genealogical stories such as *Mali Béro* or the episode of *Soumayla Kassa*. Though they may involve some forms of battle, these texts always address ancestral lines. Additionally, these genealogy stories are mostly recited during gatherings that relate to the formation or transformation of a lineage, marriages, deaths, and naming ceremonies.

These recitations are made in order to exalt certain people among the crowd. During such events, different storytellers use different combinations of sub-stories in order to suit the storytelling context.

In addition to establishing pure genealogy, the text also contains a large number of lines that only function to explain the origins of various socio-cultural categories such as the *Sorko*, the *Griots*, the *Sohantché*, etc.

That is why we are griots (214)

A griot has thus been created (217)

There's how the profession of the griots begins (218)

He is at the origin of the Sohancis/who do circumcisions for people/He became a Sohanci (222/4)

It was on that day she came out as a Sorko (228)

The Sorkos come from her (229).

True epic narratives in the Zarma-Songhoï traditions tend to not involve such abundance of genealogy. Instead, epic stories essentially emphasize the bravery of the hero.

V. ASKIA'S INSUFFICIENT PERSONAL INVESTMENT ON THE AXIS OF THE QUEST

The second technical characteristic that refutes the idea that the Askia story is an epic sung for Askia's heroism concerns the personal investment of the epic hero in the Songhoï oral traditions as well as the condition for the hero to prove himself through successfully overcoming a qualifying challenge. In "How Not to Treat African Folklore," Isidore Okpewho has already pointed to the minor personal presence of Askia in order to challenge Hale's titling. Okpewho asserts that Askia's story is not an "epic" and that Askia Mohammed is not an epic hero. Though these points are valid, Okpewho does not convincingly support them with pertinent examples from existent Songhoï epic texts such as *Bakary Dia*, *Sillamika*, *Gorba Dicko*, *Hama Bodéji*

Paaté, Boubou Ardo Golo, Amala Seyni Gakoye, and Issa Korombé. In these texts, the protagonist overwhelms and literally *owns* the narrative space from beginning to end. Askia figures too little in the story to earn the title of “epic” hero. He does not enter the narrative landscape until a third of the 1602-line recitation is reached. Traditionally, epic heroes both open the recitation and close it. In the case of Askia’s story, it is the secondary characters such as Yéfarma and Amar Zoumbani who occupy a more notable presence throughout the text.

While Askia’s personal presence is far from epic in nature, so too is his intrinsic warrior value. In the epic narratives in the Songhoï tradition, the hero must prove himself in such a manner that commands from the storyteller lengthy vivid description of the hero’s prowess. In Askia’s case, the text collapses the narrative space where Askia’s indisputable skills as a warrior might be presented. Victorious campaigns are condensed to a total of seven lines (lines 270, 278, 285, 288, 299, 300, and 301). These lines reduce Askia’s work to: “*he conquers it, he burns it, he moves on,*” “*they pillage,*” “*he destroys the village,*” “*he conquers them,*” etc. Such a paltry attribution of lines to war wins and such a minimalist summary of the wins are discordant with the notion that Askia is an “epic hero.”

Comparatively, the text devotes considerable importance to episodes that dishonor Askia. For example, the episode of the war against the Bargantché alone, in which Askia shamefully fled the battleground, accounts for 84 lines (385-469). Every aspect of this battle is meticulously and vividly described; lengthy dialogues permit a view of characters actively interacting. One finds a similar focus on defeat in the important episode where Askia encounters obstacles at the Red Sea during his pilgrimage to Mecca and which totals 17 lines (247-264). In this episode Askia appears not only to be dishonored by his experience in the story, but to be dishonored by

the text's focus on this shameful blockade at the Red Sea. This episode at the Red Sea brings into view tensions between Askia's dualing Islamic and Songhoï profile as shall be detailed later.

Finally, the dim personal investment of Askia on the axis of the quest in the story is consistent with the importance of the Askia's presence within the total narrative. As detailed later, the version that Nouhou Malio recounted to Thomas Hale is in reality a mosaic of three different and free-standing stories, or sequences. If we isolate the Askia sequence we notice that in both Hale's own text, as well as in one by Sandra Bornand, the intrinsic sequence of pure Askia material amount to but a mere 687 lines (Bornand) and a modest 480 lines (Hale). Comparatively, the bare minimum for that Zarma-Songhoï to consider a story as an epic is about 2,000 lines. For example, both Hama Bodéji Pâté and Bubu Ardo Golo transcribed in Sandra Bornand's study respectively have 2,176 and 2,245. If already within the modest 480 lines, Askia's personal investment occupies but a fraction, we simply do not have enough material to support an epic hero.

VI. COWARDICE: AN ANTI-HEROIC MARKER OF ASKIA'S FAILED ASPIRATION TO EPIC HEROISM

While moments of bravery and prestige in Askia's personal investment on the story's axis of the quest are minimized in the text, Askia's character receives a similar treatment. The text portrays Askia as coward, a serious deficiency to an aspiring epic hero.

In effect, one of the quintessential character that define epic heroism in the Zarma-Songhoï tradition, indeed observed cross-culturally, refers to the hero's fearless gamble, his love of death and his demonstrated ability to successfully overcoming a qualifying challenge as Okpewho argues about the Homeric tradition:

Love of danger and of the din of battle and a contempt for the certainty of death are features that Homer dwells upon in his portrait of the brave. To be sure, it sometimes happens that at the grim moment of engagement – after the final choice has been made, and the issue is left at the hands of the impartial war god – the hero experiences a brief sensation of fear, even considerable tremor of intent. Still, turning his back on danger or death, with the terrible prospects of a life of shame that such retreat would bring, is a step seldom contemplated by a true Homeric hero. (*The Epic in Africa* 103).

The episodes of Askia's blockade on his journey to Mecca as well as that of the war against the Bargantché essentially function in the narrative to highlight Askia's failure to meet the above essential characteristics of true local epic heroism.

First, in order to gain access to Mecca, in the episode of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Askia is to pass a test to prove himself. He is presented with the following three difficult tests and is asked to pick one to complete in order to be granted access to Mecca:

You must find a hen who has just produced chicks, and drive them home. You will drive a hen who has just produced chicks and its little ones to the Red Sea (test #1)
Or, you go into the distant, uncleared bush
You clear it with your own hands
You don't let anyone help with it
You sow by your own hand without the help of anybody
You cultivate it and you recultivate it, and you leave the millet so that the birds and the wild animals may eat it (test #2).
Or you go home to start a holy war (test #3) (*Scribe* lines 253-263).

While the first and second tests are positive in nature and reflect altruism, test #3 brings about destruction and sorrow to fellow humans who must be killed for an individual to prove his bravery. The fact that Askia selects the third test indicates that his lack of concern for the welfare of others as taking responsibility for the nourishment of society, here symbolized in the chicken and millet tests. Additionally, in choosing to start a holy war, Askia interestingly selects the easiest and most cowardly task because the first two require considerable time and patience. In a culture where patience is a marker of wisdom, a true virtue, Askia misses a chance to express his nobility of character. A typical epic hero would have quickly picked the hardest test.

Finally, while the first two would have tested Askia's personal worth, he chooses the task in which he is already assured of the contribution of others, his army. Epic heroes do get accompanied by their army, or friends, or another types of helpers to the battleground. However, even when accompanied, the epic battle always involves some sort of *épreuve* through which the hero confronts, alone, a qualifying challenge that he is able to overcome without additional human or supernatural assistance. For example, in the *Fatimata Bidani sequence of the Epic of Hama Bodéji Paaté, as recounted by Djado Sékou*, epic hero Hama Bodéji Paaté, apart from preparing attack strategies, does not physically take part to the invasion of the city of Sâ. His army, his trusted captive and sons accomplish this feat. Because he must still prove himself, Hama Bodéji Paaté engages in a one-on-one battle against Sâ-Koy. In this battle, if Hama Paaté is defeated, he would become Sâ-Koy's captive even though Hama Paaté's army had already defeated Sâ-Koy's city. There is no such moment of individual strength in Askia's story. In the war he wages, Askia appears weak and his victory totally dependent upon his army. As a consequence, this episode must be understood as one designed to highlight forth the selfish, inhumane and unwise nature of Askia.

Second, the cowardice implicit in Askia's choice to go to war becomes explicit in the episode of the war against the Bargantché. In effect, this episode seems to have been adjoined to the story essentially to highlight Askia's cowardice, a serious defect that disqualifies an individual's aspiration to epic heroism. This scene indeed essentially portrays him as a sort of anti-epic hero. By fleeing during the heat of battle, Askia fails to live up to the Songhoï mark of exemplary bravery. Even today in traditional circles, when a young man begins a journey, the only advice that he gets from his parents are "*Ir ma maa ni buyan, anma ni hawi ma si iri gar newo* = *Let us hear of your death but never your shame,*" and in this culture, "*Yé bandayan,*" the

act of retreating in the face of adversity, represents the highest level of cowardice. Though they may lose a battle, Songhoï epic heroes never flee the battleground, especially during the height of combat. For example, the *Yéfarma* sequence that concludes the same Askia narrative (*Scribe* lines 1459 – 1602) allows to contrast Askia's insignificant presence to the story's lengthy portrayal of Yéfarma's exemplary epic heroism. In this sequence, the Zarma responded to the Songhoï's call for aid against the invading Moroccan army. Mali Béro, mythical and legendary ancestor of the Zarma and his nephew, Yéfarma Issaka, also known as the Zarma epic hero Issa Korombé, have come to help the Songhoï. However, prior to the most intense, indeed the decisive battle, geomancers warned Mali Béro, Yéfarma uncle, that his nephew Yéfarma should not participate in the battle else he would be killed. Thereupon, Mali Béro came up with a stratagem in order to make Yéfarma unaware of the battle. It was per chance that wandering Yéfarma was informed by an old woman that his uncle has "hidden" him from the battle in order to save his life. Thereafter, Yéfarma rushed to the battle ground, at the heat of the war, and first thing decides to vehemently scold his uncle for daring to hide him from battle, indeed from death. The narrator emphasizes Yéfarma's determination by repeating three times:

Yéfarma came to dismount
He began to scold his uncle
He began to scold his uncle
He began to scold his uncle (*Scribe* 1544-1547).

Yéfarma is obviously angered about the dreaded prospect of missing a chance to prove himself for his entire proven successful previous war campaigns, his reputation, would indeed be ruined if it comes to be known that he was "hidden" from participating to a battle to save his life. In contrast to Askia who openly and shamefully fled the battle ground, Yéfarma scolds his uncle for precisely the following reason: "From which war are you going to make me flee? / Why do you make me run from death?" (*Scribe* 1557-1558).

In another version of the Yéfarma true epic story, it is directly to Issa Korombé (variant of Yéfarma) that Gounou, the marabout geomancer tell the fearful warning about his imminent death should Korombé participate in the battle. Korombé's response remains the same: better death than shameful retreat:

Ils se mirent en selle, ils marchèrent, marchèrent jusqu'à Kosseï où ils passèrent la nuit. Au crépuscule, il convoqua Gounou.

- Gounou, comment se présente la situation ?
- Eh bien ! Demain tu mourras, toi Issa !
- Je mourrai demain ! cela ne me fera pas retourner à la maison.
- Tu ne rentres pas ?
- Pas question. Si par la volonté de Dieu, je dois mourir, je mourrai. Mais j'irai les rejoindre ! (Laya and Hamâni 85).
-

If one may expect such celebration of death from the epic hero, it is Gounou, Korombé's companion, who even celebrates love of death with the following terms: "Très bien! Moi aussi, Gounou ton marabout, demain je vivrai le plus beau jour de ma vie ... Tu mourras je mourrai" (85).

Outside Hale's own text, the counterexamples to Askia's failure to meet the epic hero's love of death are plentiful in the local tradition. One example is epic hero Silâmaka Ardo Macina who, in the epic of Da Monzon as recounted by Djéliba Badjé, armed with his sole courage confronts the powerful army of King Da Monzon. The only assistance that Silâmaka enlisted is his wife whose sole role is to verify and record for posterity her husband's display of sheer epic courage. Another example, relates to the epic of *Sombo Soga nda Lobo Soga*, as recounted by Djado Sékou, when bare-handed Sombo Soga, only armed with his guitar, decides to confront the king who stole and married his beloved *Lobo Soga*, it is clear that Sombo will lose. In spite of this predictable outcome, neither his own parents nor anyone who truly cared about him advised him to turn from such a perilous adventure. Sombo's battle emerged from a challenge to his honor, one he could not afford to ignore as it would demean the whole of his clan. Finally,

when an army of 100,000 djinn, not even humans, came to attack his village, and though an equivalent army of 100,000 valiant warriors saddled to face the djinn army, epic hero Bakary Dja simply told them “You stay home, it’s me they are after,” upon which he confronted alone the invading army of supernatural beings until he took them under the sea. This commitment to battle in spite of difficulty and danger increases the worth of the epic hero. Conversely, Askia’s lack of commitment to completing a battler decreases his worth and should dissuade readers from envisioning him as an epic hero. In addition, the more formidable the opposition appears, the more valued the qualifying challenge, the more increased the hero’s self-worth. As Koné states:

Plus les ennemis sont puissants, plus le héros qui les combat est admirable. Silâmaka n’est qu’un petit vassal en face du puissant Sâ. Et le défi qu’il lance à Sâ tient du courage qui s’assimile facilement à la folie. Une espèce de suicide, peut-être, mais un geste d’orgueil apprécié même des vainqueurs. (Koné 42).

The proportionality of the hero’s self-worth to the formidability of opposition explains the process of amplification of opposition to the hero that the epic tale operates as Gabriel Soro argues:

L’amplification épique réside dans la coexistence de trois faits au moins: l’extrême puissance du héros, l’opposition à lui de protagonistes plus grands, plus forts, plus endurants que la normale et la révélation, par ces opposants, de la dimension simplement humaine, mais poussée à la perfection, du personnage central. (Dérive 162).

It is precisely because as Soro states “Cette exemplarité du héros est particulièrement marquée lorsque l’adversaire qu’il vainc est lui-même présentée comme quelqu’un d’exceptionnel” (162) that when the djinn Bilissi encounters little Bakary Dja, who has been stealing the meat that the people devote to Bilissi in return for protecting the village, Bilissi insists that little Bakary, for twelve consecutive months, feed upon the meat devoted to him, Bilissi, so that Bakary could build matching strength. Only then, could the battle take place for

Bilissi's self-worth would be seriously undermined for unlawfully attacking an opposition by far inferior to his strength. In the Zarma-Songhoï oral tradition, this process of amplification, aimed at exaggerating the hero's epic bravour takes the form either of extreme exaggeration of the casualty that the hero causes to opposition (100,000 killed) or of prolongation of the duration in which the hero has been killing enemies (from dawn to dusk, such epic hero has been massacring enemies)."

VII. THE HERO'S NOBLE ASCENDENCY, EXCEPTIONAL BIRTH, EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH AND RECOURSE TO MAGIC

In support of his claim about Askia's epic heroic status, Thomas Hale extensively analyses characteristics of noble ascendance, exceptional birth, extraordinary growth under the following chapters: "Ancestry: The Soninke Heritage" (69); "Birth: The Intercession of the Spirit World" (74); "Childhood: The Suspect Toddler" (75); and "Adolescence: In Search of a Father" (75). As mentioned above, in *Heroism and the Supernatural in the African Epic*, Mariam Deme Konaté uses the same characteristics of noble ascendance, exceptional birth, extraordinary growth, to which she adds the factor of the hero's reliance on supernatural powers in order to categorize Askia Mohammed into an ensemble of "African" epic heroes such as Sunjata, Chaka, etc. Konaté's argumentations are detailed under the following chapters: "The Hero's Ancestry" (57); "The Hero's Birth" (60); and "The Hero's Growth" (64).

First of all, as mentioned above, if Dérive insists on the hero's exemplary upholding of social rules rather than the age-old characteristics of ascendency, birth and childhood, it is precisely because, within the problematic of searching for a universal and transcultural archetype of the epic genre, these factors may not always be sufficient or even relevant to determining an

epic hero's status: "Cependant, tous les traits que nous venons d'évoquer, s'ils sont assez fréquemment présents chez un certain nombre de héros d'épopées dans différentes cultures, ne sont des conditions ni suffisantes ni nécessaires à la reconnaissance du statut de héros épique" (136). The elements of belonging to the community as well as exemplary upholding of social rules, instead, according to Dérive:

... doivent permettre de dépasser les clichés sur la vaillance et les exploits du héros épique et d'aider justement à mieux le distinguer des personnages au comportement tout aussi héroïque et extraordinaire qu'on rencontre dans d'autres genres et en particulier dans le mythe. (146).

For the criteria of noble ascendance, of exceptional birth and extraordinary growth are salient with the epic hero because they already have an existence within a mythological tradition anterior to the events of the epic poem and we know that the epic, even the historical model calls to mythology.

The argument for the insufficiency and/or irrelevance of the criteria above-mentioned is consistent with Zarma-Songhoï epic literature for while only two Zarma-Songhoï epic tales (*Bakary Dja; Awli Djawando*) do call for the hero's birth and growth, these criteria simply do not appear in the landscape of the majority of the Zarma-Songhoï corpus (*Issa Korombé; Garba Dicko; Dondu Gorba Dicko; El Hadj Oumarou Foutiyu; Hama Bodeïzé Paaté*; etc.). In the face of insufficient personal involvement on the axis of the quest within a too short a narrative, exploitation of the criteria of ascendancy, birth and growth simply cannot make up for the important deficiency.

To the above-mentioned criteria, Konaté adds that of the mastery of the supernatural to support her classification of the "African" epic hero such as Askia: "... in African epics a great man, a true hero, is one who is able to use the supernatural powers to achieve extraordinary

deeds and action. [...] It is the reliance of the hero on supernatural aid that defines and determines true heroism in African oral epics” (Konaté 9).

Though the hero’s recourse to supernatural forces is prevailing in Zarma-Songhoï epic literature, their presence satisfies more the criteria of enlistment than a sine qua none for the epic hero’s stature. This accessory presence of magic aide to the hero aligns with Dérive’s argumentation that differentiates between the myth such aide tends to reside on the axis of the quest, and the epic genre where it is rather situated as an auxiliary:

Mais dans le mythe notamment, qui se rapproche le plus de l’épopée en termes de contenu, le type de rapport entre héros et transcendance n’est pas le même. En effet, dans ce dernier genre, la transcendance, comme force actantielle, se situe essentiellement sur l’axe de la quête... En revanche, dans l’épopée, par rapport à l’axe où se trouve situé le héros, cette force actantielle par la transcendance se situe en principe sur l’axe de l’auxiliarité. La puissance surnaturelle intervient toujours pour aider ou contrarier sa quête qui n’est pas fondamentalement de nature transcendante mais qui correspond à un objectif de type plutôt sociopolitique. (146).

For example, the previously discussed episode of epic story of Hama Bodéji Pâté, as recounted by Djado Sékou, where before engaging war against the city of Sâ, epic hero Hama seeks advice from his Tôrou, his supernatural aides, inside his gourde can help illustrate this point. When the Tôrou told Hama Pâté that he must not attack Sâ, he violently threatens to smash the gourde along with the Tôrou inside vowing to pursue his quest without any supernatural aide, at what point the Tôrou reluctantly decide to follow Hama’s decision. Another example is found in the epic story of *Awli Djawando* who is born with a magical ring on his finger. When, after years of researching, his opponents came to know that the only way to kill Awli is to get his ring, they enlisted the complicity of Awli’s own sister. When the latter came to request the ring from his brother, the latter, already informed of everything gladly offers the ring to his sister fully knowingly that he would be at disadvantage without his ring. Yet, he chooses to separate himself from his ring in order to confront opposition with his sheer bravour. These illustrations

underscore that contrary to Konaté's claim, recourse to the supernatural, through undoubtedly prevalent in many African epics, should not be established as a *sine qua non*. If Konaté's criterion of the hero's recourse to magic aide is flawed when attempted to be generalized to the "African" epic, it does, however, draw attention to an important aspect of this story, Askia's relationship to the supernatural. This announces the veritable cultural textual analysis of this story against Zarma-Songhoï cultural base.

CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE STORY OF ASKIA

I. PRELIMINARY CONDITIONS TO CULTURAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Any serious study of this ancient Songhoï oral text must necessarily start with the fundamental fact that the story is inscribed within the ancient Songhoï matriarchal regime. By choosing to inscribe the story within the long-deceased matrilineal regime through the invocation of the name “Kassai,” the author(s) of the text may undoubtedly be trying to exploit the powerful cultural symbolisms associated with the matriarchy in order to accentuate the fictional events. Scholars must remember that this story is primarily intended for a traditional society audience that relies on cultural directions and would not have remained insensitive to the types of profound alterations that this text causes to fundamental cultural values and symbols. In effect, a fundamental traditionalist, such as the storyteller, the very guardian of the sacred of tradition, could not possibly attack such powerful cultural symbolisms without intending to achieve an even more powerful effect in the audience. Before examining this aspect of the text, it is crucial to identify the text’s internal ethnography so as to establish the necessary theoretical basis against which the motives and experiences of the characters should be evaluated.

In today’s Songhoï patriarchal society, one finds the persistence of widespread cultural practices in which the female commands considerable influence upon important socio-cultural matters. This suggests both the survival of an ancient, predominantly matrilineal filiation and that the passage to a patriarchal society is not yet complete.

In analyzing the presence of matriarchal power in the text, one must return the character Sonni, the infidel Askia kills, and his relationship to Askia. Sonni is Askia's *hassey*. The *hassey*, or maternal uncle, supersedes the biological mother in her traditional role and position. The *hassey* symbol exists primarily in his relationship with the children of the sister, the uterine nephews and nieces, called the *tuba*. In the story, Sonni represents the *hassey* and Askia the *tuba*. This form of privileged parental relationship is part of a set of symbolic cultural relationships that permute the couple "father-son," "uncle-nephew," "master-slave," etc. Olivier De Sardan believes that this unique permutation practice helps defuse tensions that emerge from inequality without suppressing it. It also can minimize social distance without abolishing it, or, inversely to create/engender alliance, protection and mutual assistance between partners necessarily distant or socially unequal (De Sardan, *Concepts* 48). The *hassey-tuba* relationship is tied to *boro-tarey* (exemplary parenthood) in which it is the *hassey*, the maternal uncle, not the biological mother, who owns every possible forms of right on the *tuba*, including the right to spiritual anthropophagy. This is a sorcery practice where one type of family member has the right to consume, symbolically or literally, the body of another family member without entailing any retaliation from any member. In "Sorcellerie et contre-sorcellerie" Maria Teixeira explains a similar practice within the Manjak of Guinea-Bissau as follows:

Dans les représentations locales, l'enfant appartient au matrilignage. [...] Les corps des enfants appartiennent aux maternels qui peuvent en disposer et les dévorer en sorcellerie. [...] Les parents maternels les plus proches, c'est-à-dire la grand-mère et ses enfants, sont ceux qui ont le plus grand pouvoir anthropophage sur leurs descendants appartenant au « ventre ». Un [oncle maternel] a des droits anthropophages dans la génération au-dessous de lui, sur ses neveux utérins (enfants de la sœur et enfants de la fille de la tante matrilatérale) car ils relèvent d'un même « sein », mais pas sur ses enfants, les enfants de son frère qu'il désigne d'un même terme : filles et fils. [...] Ce système reflète l'importance des neveux utérins pour un homme. Il est autorisé à les dévorer en sorcellerie. Ces neveux peuvent être appelés à veiller dans le cadre du lévirat sur les biens, les femmes et les enfants de leur oncle. De même un petit-neveu utérin peut en principe hériter de son grand-oncle maternel. (7-8).

Although Teixeira's study focused on the Manjak of Guinea Bissau, the similarities with the Songhoï make the above explanation pertinent for this text as it helps to make clear the cultural basis for the various murder cases that occur in the story. The ownership that the hassey exercises upon the body of the tuba is vividly portrayed in *Toula*, a fictional adaptation of an old Songhoï legend by Boubou Hama against which text, the story of Askia will be compared later. In this text, the disgruntled god of rain summons the king to designate a human sacrificial victim in exchange for the return of rain. When King Baharga-Koy decides to designate his own daughter as sacrificial victim to appease the god's wrath, he is swiftly brought back to "reason" because as the biological parent of his own child, he does not possess any ownership of his child, even in matters of life and death. The following interactions help explain this situation:

Le roi des Baharga se décida. Il se décida d'offrir au dieu de la mare de Yalambouli sa fille Koundoum. Il dit [à son ami intime et confident Zongom] :
"Zongom, nul autre que moi ne doit fournir le sacrifice qu'on me demande. J'offre au génie de la mare de Yalambouli, ma "fille Koundoum."
Zongom : "Mais, grand roi, sais-tu que tu n'as pas le droit de sacrifier ta fille [...] contre le gré de ses oncles maternels ?" (*Toula* 180).

Thereupon, the king called his outraged brothers-in-law who direct the king to choosing the his niece, Toula:

Wantam : "Tu sais très bien que tu ne peux pas disposer de la vie de ta fille sans notre consentement [...] Le problème est clair. Tu as une sœur et celle-ci a une fille sur laquelle tu as un droit absolu. C'est elle que la coutume t'autorise de sacrifier en pareil cas." (185).

This absolute power that the hassey possesses over upon the children of his sister comes with a special form of compensation. Because the hassey essentially owns the children of his sister, they are the ones to inherit from him. The hassey's own biological children do not. Interestingly enough, the Songhoï term for "inheritance" is *tubu*, which recalls Askya's relationship to Sonni. This traditional relationship is designed to guarantee a well-balanced social

dynamic. Askia's killing of Sonni violates the rules of the *hassey-tuba* relationship. Later, Askia perverts another traditional familial bond related to *boro-tarey*, namely his abuse of the *baasé-tarey* relationship.

Distinct, but related to the aforementioned uncle-nephew relationship, *baasé-tarey* concerns primarily the *hassey-izé* and *haawey-izé*, the respective descendants of a brother and his sister. This relationship has more implications on the political level in which instance the participants are referred to more as *Ariizé* (children of the male branch) as opposed to the *Wey-izé* (children of the female branch). As Olivier de Sardan explains, the patrilineal filiation, which applies to chieftaincy succession, ensures that only the *Ariizé* can exercise this function. The *Wey-izé* are automatically excluded from any claim to chieftaincy. However, much like in the *hassey-tuba* relationship, two important cultural devices have been invented to compensate for the tremendous imbalance of powers that results from the *Ariizé/Wey-izé* opposition in the political arena. One device is political in essence while the other is more cultural. Politically, although it is the male branch that exercises real political power, it is the *Wey-izé* who designates whom among their cousins of the male branch should be enthroned as king. Thus, though they cannot directly exercise chieftaincy, the *Wey-izé* are guaranteed a considerable say in the political life of the society through their role as electors.

On the cultural level, the practice of the "*haabouyan*" (sweeping) resembles a sort of symbolic compensation. In effect, once a year, only during Eid-el-Fitr, the day celebrating the end of Ramadan, members of the *Wey-izé* sweep the front yard of the domicile of the *Ariizé*. In exchange, the *Ariizé* are obligated to give the sweepers a symbolic annual gift that could range from a chicken up to a ram. This cultural practice works to compensate the *Wey-izé*, whom the *Ariizé* despoiled of the social domination they once exercised in a distant matriarchal society. De

Sardan is correct in his assessment that the establishment of the practice of *cousinage à plaisanterie* could well be a cultural fossil from the moment of transition from a matrilineal filiation to a patrilineal filiation under Islam. The sacred nature of these symbolic parental relationships is established in the link that *Wa*, milk, creates between people who have either literally or symbolically drunk the same milk. Because of the bond that the milk establishes between the giver and the receiver creates an inviolable and sacred relationship. Any form of transgression against any form of a sacred relationship or alliance established by the “link of the milk” is met with merciless, immediate and inescapable punishment that is sanctioned by *hasan nda hini*. This forms the indispensable cultural basis against which the story of Askia must be appropriately read in order to bring out its true message hidden in cultural symbolisms and other cultural implicit coding. In this view, Askia’s transgressions that so much highlight his asocial profile will be assessed against Dérive’s proposal of the epic hero’s fundamental social exemplar. In effect, contrary to the atypical profile of the mythical hero, who appears as an exceptional character empowered with qualities that do not resemble those of others but to the contrary distinguish him radically, making him a transgressor and as such, very often the founder of a new order, the epic hero, on the contrary :

...appartient à un groupe dont il est le représentant idéal. Il ne se distingue des autres personnages positifs de sa communauté que parce qu’il pousse à un degré plus extrême de perfection les qualités qu’il partage avec eux. Il s’agit en quelque sorte davantage d’un héros *accompli* que d’un héros *d’exception*. (143).

In committing a series of unforgivable blood offenses, against otherwise culturally inviolable sacred symbols, such as the mother and the maternal uncle, the following sections aim to demonstrate Askia’s essential antiheroic character that disqualifies him, against locally-attested epic heroes, as a true epic hero.

II. TRANSGRESSION AGAINST SACRED CULTURAL VALUES

The Epic of Askia Mohammed involves two key episodes that contribute to build strong evidence to support Askia being essentially portrayed as a transgressor of fundamental cultural values. While in the Zarma-Songhoï culture, outré-passing one's own biological mother's advice already necessarily establishes a merciless curse against the disobedient child, worse the act of taking hand onto the maternal uncle, the symbolic mother, represents the ultimate form of violations that is so severe its imminent and inescapable punishment falls, not only on the perpetrator who is inevitably socially ashamed, but most importantly such categories of transgressions taint the entire society and for eternity with a timeless curse that certainly dooms the entire lineage.

III. TRANSGRESSION AGAINST THE SYMBOLIC FIGURE OF THE MOTHER

In the episode of the war against the Bargantché people, Askia commits a double transgression against the sacred figure of motherhood, he not only disobeys his biological mother, but most importantly, he violates the sacred link of the milk that ties him with the Bargantché captive who nursed him and also helped save his life from an imminent death while a baby in the hands of his uncle. By nursing baby Askia, the Bargantché captive's milk created a "link of the milk" between Askia and the entire Bargantché clan. This is also considered as sacred boro-tarey. Conscious of the implications of the sacred link between her captive and her son, Kassaï does warn Askia never to stage war against the Bargantché people or else the supernatural sanction of *hasan nda hini* will mercilessly strike him.

At the time of his departure, his mother told him, “Whatever battles you undertake,
“When you reach the Bargantché land,
“Watch out for them, because you have the milk of a Bargantché woman in your stomach.
“You will not be able to conquer the Bargantché.
“You have Bargantché milk in your stomach
“Whatever cleverness you will use, if you reach the Bargantché, watch out, don’t quarrel with them.” (*Scribe* lines 379-385).

By deciding to stage a war against the Bargantché people, Askia not only disobeys his own biological mother, but betrays the person who helped save his life. In this way Askia doubly violates the sacred link of the milk that ties him to the Bargantché people. Therefore, as discussed later, Askia’s shameful retreat at this war against the Bargantché could be read as a textual resistance against his disrespect of cultural values and a form of retribution for his disobedience to motherly authority.

IV. TRANSGRESSION AGAINST THE INVIOLEABLE SYMBOLIC MOTHER, THE MATERNAL UNCLE

Central to Askia’s story is the question of the usurpation of political power. It is within the context of Askia’s assassination of king Sonni Ali Ber, also his maternal uncle, that Askia’s most serious crimes against cultural foundations and structures must be examined. At first it seems that elements of Songhoï cultural values are being exploited as an apology for Askia’s murder of King Sonni and subsequent usurpation of Sonni’s throne.

By opening with the episode with a description of how Sonni slaughtering the children of his sister, Kassaï, the text seems to be conditioning the audience’s negative view of Sonni in a sort of moral battle between Good and Evil. Evildoing in Songhoï is equated with some form of witchcraft and is thus vehemently and mercilessly combatted. By killing Sonni, Askia appears to

have helped end injustice and the assembly appears to have been won by Kassaï's appeal to Songhoï fundamental humanistic chord.

All together, they reach up to grab him.

[Kassaï] said, "Let him go!

"Let him alone, it is Mamar, son of Kassaye.

"Si has killed eight of my children.

"You want to catch him, someone who has taken the life of one man who has himself taken eight lives

They let him go. (190-196).

In addition, on the cultural level, even though Askia himself has committed a crime of murder, even regicide, the principles of *baasé-tarey*, described above, can be advanced as convincing arguments to absolve Askia of wrongdoing. However, the relationship between Askia and Sonni must be understood in the context of the sacred *boro-tarey* relationship. Interestingly enough, Askia kills Sonni during the symbolic day of *haabyan* (sweeping). On this day, Askia, belonging to the female branch, the Wey-izé, was entitled to a gift from Sonni, a member of the male branch, the Ariizé. Symbolically, Askia's deed, however awful it may appear, could be culturally envisaged as him exercising his inalienable cultural right. Additionally, one must recall that the patriarchal regime (to which Sonni belongs) is culturally considered to have been the first to spoil the once predominant matriarchal regime (to which Askia belongs). Thus, the branch that Sonni represents can be seen as having first usurped the political power from Askia's female branch. By killing and replacing the most prominent figure of the primordial usurper, Askia's dynasty has reversed a form of spoliation, thereby ending an injustice that has lasted for far too long. It would appear that the fictitious parental relationship between Askia and the legendary Sonni participate in a cultural stratagem of apology for Askia's crime because this act worked to legitimize Askia's seizure of political power from someone who is portrayed as culturally inept to exercising such function. However, if one looks more closely at Askia and

Sonni's relationship, it is more likely that the specificity of their bond works to frame Askia as an exemplary figure of moral decadence as he violates sacred traditional values.

When examining the horrific nature of Sonni's murder of innocent children through the cultural lens of the *hassey's* social function, Sonni cannot be accused of committing any injustice. As the *hassey* to the children he killed, Songhoï culture confers upon Sonni the inalienable right of life and death over his sister's children. The murder of innocent children represents the text's twisted manner of presenting Sonni an exemplar of ancestral ways. In traditional societies, like in the closed Songhoï society of the story, respecting and upholding traditions represent a supremely noble virtue. Consequently, in killing Sonni, Askia does not kill an unjust awful evildoer, rather Askia slays a model of Songhoï culture and engages in unlawful murder. By killing his *hassey*, Askia, the *tuba*, has also profoundly perverted the principles of this relationship for it is actually Sonni who possesses absolute control over the life and death of Askia. Even though as *tuba* Askia has a right to Sonni's material belongings, the act of taking control of Sonni's body shows Askia to be transgressing a sacred principle.

This perversion of sacred values is aggravated by the symbolic mother figure that the *hassey* represents to the *tuba*. In almost all human cultures, the figure of the mother, whether biological or symbolic, represents a revered, inviolable sacred entity for the children. By turning his hand against his symbolic mother in the matriarchal society of the story, Askia has committed in Songhoï culture the highest degree of abomination.

In addition, the killing of the king also represents an attack on the central pillar of this society. By slaying the strongest symbol of Songhoï socio-cultural identity, Askia essentially attacks the Culture. By severing, symbolically as well as literally, the head of the king, Askia's act engenders chaos. Thus, in his essentially negative portrayal, Askia fundamentally diverges

from Gabriel Soro's model of epic hero who exalts the major virtues in vigor within the community (Dérive 167) as well from Dérive's categorizing of the epic hero's as the ideal representative of the group, an accomplished character whose positivity within the community as well as uphold to perfection of the community's values (143).

Through this particular reading, the people's uprising against such an abominable transgression against ancestral values, encapsulated in the famous *a...si...tchia* moment, which, incidentally, is very poorly rendered in Hale's text, represents the most famous episode in Songhoï culture because it is there that Askia supposedly got his name. This poor rendition in Hale's text of one of the most central landmarks of this story calls to analysis in-depth how Hale's treatment of the text may work to inevitably lead to misinterpretations. This issue also highlights Hale's neglect of other versions of the same story.

V. THE "A...SI...TCHIA..." MOMENT: THE COMMUNITY'S SYMBOLIC VOMITING OF ASKIA'S TRANSGRESSIONS

In regard to the existence of the many versions of the story, one of the serious insufficiencies involved in Hale's study is that his entire argumentation in support of Askia's epic heroism is based on only one version, the very one that he collected from Nouhou Malio. In his study, Hale does an excellent job acknowledging the existence of at least three serious versions. Yet, he disregards them altogether in order to exclusively build his argument from his own source. As the following illustrates, there exist versions that fundamentally conflict with Hale's on key episodes such as the scene from which Askia acquired his very dynastic name Askia.

In effect, while all these versions appear uniform in the broader unfolding of the story except for one key episode where Hama's text and Badjé's audio recording greatly diverge from those of Hale and Bornand which seem uniform in the treatment of this key scene.

The episode relates to Askia's killing of King Sonni Ali Ber and the immediate reaction from the gathering. Oral tradition, in effect, reports that it is in this episode that Askia loses his birth name (Mamar Kassāi) in order to acquire his dynastic name Askia from the famous contestatory phrase *a...si...tchia* = *he shall not be*. In effect, Askia's beheading of Sonni, none other than his own maternal uncle, immediately caused an opposition from the crowd in front of this transgression and Askia's attempt to usurp the throne as he is culturally unqualified to assume political chieftaincy.

The single most important aspect that is often neglected about this story is the fact that this story is all about power relations between the following opposing parties: Islam/Indigenous animism; female branch/male branch, right/wrong, etc. Here, if I use this key event to disqualify Askia's claim to epic heroism, it is because this single phrase *a...si...tchia*, itself old legend, encapsulates a powerful symbolic rejection by the community of Askia's asocial (thus antiheroic) behavior insofar as not only is Askia culturally inept to assume political chieftaincy, but also because in the oral tradition of this culture the conformity to social rules characterizes the epic hero. "Askia" encapsulates much more cultural symbolism than previously thought in that it explicitly refers to Askia's being so culturally inept that he should be barred from any form of political chieftaincy. This adds an additional dimension to the cultural proscription against him occupying a throne as his belonging to the female branch already barred him from exercising any form of political chieftaincy. As a *Wey-izé*, Askia only had the right to nominate the future chief.

Thus, who uses the contestatory phrase bears a heavy weight in Askia's aspiration to epic heroism, so too is the treatment (the rendition) of the author of this key scene. In effect, while Hale's text referring to this pivotal moment simply as: "All together they reach up to grab him" (190). This rather poorly renders this moment and obscures the magnitude of the community's vomiting of Askia's abject transgression. The same poor rendition is observable in Sandra Bornand's text as follows:

Tout le monde s'est figé et a ouvert la bouche...
A présent
On a continué à la contredire on lui a dit : « ça ne peut pas se faire
Tu ne le seras pas (*Le Discours* 249, lines 179-186).

What is greatly missed is 1) in Hale's text a total omission of the *a...si...tchia* phrase, famous in all Zarma-Songhoï; 2) in both texts, the identity of who utters the contestatory phrase against Askia. First of all, with the necessary inclusion of the *a...si...tchia* phrase representing the norm of the narration of this story in this society, we already observe that Malio's text tremendously diverges from the norm which places Hale's text in a "peculiar" position vis-à-vis the story's cultural basis. What specific enunciation factors brought Malio to exclude this central moment would be a good research topic about the different schools of training for griots in the Zarma-Songhoï society which could help enlighten the different ideological lines along which that these schools may operate. No local audience would be satisfied to hear this story without the famous *a...si...tchia* which truly represents the heart of the story.

Thus, the obscuring of the identity of the contestatory party, in the above two texts, rather functions to establish a power relation between the aspiring epic hero, Askia, and the unidentified party in which power struggle, the unidentified agents such as "*Tout le monde; on; they*" profoundly weakens the underlying power associated with whoever these people are. This is central because Askia has just beheaded the Sovereign, an act, as detailed below,

fundamentally dislocates the whole of Songhoï. The obscuring of the opposing party to Askia's forfeiture in this scene functions to empower Askia, in Hale's text, over the opposition even though he has just committed a sacrilege of the highest degree.

There is no doubt that the weaker rendering and poor dramatization of the above mentioned key episode through the texts of Hale and Bornand, by far the most accessible transcriptions, there is no doubt that the obscuring by Hale's text of the *a...si...tchia* moment, all may explain how this story could be interpreted as an apology for Askia's dynastic revolution and even a celebration of Askia's ending the tyranny of Sonni Ali Ber who is portrayed apparently as an abject murderer of children. This apologetic legitimization of the Coup d'État is reinforced, in the texts of Hale and Bornand, not only by the weakening of the *a...si...tchia* but also by the direct intervention of Kassai:

She said, "Let him go!
"Si (King Sonni) has killed eight of my children.
"You want to catch him, someone who has taken the life of one man who has himself taken eight lives – leave him alone!"
They let him go. (*Scribe* 191-196).

Bornand's text treats similarly the same moment as the following:

Les gens se sont levés et ont dit qu'ils allaient appeler au secours.
Kassay s'est levé...
Elle a dit a tout le monde s'arrêter...
[et leur a dit] Si quelqu'un tue sa mère
Qui va l'arrêter ?
Il n'a tué personne il a tué son oncle
Ainsi elle s'est imposée
A cette époque-là un prince ne parlait pas
Et que quelqu'un le contredise
A cette époque-là Kassay et Soni avaient la même mère et le même père
Donc c'est Kassay qui avait la force
Tout le monde s'est figé et a ouvert la bouche (*Le Discours* 249, lines 168-179).

However, this study shows that when this story is properly replaced into its cultural context, such view may have to be greatly nuanced if not totally abandoned. If I argue that Hale's text

involves some abnormality it is because, as already mentioned, any performance of this story is traditionally expected to explicitly involve and to dramatize the famous *a...si...tchia* moment.

The magnitude and cultural relevance of this central episode (as undermining factor against Askia's aspiration to epic heroism) is found in Hama's text as well as in Badjé's audio CD recording. In effect, while the texts of Hale and Bornand poorly relate this central moment and thus deviate from the norm, in Hama's text as well as in Badjé's audio recording, the opposing parties to Askia's transgression are explicitly identified as none other than Askia's own mother, Kassaï, in Hama's text and a group of captives in the audio recording:

Kassaï survint aussitôt et dit à son fils : « Tu as tué ton oncle, mais tu ne le seras pas, *ni si tia* ». (Hama, *Les Zarma* 140).

Kon'aye is so bey ga kakaw. I na sé a si duga té. Ni si tchia = the (female) captives started to contest him. They told him it cannot be. You shall not be (the king of Songhoï) [Badjé, *Epopées* 6'29 – 6'39].

The treatment of this episode by Hama and Badjé fundamentally conflict, to some extent with Bornand's, but most importantly with the portrayal in Hale's text of Kassaï, Askia's mother's, apologetic and even complicit intervention to seemingly legitimize an illegitimate usurpation of power.

What is even more symbolic in entrusting the opposition to Askia's transgression into Kassaï, Askia's own mother, and the captive class is that the two, Kassaï and the captives, represent powerful symbolic agents of the fundamental traditional structure. As such, they derive their legitimacy from a strict conformity with the cultural values. To have these cultural symbols reject Askia's forfeiture not only gives weight to Askia's asocial (thus antiheroic) behavior but they also impose a sort of spiritual and fundamental everlasting stamp that sort of fixates Askia's transgression into a mythical dimension. His violations are so abominable that the rejection of them can only be measured against the high esteem that Kassaï and the captive class hold in that

society. And in fact, from the moment Askia's forfeiture is symbolically rejected by his own mother or by another equally symbolic figure (captives), a sort of spiritual and moral stain follows the entire lineage of the Askias, as bad karma, until their reign inevitably ended in shame with the Moroccan-led invasion of 1591. *A...si...tchia*, he shall not be, indeed he never prospered in it, the cheater never prospered.

Now, some versions have followed this contestatory *a...si...tchia* moment with Askia's outrageous defiance by deciding to use the very contestatory phrase as his new dynastic name *a...si...tchia* = *ASKIA*. As Bellama rightly noticed, another version (in prose) by Boubou Hama proposes an interpretation of the *a...si...tchia* moment as an act of pure sang-froid, the act of one who knew that he was already what they were saying he would never be. (Bellama 43):

Les autres sœurs (of the murdered king), au comble d'une folle colère, dirent :

« Il a tué SI, mais il ne le sera pas. »

« A si tia !

« A si tia !

« A si tia ! »

Mamarou garda son sang-froid. Sa cavalerie imposa sa puissance. Il fut ce qu'on dit qu'il ne sera pas, qu'il ne serait jamais.

Pour narguer ses tantes, Mamarou s'exprima en ces termes :

« Puisqu'elles ont dit que je ne le serai pas : Aï si tia, désormais je me nomme : « A SI TIA : ASKIA ».

Ce fut dans la foule un tollé général. De partout on cria :

« A si tia !

« A si tia !

« A si tia ! » (Hama, *Les Zarma* 47-48).

This famous *a...si...tchia* incident has become a controversy between the Tarikhs chronicles and the oral tradition for if in the popular mind the legend holds true that Askia did acquire his title from this incident, the Muslim chroniclers (of local Songhoï origins, not Arab) have a different view on this dynastic title as they point at the existence of such name (Askia) even before Askia's historical coming to power). In effect, if popular belief credits Askia's acquiring his dynastic name 'Askia' from the above incident, Kati, the author of the *Tarikh el-Fettach* who

lived under the reign of Askia, as Bellama first points out, makes no mention of such *a...si...tchia* incident (Bellama 44). The Chronicler does, however, call attention to a certain “Askia Baghna,” one of Sonni Ali’s lieutenants, remarking, as Bellama points, that this title “Askia” was already in use before Mamar became king. This fact, Kati adds, contradicts the ‘public belief’ that Askia Mohammed was the first to assume this title and attach it to his name. The following incident is supposed to have happened during the life of Sonni Ali Ber, thus forcibly anterior to Askia’s accession to power:

Ensuite le *chi* Ali envoya l’*askia* Baghna faire une expédition contre Tosko. – Remarquez l’emploi de ce terme d’*askia* dès l’époque de la dynastie des *chi*, ce qui est contraire à l’opinion générale voulant que l’*askia* Mohammed ait été le premier à porter ce titre et à l’accoler à son nom et expliquant ainsi l’origine de cette dénomination en qualité de surnom dynastique... (Kati, *Tarikh el-Fettach* 88).

Thus against a certain reading that may perceive the *a...si...tchia* moment as one of legitimization of Askia’s usurpation of the Songhoï throne, such reading is not consistent with the multiple incidents that follow this incident, all pointing at Askia’s usurpation and transgressions against fundamental cultural values as the origin of the curse that eventually completed in the decadence of the once-glorious Songhoï Empire. In effect, according to Bellama:

The “a si tyi a” legend, as well as Kati’s remarks, are significant for the historian (that Bellama was), in that they show how a false tradition can be of value in getting at the truth. If Kati is correct in his facts – that the title “Askia” was not first used by Mamar – then the “a si tyi a” incident never took place. But Kati’s remarks demonstrate that the people believed the story, even during his time. That is, a folk etymology had been created to legitimize a ruler who was not legitimate. And yet, true to form, even this attempt was compromised; for the tale must bring to mind, for any Songhay well-versed in the oral tradition of his people, the ultimate judgment of Askia Mohammed. When the daughters of Si Ali screamed “A si tyi a..., a si tyi a...,” if by this, they meant that Mamar could never take the Si’s place – could never be the real king of Songhay, *with all the responsibilities and powers that tradition and kingly heritage would demand of him* (my emphasis), they were, indeed, right. He never was. (44).

Bellama is indeed correct in pointing at the story's highlighting Askia's illegitimacy in assuming political chieftaincy. As already mentioned above, Askia's belonging to the female branch rightfully disqualifies him of such title. It is yet in another version, that of the tradition of the Sohantye of the village of Wanzarbé as recorded by Jean Rouch, that we find an episode that completes the *a..si..tchia* moment. The following is an English translation by David Bellama of Rouch's original text that appears through *Contribution A L'Histoire Des Songhay* 187-188:

As the legend go, some of the sons [of the murdered king Sonni] remained with Mamar, but others refused to acknowledge him, and with huge followings, abandoned Gao to set up in independent kingdoms in Dendi (which from that point on, incidentally, was to gather support as the true center of the Songhay). Of great significance, it is said that two of Si's sons, Almine and Daouda, before quitting, removed the seven war drums of the Si (ancient symbol of kingship) and hid them on an island where they were never found by Mamar or his descendants. (Bellama 33).

By being denied the powerfully symbolic insignias of kingship (the war drums) and by failing to enlist key political allies (Sonni's children Almine and Daouda) whose allegiance would have indeed legitimize Askia's usurpation, this episode rejoins the *a..si..tchia* moment as a powerful display of the story's negative portrayal of Askia. As Bellama notices if the children of Sonni refused to legitimize Askia's forfeiture with their symbolic allegiance, if they refuse to have Askia retain the seven war drums, it is because in many respects, they, the rightful heirs to the Songhoï throne in many ways regard Askia as their inferior: he belongs to the female branch, he was nursed, not by Kassai, the all-too powerful symbol of Songhoï tradition, but by a Bargantché captive (thus decreasing Askia's self-worth), and he has not been initiated by a Sonni to the secrets of that clan and its magic, as was King Sonni (Bellama 36).

Thus the obscuring in Hale's text of this central moment in the narrative does not in no way discharges the powerful cultural resistance implied through this contestatory phrase. Even more, an element that reinforces my observation about the deviance of Hale's text from the local

reception of this story is that, somehow, Hale's text quickly re-aligns with the local reception after what appears to be a (purposeful???) eclipsing of the *a...si...tchia* moment. In effect, if in the above lines 189 through 192 Kassaï's intervention seemingly protects Askia's integrity, just a few lines after, in the same text, Hale's text re-aligns with the general local understand of the story as being a reprimanding of Askia's moral turpitude. In effect, in lines 203 through 213 of Hale's text, the previously deviant Kassaï becomes the guardian of the very cultural rules she just previously hurt as follows. As we recall, this episode opens with Askia's killing his uncle, the king. When the crowd attempts to retaliate against Askia, Kassaï intervenes to save Askia's life against the community's uprising which is in line with the societal rules. Thus, in that instance, the texts of Hale and Bornand portray Kassaï as anticonformist to the societal rules. Now, after Askia's usurpation of the throne, his cousins, some of the children of the deceased king Sonni decide to deviate from the rules and support Askia. We are in a society that celebrates the separation of powers between the matriarchy and the patriarchy with a domination of the patriarchy over the matriarchy. Kassaï and his son Askia belong to the female line while King Sonni and his children belong to the patriarchy and are supposed to be superior to Kassaï and Askia, members of the female line. Thus, the reversal of attitude in lines 203 through 213 in Hale's text that brings back Kassaï onto adhering to societal rule relates to this separation of powers. Kassaï becomes very enraged that, the son of the deceased king and member of the male branch becomes the griot of Askia who belongs to the female branch:

The son of his uncle says to him, "*Son of Kassaye, you did it all by yourself.*"... (to be understood as someone praising another)

Kassaye glanced in back of herself to see her nephew, the son of her brother.

She said, "You want to shame yourself.

"You who are the son of the man [male branch], you want to beg [praise] for the son of the woman! [female branch]

He said, "Me, I sing his praises.

"I follow him, I become a griot, and I follow him. (*Scribe* lines 203-213).

By bringing Kassai back onto adhering to societal norms, Hale's text now rejoins the local general reception of this story, the understanding of which appreciate is conditioned by a sound understanding of the Zarma-Songhoi culture. Given the centrality of this *a...si...tchia* key episode, Hale should have exploited the other versions, and especially those that diverge from his and should also have considered factors relating to the enunciation to him of the story by Malio in order to exclude potential enunciation factors that may have corrupted the version he collected. Why would such renowned Djesserédounka and undisputed storyteller cast patriarch as Nouhou Malio "forgets" the famous Askia phrase or fails to appropriately dramatize this key scene which represents the heart of the story? While we may never know the reason, the above *a...si...tchia* moment furthers the scrutiny of Askia's asocial behavior. With Askia's above abomination encapsulated in the *a...si...tchia* moment and phrase, it is therefore not surprising that the ghost of the murdered king, and parent, will continue to follow Askia until it constitutes a solid impediment to his individual prosperity. The famous *a...si...tchia* moment in the story of *Askia Mohammed* appears as a tear in the narrative fabric, even a gangrene that severely rotten the sociocultural fabric until it ends up consuming the entire glorious legacy.

The forms of impediment to Askia's prosperity, all portrayed as essentially curtailing Askia's aspiration to epic heroism, are best exposed when examined within what appears in the story to be a power struggle, even the conflict, between Askia's Islamic profile and the indigenous animistic basis.

CHAPTER V

TENSIONS BETWEEN ISLAM AND ZARMA-SONGHOÏ INDIGENOUS TRADITION

I have already pointed out above the original indigenous title “Mamar Kassaï Deeda” operates a profound cultural resistance against Islamic tradition by detaching Askia from the Islamic naming tradition and instead re-attaching him to the Songhoï animistic base. I thus hinted at the dualing tensions between Askia’s Islamic profile and the indigenous animistic basis of his people.

Every time that in the story Askia advances some form of Islamic agenda, he runs into some form of insurmountable obstacle that halts his pursuit of an Islamic prosperity. Conversely, every time that he encounters an obstacle, while reliance on Islamic powers cannot help him, his return to the old ancestral ways represents the condition that saves him. This fundamental foundation of this story upon a tension between Islam (symbolized by Askia) and the old traditional animistic base (symbolized by reference to Sonni Ali) represents a central point being frequently missed by scholars in the study of this ancient Songhoï oral narrative. The discussion of such tension must start with a focus on the primary receptor of this story and their relationship to Islam.

I. THE ISLAMIC PROFILE OF THE PRIMARY AUDIENCE OF THE STORY OF ASKIA

The primary audience of this story is not the individual storyteller, a curious researcher and a tape recorder. The primary receptor of the story of Askia is a whole *community* who bitterly remembers and profoundly resents the bitter memory of the Moroccan-led Islamist invasion of

1591 that caused the ruin and eventual dislocation of the once-glorious and prosperous Songhoï Empire. Though they may have adhered, with varying depth, to the Islamic faith, this community is one that is profoundly attached to the old animistic base. In effect, in *Les Songhay*, Jean Rouch insists on the rather *superficial* nature of the average Songhoï individual as well as the indestructible animistic basis that is buried deep into the subconscious and that comes out any time the individual is subject to heated moment:

Pour des observateurs superficiels, les Songhay paraissent entièrement islamisés : leur vêtement, leur coiffure, leur droit, les principales manifestations du cycle de la vie d'un individu sont soumis aux règles de l'islam et il faut bien dire qu'au Songhay, sont rares les hommes qui ne font pas les 5 prières dans la journée, qui ne jeûnent pas au Ramadan, qui n'égorge pas un mouton à la « Tabaski », qui ne traitent pas avec respect et envie les quelques *El Hadj* qui ont fait le pèlerinage de La Mecque, qui ne se prétendent pas orgueilleusement *Quadria* ou *Tidjania*... En fait, l'islam n'est qu'une teinture plus ou moins profonde. Depuis le XI^e siècle, date probable de la première « conversion » des Songhay, l'islam s'est heurté à cette faculté d'assimilation et de fidélité aux coutumes qui est le trait caractéristique de la mentalité Songhay : il a moins effacé les anciennes croyances qu'il ne leur a apporté des éléments nouveaux. (59).

If the contemporary Muslim Songhoï inherently pays allegiance to the old ancestral ways, one can only imagine, as Bellama argues, that such superficial adherence to Islam was even pronounced with the contemporaries of the historical events five centuries ago:

Islam, the religion of the city-dwellers, the traders, the foreigners, and, at times, the royal courts, was little diffused in the territories where the true Songhay lived – in the countryside and along the river Niger. The Songhay peasants and fisher-folk encountered Islam only insofar as they had contact with the State organization. That is, the country-dweller was exposed to Islam in small, superficial doses. (20).

Historically, the tensions between Islam, as an intruder in Songhoï land, and the traditional ancestral practices culminated in the 1591 Moroccan-led invasion of the Songhoï which according to tradition was facilitated by the internal treatise of Askia's Islamic advisor who ill-advised him against a better war strategy and thus caused the defeat of the Songhoï army. Eventually the once glorious empire was ruined and the Songhoï became split between the

Northern Songhoï, collaborators to the Moroccans and the Southern Songhoï whose distancing from the Moroccan favored a revival of the old ancestral practices. The oral tradition of the Songhoï people in fact never forgot what it views as the intrusion of Islamic agents, the foreigners, that caused the ruin and split of the Songhoï people. The descendants of this people represent the primary audience of the story, an audience that in reality never forgot the disruptive intrusion of Islam nor do they ever forget the *shame* caused to them through the Moroccan invasion, with, it is important to mention, the complicity of Askia's own Muslim advisors who ill-advised him and led his army to shameful debacle as Jean Rouch explains in a manner that aligns with local historical interpretation:

En novembre 1590, 3.000 hommes d'armes, tant cavaliers que fantassins, accompagnés d'un nombre double de suivants de toute sorte se mirent en route, sous le commandement du renégat espagnol, le pacha Djouder... A ce moment intervient un louche personnage... il s'agit du prêtre musulman, l'*alfa*, qui était affecté à la personne même de l'Askya... et fit prendre la fuite [à Askia et à son armée]. Les Marocains louèrent Dieu... l'*alfa*, on le voit, fut en grande partie responsable de la déroute des Songhay ; il agit là comme un traître, au lieu de « faire courage », comme les griots, il fit ce jour-là « la peur ». Avait-il été acheté par les Marocains, ou plutôt était-il convaincu que les Marocains étaient l'arme imparable de Dieu, peu importe ; au moment décisif de la bataille, alors que rien n'était encore perdu, ce prêtre sinistre empêcha les combattants de se battre. Ainsi l'islam conduisit le Songhay à la défaite et à la honte. (*Contribution* 215).

It is interesting to note in the above quote Rouch's interpretation of the historical events through the prism of local oral tradition : “au lieu de « faire courage », *comme les griots*, il fit ce jour-là « la peur »”. Thus, already we observe a fundamental contextualization of the historical encounter between Islam and Songhoï traditional practices within symbolic interpretation.

The identification of the story of Askia as belonging to the Southern Songhoï, the rebellious anti-Moroccan faction, indicates the story's orientation towards a cultural resistance against the destruction of the once glorious empire. David Bellama supports such view when he argues that in fact the story could be viewed as a timeless ideological weapon against the invaders:

This final destruction of the seat of Songhay by Muslim foreigners has been perhaps the single most important element determining the unified character of Songhay oral tradition today... With the arrival of the Moroccans, the center of Songhay was destroyed, and a physical line drawn between what would henceforth be the enemy – the foreign, Muslim Empire of Gao in the North – and the resurrected, traditional Songhay in the South... The Songhay refugees (in the South) were forced by the invaders into a new cultural unity, based on traditional Songhay values and, above all, opposed to the corruptive influence of all Muslims and all foreigners... Bearers of the heritage of their ancient empire, these men of Songhay displayed a striking adherence ... to their historic traditions. (45-46).

In actuality, those attentive to the recent invasion of Northern Mali by Islamic fundamentalists certainly did not fail to perceive in the Jihadists' attack onto the ancient cities of Timbuktu and Gao, former capital cities of the Askias' Songhoï, a sort of striking re-actualization of stakes that go back far into the Sahel Medieval era. One major reason that explains why the Islamists failure to builds strong social basis in Northern Mali, unlike in Afghanistan, is due to the rather superficial hold of Islam onto the local Sahelian peoples. Just as in ancient times, the recent Islamist invasion encountered fierce opposition from local groups into whose imaginary the invasion awakened ancient opposition. It is this same population group that represents the primary receptor of the story of Askia, an audience who bitterly remembers the Moroccan-led Jihadist invasion that contributed to the ruin of the once glorious Songhoï Empire.

It is within this audience that the storyteller derives. One reason to believe that this story aims at undermining Askia's Islamic profile comes from the fact that the storyteller, who is charged of transmitting the story, derives his legitimacy from his adherence and conformity to the ancestral ways which in turn are fundamentally built upon the indigenous customs. By disrupting this cultural foundation, by attacking Culture, Askia also gravely threatens to disrupt the structures that support the legitimacy of the traditional storyteller. Furthermore, the traditional storyteller, who pays allegiance to the old ancestral ways, cannot side with any form

of upholding Askia's Islamic values, especially when in addition to threatening the legitimacy foundation of the storyteller, in the minds of Islamist fundamentalists music, an essential component of local storytelling is viewed as satanic. In fact, in the minds of some local Islamist radicalists, the very act of storytelling itself is seen essentially as nothing but telling lies, a very condemnable act. This is to say nothing about the social festivity involved in oral performance of storytelling that often involves acts deemed anti-Islamic such as the consumption of local *dolo* (fermented beer), the gathering and proximity of men and women, etc. For all these reasons, it is not surprising that both the primary audience of the story as well as those owning the cultural prerogative of transmitting it, the traditional storytellers, would welcome a story that undermines Askia's Islamic profile which necessarily becomes associated with the bitter memory of the ruin of the Songhoï caused by the invasion of Moroccans acting under an Islamic agenda.

II. TEXTUAL TENSIONS BETWEEN ISLAM AND SONGHOÏ ANCESTRAL WAYS

It was Jean Rouch who the first (1954), through his comparative analysis between the Tarikhs chronicles and Songhoï oral tradition, through *Contribution A L'Histoire Des Songhay*, pointed at the revealing tensions between the two faith bases. Later, in 1970, through *Si Ali And Askia Mohammed – Two Interpretations*, historian David Bellama rearticulates Rouch's arguments through a very similar comparative study between the same historical sources and the same indigenous oral texts that Rouch exploited to build his arguments. However, Rouch's findings are incomplete because they were based on only one version, the version of the Tradition of the Sohantye of the village of Wanzarbé recorded by Rouch himself. By articulating the issue within a comparative approach among several versions, my analysis builds upon and

strengthens previous argumentations. Thus, the following discussion aims at essentially highlighting Askia's dualist tensions within the context of tense rapport between Islam and the Songhoï traditional practices and focuses essentially on the following three salient textual moments relating to Askia's transgression against Islamic value, textual mockery against Askia's Islamic profile as well as forms of impediment against the fulfillment of Askia's Islamic profile. The episodes from the Rouch's version that I use below represent David Bellama's English translation of Rouch's text which appears in *Contribution A L'Histoire Des Songhay* 187-188; 193-194.

II-1 Transgressions Against Islamic Values

II-1-1 Incident Of The Gris-Gris In Mecca [originally from Rouch 1954: 194]

Mamar had inherited several Korté [magical charms] from Si. It was thanks to these that he gained his first victories. But, one day, he set out for Mecca to obtain God's pardon. There he removed the Si's korté and hung them up in the mosque of Mecca where they can still be found today. The people of Mecca, seeing him, cried: 'He is a pagan,' ... (Bellama 37).

Here we have a double form of mockery against Askia's Islamic profile. On the one hand, as studied in depth later, Askia transgresses sacred Islamic values by first daring to wear korté charms in the first place. According to Islam, the only form of heresy that God will never forgive his servant is the deliberate association to Him other deities. Worse, by bringing his 'pagan' charms into the holiest place in Islamic tradition, the Holy Mosque of Mecca Askia commits yet another unpardonable transgression, a profanation of the most sacred site of Islamic tradition. On the other hand, by being left hung onto the wall of the Holy Mosque of Mecca for eternity to

witness, the story seems to convey a sense of supremacy of the Songhoï animistic tradition over Islamic authority. A text aiming at celebrating Askia's Islamic profile would not have treated such incidents in such a profound heretic manner. Though he advances a fundamental Islamic agenda, Askia, nonetheless, is careful to enlist the powerful traditional korté, a belief in the power of which diverges Askia from Islamic puritanism.

II-1-2 Context of Askia's Assassination Of King Sonni Ali Ber

The reference above to the gris-gris episode as highlighting Askia's propensity to desecrating holy Islamic sites receives reinforcement in the very episode, in Hale's text, of the context in which Askia murders King Sonni. In effect, Having gathered at the prayer site for the Eid-el-Fitr prayer that celebrates the end of Ramadan, Sonni and his people begin praying. It is at this moment when, disguised and heavily armed, Askia interrupts the prayer and kills his hassey.

In Islamic culture, the prayer site is a holy entity to be entered in inappropriate attire or with "filth in the heart." To enter the prayer site in combat gear and with the deliberate purpose of murdering another human being, especially for political motives, represents a desecration of the sanctity of the prayer grounds. Apart from violating prayer grounds, Askia murders another devout Muslim in the process of rendering grace to Allah. However troublesome Sonni's behavior may have been in real life, the text presents Sonni as a devout Muslim. To kill Sonni in the context of prayer on a most holy day effectively prevents Askya from fulfilling his own religious duties: He [Sonni] and his people go out, they went to the prayer ground. / They are at the prayer ground. / They were about to start the prayer. (*Scribe* lines 167-170).

By murdering Sonni who is presented in the process of prayer, Askia not only engages in an act of cowardice but he also sinned against the very Islamic values that he upholds, which suggest his hypocritical nature. These cowardly and hypocritical characteristics are further emphasized by the surprise attack that Askia launches against defenseless Sonni. In effect, Islamic Jihad's rules oblige the attacker to warn three times his opponent in order for the opponent to first seek conversion to Islam. The attacker may kill the opponent only when the heretic refuses to convert. In the story, however, Askia is so disguised that he is mistaken for a visitor from a foreign land who has come to join the crowd in prayer: They said, "Stop, just stop, a prince from another place is coming to pray with us. / "A prince from another place is coming to pray with us" (*Scribe* lines 171-172). This rendition of the surprise attack opposes the historical accounts of the *Tarikhs* chronicles in which before he attacks Baru, Askia did send three successive messengers to warn and seek conversion.

II-2 Forms Of Impediments To The Fulfillment Of Askia's Islamic Profile

II-2-1 Incident About The Thirty Virgins [originally from Rouch 1954: 194]

[the people of Mecca] knew that he was a true Muslim... [and they knew] that Mamar was protected by God. But, nevertheless, several among them said to him: 'You are a pagan, but your father was doubtless a marabout. We will know that you are truly a Muslim if, once you have regained your own country, you will send us thirty virgin captives.' Mamar said: 'Very well.' Back in Gao, Mamar seized the thirty captives. One of the Tôrou [personal genies] of the Si said to him: 'If the captives leave for Mecca, it will be a mistake.' Mamar sent the captives anyway.. One night, during the voyage, they were sleeping at a place where there were a number of djinns. The djinns slept with the thirty captives and rendered them all pregnant. Seven months later, the captives arrived in Mecca. The people of Mecca only laughed when they saw them. They said: 'That one is a trickster; he says "I will send you thirty virgin girls" and we receive thirty pregnant women; let them return home.' The women set out again and it was during the return voyage that they bore their children. The infants

remained in the desert where they became Touaregs. It was their descendants who later ruined Songhay. (Bellama 37-38).

These two episodes convey a powerful mockery against Askia's Islamic profile through the hilarity (truly the mockery) of the *community* of Meccans who openly reject Askia, despite his efforts to prove his Islamic profile. Such damaging rejection by a *whole community* recalls, back home, Askia's, own *community's* rejection of him through *the a...si...tchia* moment. Rouch even sees a form of revenge of the Sonni animistic base in what appears to be a shameful moment for Askia:

L'histoire des captives, engrossées par les Zîn, est une sorte de revanche de la tradition des Sonni, montrant [Askia] Mohammed bafoué à la fois par les gens de La Mecque et par les Tôrou de *Si*, et finalement responsable de la conquête du Songhay par les Touareg, que ses descendants, effectivement, ne surent pas repousser. (*Contribution* 194).

Bellama, on the other, sees a bitter mockery in the episode of the thirty virgins. For if as it appears this episode of the djinns raping the thirty virgins is highly unlikely originally Songhoï, but very well Arabic or Persian as the *Tarikh el-Fettach* affirms (Kati 48) then, Bellama is right to affirm that "Indeed, there is a good evidence to believe that the Songhay have here appropriated a Muslim oral tradition... and put it to their own ends: *against* Askia and *against* Islam" (40).

II-2-2 Episode Of The Blockade At The Red Sea

The textual resistance against Askia's Islamic profile that is conveyed through the above two episode receives an even biter treatment in Hale's text where the ghost of the murdered king, and parent, will continue to follow Askia until it constitutes a solid impediment to his individual prosperity. In effect, the episode of Askia's blockade at the Red Sea is a direct result of Askia's

transgression against the violation of the body of his symbolic mother. He is not only denied access to Mecca, but is reproached a second murder:

Until he got up and said he would go to Mecca.
Thus he started off and went as far, as far, as far as the Red Sea.
He said he wants to cross.
They told him there is no path.
“Anyone who killed an ancestor does not have the right to cross to Mecca.
Now you will return home. (*Scribe* lines 246-252).

While we understand Askia’s principle crime as being the murder of his uncle, this episode introduces a secondary reason for the blockade. The text clearly specifies, as reason for denial to enter the Holy Land, the killing of an ancestor, not an immediate relative, which Sonni was. In a religious context, killing Sonni constitutes a sin. Askia’s killing of an immediate relative is not only a criminal act, but a sin against his entire line of Songhoï ancestry. The sin is so powerful and fundamental that it reverberates onto the mystical plan where the manes of the ancestors dwell. Usually, in Songhoï magic system, the individual in the present sends a beneficent request to the ancestors who transmit their benediction down to earth. Askia does the contrary. He sends backward a negatively charged energy toward the ancestors. This sin gravely troubles the spirit world. By becoming the major impediment for Askia to enter Mecca, the ancestors express their disapproval of his deeds.

In fact, when examined in-depth, this episode at the Red Sea brings into view tensions between Askia’s dualing Islamic and Songhoï profile. In following the question of Askia’s Islamic identity, this scene of defeat takes on great importance.

In order to properly understand this scene of Askia’s pilgrimage, one must return to the geopolitical context of Medieval Western Soudan. Following the pilgrimage of then Mali Emperor, Malli-Koï Kankan Moussa, the pilgrimage to Mecca became for rulers more than a pious act. It stood as the single most important political statement about one’s might, wealth and

geopolitical importance. During his pilgrimage in 1324, Kankan Moussa was accompanied by 80,000 servants carrying about 2 tons of pure gold. He made such ostentatious expenses that it momentarily destabilized the entire international monetary system and greatly devalued gold (Ki-Zerbo135).

In the case of Askia's pilgrimage, it is important to note how the literary text falsifies historical accounts, an act which functionally belittles Askia's reputation. Maurice Delafosse, who drew primarily from the *Tarikhs* chronicles, gives the following account of Askia's sumptuous pilgrimage in 1495. Even though Moussa's pilgrimage surpassed by far Askia's in terms of wealth and the prestige of the entourage, Askia's pilgrimage could in many ways be regarded as far outstripping his predecessor's because Askia returned home with the most coveted prestigious title of *Khalifatou biladi al-Tekrou*r (the Khalife for the Western Soudan):

Vers la fin de 1495, Mohammed partit pour la Mecque avec plusieurs nobilités de l'empire. [...] Cinq cent cavaliers et mille fantassins lui servaient d'escorte et il emportait avec lui 300 000 pièces d'or. [...] Il rencontra au Hidjaz le quatorzième Khalife abdasside d'Egypte, El-Motaouekkel, qui le désigna comme [le Khalife au pays du Soudan occidentale] en lui plaçant sur la tête un bonnet et un turban. (Delafosse 86).

Mahmoud Kati, author of the *Tarikh-el-Fettach*, scribe to the Songhoï throne and member of Askia's entourage during the pilgrimage, describes Askia's largesse as follows: “[Askia] fit aumône de 100 000 dinars d'or aux pauvres des deux villes saintes (Mecca and Medina), et acheta, contre pareille somme, un jardin et des maisons qu'il constitua habous (fondations pieuses) en faveur des religieux, des ulémas et des pauvres” (26).

Everything in Askia's historical pilgrimage to Mecca had been a great success that added fame to his glory. While the real pilgrimage was indisputably successful and greatly contributed to Askia's renown, the literary text greatly distorts the historical record. The literary portrayal

essentially turns the pilgrimage episode into a major impediment in Askia's pursuit of glory and minimizes Askia's importance.

First of all, the historically imposing entourage of 1500 people that escorted Askia in order to signal his importance is reduced in the story to an insignificant party of three modest pilgrims (Ask-a, his griot and the marabout Modi Badjé that Hales inappropriately corrupts into Modi *Baja*):

Before arriving at the Red Sea,
All the horsemen, those who died, those who were tired, returned.
Except for Modi Baja, Modi Baja and the griot, his cousin, who stayed with him.
It is they alone who remained at his side (*Scribe* lines 304-307).

One might propose that the text suppresses the entourage in order to concentrate the focus on Askia. However, this is highly unlikely given the symbolism that the pilgrimage represents for African Muslims, then and now. More importantly, the size of one's entourage reflects one's prestige and power. This reduction, then, has significant cultural implications. In the traditional African context, the fact that Askia is left alone with two people who are obliged to stay with him sends two important signals: 1) he does not possess a strong authority on his troops who, when tired, abandon him; 2) he is a person with minimal prestige and charisma who cannot retain an entourage to accompany him on the most perilous adventures of his life. In a cultural context where belonging to the group identifies the individual as a worthy participant in society, being abandoned undermines how Askia is perceived at the cultural level.

However, more important than the belittling effect of shrinking the entourage, this text turns the pilgrimage episode into a major impediment to Askia's pursuit of fame and glory. When he reaches the Red Sea, Askia is denied access to cross over in order to enter the holy land whereas he had actually been given premium access.

Until he got up and said he would go to Mecca.

Thus he started off and went as far, as far, as far as the Red Sea.
He said he wants to cross.
They told him there is no path.
“Anyone who killed an ancestor does not have the right to cross to Mecca. [...]”
Now you will return home. (*Scribe* lines 246-252).

This episode involves great irony because the ancestor whose killing now stands an impediment to Askia’s ability to fulfill a religious duty is none other than Sonni Ali Ber. While Askia proclaims himself to be a true believer in Islam, Sonni Ali Ber stands as the antithesis to Islam. In fact, Sonni Ali Ber is known as a notorious pagan, a protector Jews and, most importantly, the persecutor of the Islamic clergy of Timbuktu, as presented by the *Tarikh-es-Soudan*:

Quant à ce tyran, ce scélérat célèbre, Sonni Ali [...] Méchant, libertin, injuste, oppresseur, sanguinaire, il fit périr telle quantité d’hommes que Dieu seul en sait le nombre. Il persécuta les savants et les pieux personnages en attendant à leur vie, à leur honneur ou à leur considération. Il exerça [dans la ville sainte de Tombouctou] de grands, d’immenses et terribles ravages ; il l’incendia, la ruina et fit périr un grand nombre de [savants]. (*Es-Sa‘di* 103).

Normally, according to the laws of Jihad, the killing of an exemplary figure of anti-Islamic behavior should have commanded much praise for Askia. It should have earned him premium access to the Holy Land. Instead the story presents the killing of Sonni as an obstacle to the Islamic profile Askia is trying to establish.

II-2-3 Aboubacar The Muslim Father: A Foreigner, Usurper Of Local Gods’ Prerogatives

Finally, an examination of textual treatment of Askia’s Islamic profile is not complete without looking at Askia’s own father. In almost all versions, Askia’s father is portrayed as a Muslim genie also the Sovereign of a vast kingdom underwater. Yet, the domain of the water, especially of the river, belongs to Harrakoye, a deity belonging to the Holley family in the local

pantheon. Thus, Askia's Muslim father is being portrayed essentially as a foreigner and usurper of the attributes of HARRAKOYE. Just like the Moroccan Muslims who brought chaos to the Songhoï, Aboubacar Askia's attributed Muslim father, far from legitimizing any epic heroism of Askia based on Islamic profile, to the contrary seems to be adjoined in order to highlight the underlying illegitimate basis of Askia's political chieftaincy. Worse, the association of Askia with this Muslim father is such negative (it facilitates Askia's killing of the rightful ruler) that, as aforementioned, the story operates, through the local title 'Mamar Kassaï Deeda' a detachment of Askia from the Islamic base of his father and instead re-attach him into the local ancestral tradition symbolized by his mother's animistic symbolic profile. Thus, by refusing that Askia's name follows Islamic tradition, the local title also rightfully detaches him from his intrusive usurper father and realigns him with the rightful Chief of the Waters, HARRAKOYE, who in many respects could be linked to Kassaï.

III. ASKIA RESCUED BY RETURN TO ANCESTRAL WAYS

The story's orientation towards upholding the supremacy of the indigenous animistic base over Askia's Islamic profile is reinforced by the fact that when Askia encounters an obstacle in the face of which his allegiance to Islam does nothing to save him, the text portrays him as being rescued through a return to the ancestral ways. Already, we have seen that in the episode of the thirty virgins, the Tôrou belonging to the Sonni animistic base warns Askia not to send the thirty virgins to Mecca else it would result in a shameful moment for him. This conveys a positive treatment of the Tôrou, the animistic symbols, which, if obeyed, would have greatly spared Askia from a very embarrassing moment. Even more, the Meccan Muslims laughing at Askia's

failure indicate the lack of dignity in these Muslims for proper rules of Islam rather forbids taken advantage of the shame, thus weakness, of another fellow human. The laughter and mockery reflect back onto the Meccan Muslims whose implicit negative portrayal, in this reading, contrasts with the positive nature of the Sonni Tôrou who, instead of mocking Askia, were attempting to reason him onto a better and dignified outcome.

However, a more poignant illustration of the victory of the indigenous animism over Islam appears through the episode of the war against the Bargantché. In this episode, Askia is defeated by the Bargantché army and is seriously cornered:

The Bargantché defeated him.
Night came, the night became cool.
He got up suddenly and recited some holy [Koranic] words
He said [to his army], where could he find someone who could see his mother in a short time.
A Sohanci got up quickly.
He said, "It is I who will see your mother."
He said, "What time will you come?"
He said, "Before the first cock crow."
"You will see me before daylight."
He said, "If you leave, tell my mother:
"Me, I have reached the Bargantché.
"By Allah, I have fought against them but they have beaten me."...
Suddenly he took off into the sky.
The Sohanci flies fast.
They go faster than a hawk... (*Scribe* lines 387-408).

Three powerful symbolisms are implicit here. First of all, Askia's praying to Allah does not help him much out of trouble. Thus, second, he must recourse to supplemental magic powers of the Sohanci. The Sohanci, or Sohantyé, are the Songhoï notorious powerful magicians who, ironically for Askia, trace their ancestry back to none other than Sonni Ali Ber whom Askia decapitated. Finally, in addition to enlisting the indispensable help of from the Sohanci, Askia also returns back to seeking his mother's advice and assistance, another ironic moment when he

defiantly disobeys his own mother in deciding, in the first place, to go to war against the Bargantché.

IV. FORMS OF RETRIBUTION FOR TRANSGRESSIONS

In the aftermath of Askia's murdering his maternal uncle, the various forms of misfortunes that befall him can only be envisaged as a form of supernatural punishment for his transgression against sacred ancestral values. Varying forms of punishment exist in different versions of the story. An examination of Hale's version alongside those of Djéliba Badjé and Hama offer a diverse look at available forms of retribution for Askia's transgressions.

In Hale's text, Askia encounters two serious misfortunes: the blockade at the Red Sea and the shameful defeat in the war against the Bargantché. These misfortunes are locally interpreted as forms of retribution for Askia's crimes. In the episode of the blockade at the Red Sea, Askia is explicitly told that he cannot cross to Mecca because he killed an ancestor. This scene also immediately follows the one in which Askia killed Sonni. The seriousness that this impediment must represent for Askia should be interpreted in the geopolitical context of the Medieval West African Soudan where Askia's aspirations to glory are blocked. On the cultural level, it is believed that many major handicaps in life, those that hinder an individual's flourishing, must necessarily derive from a tort that one committed previously. The bitterest forms of punishment directed at Askia are to be found in other versions of the story. In both Djéliba and Hama's versions of the story, the storytellers describe how Askia becomes blind and was subsequently dethroned by his own son, Askya Moussa. After losing the throne, Askia is ostracized and exiled

to a pest-infested island where he dies alone. All of these misfortunes must be interpreted in the cultural context.

First, in the traditional cultural setting, a righteous individual is believed to live a long, blissful life. At this point, the individual is provided with the social reward of gaining access to the most coveted and revered circle of elders, known as *dotidjo* or *albora*. Then, upon the peaceful and noble death that these elders experience, they join the manes of the ancestors in the spiritual plan from where they continue to benefit the community. Because of his conduct, Askia is denied any chance of becoming an elder.

The initial impediment to becoming an elder emerges from Askia's loss of sight. In Songhoï culture, physical deformities are interpreted as forms of retribution for wrongdoing. Having a physical handicap greatly diminishes the individual's self-worth and social worth in this traditional context. Secondly, Askia loses his throne to his son, Moussa, during the celebration of the Eid-el-Adda. This, we recall, is the same day on which Sonni lost his throne to Askia. The shame of this event is accentuated by the fact that Moussa also seizes father's wives. Such a deep humiliation can only be interpreted as retribution for a crime of equal importance. It is generally believed within Songhoï culture that righteous individuals are spared from high-level humiliations such as these. Askia did curse his son for this abominable act; nonetheless Askia died in sorrow. Finally, in a context where the individual identifies with the group and derives his dignity and worth from his capacity to participate to communal life, Askia finds himself ostracized by his son. He is left to live in seclusion on an island ridden with mosquitos. Isolation, in the communal context, symbolizes not only the greatest form of despair. One is not only excluded from participation in communal life but is also denied individual humanity. In this particular context, the act of an elderly man dying alone is heavy in symbolism. One cannot seize

the magnitude of the dehumanizing nature implied in the ostracization of elderly Askia to an island infested of mosquitos until one has personally experienced living in the swamps of River Niger without modern protection against mosquito bites. Only then can one fully realize the symbolic appeal to the man-eating *parasitage* of the mosquito, a dreaded situation that terribly haunts the imaginary of the pre-modern riverine peoples of the swamps of River Niger. In fact, in the absence of modern-day type of incarceration, there could not be a better symbolic type of punishment against Askia than to be secluded from community, worse to face the terrifying mosquitos. Not only is the culprit subject to thousands stings, at once, of blood sucking insects, thus depriving him of sleep, the torturous isolation in confinement situation is aimed at maddening and completely dehumanize the prisoner. In many respects, from the perspective of pre-modern societies, this type of cruelty is equivalent to death sentence worsened by the maddening isolation confinement, a terrible slow death. This type of punishment is so extreme in its intent to dehumanize that it used to be applied only to people (usually elderly widows) accused of anthropophagy, the inhuman nature of which offense can only be met with an equally inhuman and dehumanizing type of punishment: banishment in a mosquito-infested island. Unlike the traditional epic hero who dies honorably in the battlefield, becomes a martyr, or grows old to become an elder, Askia is denied martyrdom, ancestorhood, and a peaceful “elderlyhood.” He died alone in great sorrow. The death of the epic hero, though inevitable, is never neither shameful nor humiliating. he death of the epic hero is a noble crossing over into the realm of the ancestorhood.

V. CONCLUSION

Scholars like Hale and Konaté, who approach this text with preconceived ideas about the historical figure of Askia, have failed to appreciate the ethnographic specificities of the culture from which this story emerges. Even when these scholars agree that this story seems to be pointing at moral decadence as the cause of the downfall of the Songhoï Empire, they are equally under the influence of faulty historical accounts. Because of this, there is a critical tendency to displace the causes of the downfall of the Songhoï Empire from Askia onto secondary characters. In reality, the careful study of the text explicitly indicates that what the story is trying to achieve exactly the opposite of an epic glorification of Askia. The story presents Askia as having committed a series of unforgivable sins through his transgression of sacred ancestral values. As a consequence, Askia received inescapable punishments. This text makes Askia the exemplar of the type of moral decadence that is culturally believed to have been the cause of the decline of the Empire.

One of the major factors that may have led previous scholars into error is the fact that these scholars focused too narrowly on attempts to reconcile this text with historical accounts. In doing so, these critics made a fundamental error: they forgot that this story is first and foremost *a literary text, a fictional story* and that the characters as well as their experience, even if influenced by original models in real life and by true historical events, nonetheless should never be interpreted as a faithful transcription of reality. Thus, the author(s) of this text may have been neither interested in, nor moved by any desire to convey any historical accuracy. The considerable alterations to Songhoï fundamental cultural symbolisms should rather have suggested to scholars to reorient their analytical focus more toward culture and give the

ethnographic specificities the primacy they deserve. This story, like any fictional creation, is not about history. It is about the human condition within a specific space and time. Only by placing focus on local ethnography can a proper appreciation of this text occur.

PART II

ANALYSIS OF BOUBOU HAMA'S *TOULA*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In writing *Toula*, Nigérien author Boubou Hama poses a fundamental question: in the face of overwhelming adversity or an overwhelming threat to the existence of the community, is our culture capable of summoning an adequate and culturally appropriate response?

In response to this question, Hama operates a profound denaturation and manipulation of one of the most important Zarma-Songhoï supernatural practices, the occult worship of the Gorou-Gondi, or the water snake spirit. Consequently, the author's complex response should be envisioned as a form of cultural resistance based upon a skillful integration of symbolic ethnographic elements that frame a dialogue with his own Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions. Out of this oral tradition have emerged the epics of *Askia Mohammed* and of *Wagadu* (Ghana Empire) which serve as models for Hama's work. Indeed, it is through the intertextual dialogue with oral literature that Hama creates his work on cultural resistance. The most salient aspect of the cultural resistance found in *Toula* rests on the distortion of an inviolable institution in traditional Songhoï culture: the sacred separation of powers between the political powers held by the masculine branch of a family and the spiritual powers held by the female branch of a family. This resistance is observed internally against the Baharga people who, through the legend of *Toulé*, tampered with the myth and profoundly distorted the cult of the Gorou-Gondi.

While Hama appears to be attempting to locate a mechanism of strength and progress internal to Zarma-Songhoï culture in his work *Toula*, I argue that Hama here makes considerable alterations to the core of Zarma-Songhoï culture in doing so. This is most visible in his distortion of local supernatural practices, specifically with regards to the all-important cult of the Gorou-Gondi, the water snake spirit. The apparent goal of this is to achieve a form of cultural resistance

at two levels. First, it serves as a bitter political satire against the regime of President Diori Hamani in the post-colonial Niger of the 1970's. Ever true to his ideology, Hama supplements his satire with explicit directives on how to effectively use culture to resolve conflicts. Second, even more urgent than the political dimension of the text are the author's cautionary words against violations of sacred cultural rules. This move allows Hama not only to enter into a dialogue with ancestors like Askia Mohammed and other characters in oral tradition. It also allows him to use the extraordinary powers of the literary in order to rectify symbolically the fatal mistakes of Askia or Mamadou the Taciturn whose irresponsible conducts, according to the oral traditions, symbolically ruined and eventually dislocated the once-prosperous Songhoï and Wagadu empires. If the modern author is able to entertain a veritable dialogue with his ancestors when they are framed as characters in oral narratives, and if the complicity between the literary and the supernatural in Zarma-Songhoï traditions allows the modern author to be able to symbolically correct previous fatal errors, it is because Hama already has models within the Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions for such action. In both oral tradition and magico-religious practices, collusion between the literary and the supernatural opens the possibility to undertake corrective rituals that, once fixed in the myth, provide concrete models of conduct for the future generations. By righting fatal wrongs, Hama not only helps to achieve societal balance and harmony but most importantly to propose to future Songhoï generations a model for cultural success much in line with the didactic character of this writer.

CHAPTER I

FROM MYTHOLOGY TO LITERARY AND ARTISTIC INTERPRETATIONS: THE FOUR VERSIONS OF THE STORY OF TOULA

I. THE CULT OF THE WATER SNAKE SPIRIT IN ZARMA-SONGHOÏ TRADITION

Hama's story of *Toula* relates to one of the most fundamental myths and cults in Zarma-Songhoï tradition: the myth and cult of the Gorou-Gondi, the water snake spirit. Before examining the convergences of myth, legend, literature and the supernatural in the text, it is first necessary to present the Gorou-Gondi's characteristics, function, and cultural significance for the Zarma-Songhoï people of Western Niger.

In *L'Empire de Gao*, Hama provides the following information concerning mystical serpents in regions such as the Sahel.

Par le monde entier et à toutes les époques (depuis la Néolithique seulement), mais plus spécialement dans les pays où une saison des pluies succède à une saison sèche et où les serpents reviennent avec les eaux, c'est-à-dire les pays tropicaux, le serpent a été associé à la pluie, aux sources et aux rivières. L'image du serpent surnaturel : le Dragon, a été réinventée partout et partout aussi comme l'eau ramène la végétation, le serpent a été indirectement associé à la fécondité [...] En pays Sonraï, le serpent est associé aux eaux, dans la mystique sonraï, parce que l'animal y est naturellement. (120-121).

Thus, Djouldé Laya is correct that this cult is present in almost every indigenous African culture, especially the West African ones:

Les enquêtes attestent que les « serpents d'eau » sont des personnages assez communs chez les groupes Songhoï et même au-delà, chez nombre de groupes négro-africains sous des appellations diverses (ex. *Mamy Wata* dans les pays du golfe de Guinée). La métamorphose de personnes en « serpents d'eau » paraît avoir été une pratique courante dans la zone. Elle se réalisait en une fois pour toutes, au nom d'un lignage ou d'un clan et scellait une alliance définitive avec l'être métamorphosé. (*Fonctions des Mythes* 60).

In "Typologies du bestiaire dans les contes," Annie Constanty establishes the following description of the important role of mythical serpents in the numerous tales and legends that present issues of community survival in Niger.

Le serpent, généralement le python, intervient dans un type de conte bien particulier ; il n'est jamais associé à d'autres animaux et semble provenir davantage du mythe que de l'environnement naturel. Dans les contes appartenant au « cycle de la jeune fille difficile », il emmène sa jeune épouse très loin en brousse au fond d'une grotte ; ailleurs il loge dans un puits et n'en sort que pour avaler une jeune fille offerte en sacrifice pour que la pluie tombe [...] Transcendant le monde terrestre, relevant de la nature ou de la culture, le reptile semble l'expression d'un au-delà inquiétant auquel on peut associer deux fonctions ; il terrorise et annihile l'homme et s'apparente alors à un ogre, monstrueux et répugnant ; il rétablit l'ordre social. (78-79).

More than a simple myth, the cult of the Gorou-Gondi is an ever present reality in Zarma-Songhoï culture. Archeological research has also proven the deep roots of this cult. Field research in this region has unearthed vestiges attesting to the existence of such practices in the past. In the Zarma-Songhoï region, all shallow bodies of water (ponds, creeks, tributaries of the river) have their own Gorou-Gondi which local residents still worshipped until recent years. In these regions, the different Gorou-Gondi, their domains as well as the names of the priests and priestesses in charge of their cults are very well established.

II. THE NATURE, FUNCTION, AND LOCAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CULT OF THE GOROU-GONDI

When discussing the Gorou-Gondi, the Zarma-Songhoï frequently speak of the “fabrication” of the water snake spirit. The Gorou-Gondi is a human being who is transformed into a water snake through magical rituals. As Djouldé Laya explains, the operation of the “fabrication” is to be nuanced from the common ritual. There is indeed a human being who

changes from the human body form into the body of a snake. However, the flesh of the individual is not destined to be eaten by another being. In other words, through the “normal” ritual, the sacrifice is not made to another spiritual entity. It is about the creation of an autonomous spiritual entity who, upon completion of the transformation, becomes a spirit and enters the cosmogony and pantheon. Even though transformed into a physical snake, the animal in its physical form does not belong to the animal kingdom, but rather to the spiritual realm. This is why the food sacrificed to the Gorou-Gondi can be understood as a symbolic feeding. In this tradition, spiritual beings feed upon symbolic food. The water snake spirit still remains a full member of the community. It supports this community by exerting the powers that belong to supernatural beings.

The force behind both the myth of the Gorou-Gondi and the cult is to be found in the extreme value of water for these communities who live in one of the driest places on earth. Laya argues that,

La motivation déclarée de la « fabrication » de Toula est le désir de satisfaction des besoins en eau du groupe. En se dotant d’un « serpent d’eau », allié au groupe, celui-ci se prémunit des risques de manque d’eau fréquents dans ces milieux semi-arides particulièrement contraignants. Il est intéressant de noter que la zone de naissance du mythe est encore aujourd’hui, même avec les techniques de forage profond, une des plus déficitaires en points d’eau en raison d’une lithologie locale granitique, massive et imperméable. C’est par ailleurs ce qui explique sa désertion actuelle par les groupes agriculteurs Songhay. Dans le cadre des techniques traditionnelles, les ressources en eau accessibles y sont donc strictement limitées à la pluie, aux mares ou cours d’eau temporaires, et aux rares nappes alluviales superficielles. Toutes ces nappes d’eau sont assez éphémères, tout au plus saisonniers. Ainsi mis en contexte, et selon un certain angle de vue, « l’invention de Toula » correspondrait à des besoins du vécu quotidien, notamment de maîtrise de l’eau et des ressources halieutiques. Le mode opératoire fondamental de cette maîtrise est tout simplement l’existence et la présence du « serpent d’eau » allié du groupe. Le « serpent d’eau » ne pouvant vivre loin de l’eau, sa présence est une assurance pour le groupe parce qu’elle génère l’eau. En fait [le gorou-gondi] est un être vivant qui fait partie de son groupe lignager qu’elle accompagnerait à l’éternité dans la mesure où celui-ci a besoin d’elle et s’intéresse à elle. (*Fonctions des Mythes* 60).

Many, like Ali Seyni, understand the symbolic importance of the Gorou-Gondi cult. This explains their disappointment at seeing this cult losing significance:

En effet, les *gorou gondi* lient le monde des vivants au monde des esprits. Ces liens s'accompagnent de rites spécifiques. Il faut noter aussi que les *gorou gondi* sont considérées comme des génies qui habitent des lieux spécifiques. Bien que l'islam tend actuellement à freiner l'observation du culte, il existe encore des prêtres chargés des sacrifices qui spiritualisent ces lieux. Mais il arrive que certains génies se trouvent délaissés à la mort du vieux prêtre et en l'absence de toute relève, ou lors de la conversion du vieil officiant [à l'islam]. Enfin, des situations de crise liées aux points d'eaux (inondations en période de crue, notamment) peuvent provoquer des récives périodiques : l'ancien prêtre, converti à l'islam, souvent sous la pression familiale, se trouve dans l'obligation d'intervenir, d'offrir le sacrifice de pacification, toujours sous la pression du groupe... Il faut noter que le *gorou gondi* quitte quelquefois son lieu de séjour lorsque son prêtre ou prêtresse meurt. Une fois choisi(e), le nouveau prêtre ou la nouvelle prêtresse a le devoir de monter à dos d'un âne noir afin d'aller à la recherche du *gorou gondi* confié à ses soins. (276-277).

III. FROM MYTHOLOGY TO LITERARY AND ARTISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

Hama published the story of *Toula* in 1972. This text figured into a collection of tales compiled in *Les Contes et légendes du Niger* [1972: 169-212]. It tells the story of a young girl named Toula who was sacrificed by her maternal uncle, the king. This sacrifice was made in exchange for rainfall at a time when a severe drought was threatening the very survival of the Baharga community. To the common Nigérien, the story of Toula is mostly known through producer Moustapha Alhassane's cinematographic adaption of Hama's text in 1972. It is popularly believed that authorities had temporarily banned both the film and the text. Apart from the widely known text and film, Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions contain two other versions of the same story. One presents the myth and the cult of the Gorou-Gondi. The other presents the legend of Toulé which, according to oral traditions, originated between three to five hundred years ago. While the myth and the cult of the water snake spirit is mostly known in esoteric

circles, the legend of Toulé still is central to the structure of the contemporary Baharga community and social division within it. Some groups identify as being descendants of either the masculine branch that once sacrificed Toulé, or the feminine branch from which Toulé was taken. Tensions related to this identification remain present. Many Nigériens are unaware that Hama's text was built around the legend of *Toulé*, which itself was built around (and even corrupted) the original myth of the Gorou-Gondi. It therefore appears that if the oral legend relates events that happened three to five hundred years ago and denounces how the Baharga people corrupted the original myth, the modern text builds upon the oral legend in a manner that skillfully confronts the original myth and the corrupted version of the ritual by the Baharga as reported through the legend.

Thus, we have four versions of the same story: the myth/cult, the legend, Hama's text and Alhassane's film. In order to see clearly Hama's contribution to the tale of *Toula* and to fully understand his message, it is important to present these other versions as they directly concern Hama's work. After this presentation, an examination of the similarities and divergences between the versions will help to clarify the contemporary implications of the modern text. The following section presents the four versions in the chronological orders of their creation.

IV. THE FOUR VERSIONS OF THE STORY OF *TOULA*

IV-1- Version #1: The Myth And The Cult

The myth of the Gorou-Gondi does not exist in a popular version simply because the magical process of the transformation of a human being into another life-form represents a

serious operation only known to esoteric circles. However, thanks to Ali Seyni, who was able to access information from some of these circles, we are now able to present the main lines of the myth and the ritual pertaining to the transformation of a human being into a spiritual being. Even without knowledge of the myth and the cult, the information that is available is of great to the study of the literary text as well to the confrontations between the myth, the legend and the modern literary text. The following translation is from a text by Ali Seyni (*Du culte des esprits à la création artistique: le cas du génie Toula ou Toulé*) :

According to popular beliefs of the Songhoï people living along the river or near ponds where the Gorou-Gondi dwell, the process by which a human being is transformed into a water snake spirit centers around the distinction between a chosen one vs. the image of a sacrificial victim. The legend of the Gorou-Gondi influences popular beliefs that obscure the original cult. The chosen one, whether a boy or a girl, must belong to the occult family of the Sorko priests. The Sorko are commonly traditional fishermen. It is also from their ranks that come the highest priests of Songhoï religious beliefs and practices.

In preparation for their fate, these children receive a unique education. The representation of their status reveals a certain ambiguity. For some in the community, particularly among the profane, the child chosen to become a Gorou-Gondi is a *bonfouto*, or unlucky, whereas s/he is referred to as *koyoy* in the sacred language of the cult of water spirits. The word *bonfouto* literally translates as “bon = head, foutou = troubled, angry, fouto = the troubled/angry one. *Bonfouto* almost always has negative connotations and is used in a derogatory manner to suggest someone is “hard-headed.” According to popular representations within the circles where the cult remains vibrant, the *bonfouto* is a child (boy or girl) whose father died before the baby’s birth and the mother shortly thereafter. This double misfortune somehow indicates the possibility of a special spiritual destiny. A *bonfouto* child is entrusted to the feminine branch of his mother's family, specifically to the maternal uncles. It is they who bear the burden of educating the child. If the mother's family decides to make this child a Gorou-Gondi, the chosen one will receive a very specific education and a special diet. This diet is composed of secret dishes designed to to facilitate his/her transformation into a snake. The food and the education of the child are subject to a ritual known only to a small circle of insiders who are under the control of the maternal uncles. Although the composition of the diet remains secret, those who work in the collection of incense recognize the unusual perfumes used to embalm body of the elected one. The child is also taught the *korté*, or incantations and magical charms, so as to facilitate the magical transformation. These lessons are known only to the initiated and constitute a very important and highly valued element of the training of the future Gorou-Gondi. After a period of training that goes from birth to the age of 6 or 7 years, the child is placed under the tutelage of the main master of ceremonies and the group of insiders. After this long period of rigorous training comes a ritual bath. As the ritual for the transformation into a Gorou-Gondi approaches, the spiritual guides reveal to the child the final elements of his/her education. The day of the ceremony, the maternal uncles go to the

waterfront (pond or river) with a group of children from the same age group as the chosen one. They take a black cat and a chicken for the sacrifice. The group of children, led by a spiritual guide, is invited to bathe in the pond. At the signal of the high priest, all of the children enter the water. They are given instructions to dive only once in the water and then immediately get back to shore. The spiritual guide then brings the chosen child into the water. It is then that the special diet (which is designed to make the body of the child sticky and slippery), the incense and the djendi, or Korté (incantations) must take effect. If the incense and incantations are effective, the chosen one will remain stuck in the water. After a futile struggle, the child will slip below the surface as though stuck to the bottom of the pond or river. While the incantations intensify, the other children watch their peer struggle. It is then that the transformation begins. The legs turn into a tail with which the sacrificial victim (according to some), or rather the elected one (by others) may, from time to time, climb out of the water. The upper body transforms after the tail. Just before the throat disappears and the tongue becomes forked, the future spirit can still address his/her maternal uncles and ask, "Can you see me?" To which the uncles reply, "Of course." At this point the uncles then ask him/her: "Can you see us? From now on you will receive as food a black cat and a black chicken, alive, every flood season of the pond. You may attack any children of the masculine branch of the family (they are blood brothers), but never the children of the feminine branch (they are brothers by milk)." Then, the uncles may specify any other victims to which the Gorou-Gondi will be entitled: a stranger, an animal (donkey, horse, ox, camel) or a bride who runs away from her matrimonial home (weykoyré). At this point, the transformation is complete. (272-274).

For the purposes of the comparative study between the various versions, the most important element in this above presentation of the original version lies in the presentation of who and what qualify for this ritual. As we shall see later, the oral legend represents a considerable distortion of what is considered to be the authentic version of the cult.

IV-2- Version #2 The Oral Legend Of *Toulé*

The Songhoï society is comprised of several groups that differ from one another according to several types of classifications. They may be distinguished along ascendancy lines (the Sii Haama vs. the Mamar Haama). They may be also be distinguished along the age-old antagonisms between matriarchy and the patriarchy. Groups find further distinction in their belonging to either the feminine or masculine branch of a family.

Among these many Songhoï groups are the Baharga. The Songhoï oral traditions present the legend of Toulé as the story of a young girl who is made a victim of human sacrifice by certain members of her paternal family. As we have discussed above, the myth and cult of the Gorou-Gondi is a widespread practice in Songhoï communities. However, both the cult and the myth of the Gorou-Gondi follow rigorous sacred criteria as to who and what qualifies for this ritual. It seems, from the oral traditions, that the legend of Toulé within the Baharga community was an intolerable corruption of the original myth and cult of the Gorou-Gondi. This was a fatal mistake that eventually led to the ruin and dispersal of the Baharga's initial core. For if the Baharga themselves belong to Songhoï culture and society, and therefore have the legitimate right to enjoy the benefice of the Gorou-Gondi, the mechanism through which they attempted to fabricate such a deity and the individuals involved in their corrupted ritual is by all means unacceptable.

The Songhoï transcription of the oral legend of Toulé was first undertaken by Hammadou Soumalia in *Traditions Des Songhay de Téra, Niger*. Additionally, Sandra Bornand reports that the Zarma griot, Djéliba Badjé, recounted the legend to her. This formed the basis for her study entitled "Is Otherness Represented in Songhay-Zarma society. A case study of the Tula story." The following text is a translation of Hammadou's text.

Following one of the many migrations that confront the Sahel people, a Songhoï clan, the Baharga, came to settle near the spring of a place called Yalambouli. In the beginning, the Yalambouli spring could provide enough water to meet Baharga community's needs. Soon, however, the population outgrew the capacity of the spring. One day, fearing dislocation, the Baharga presented their concerns to the ruler of the land, Balma Farimonzon. The Baharga requested and obtained the king's permission to proceed with a ritual aimed at creating a Gorou-Gondi in the spring that was slowly drying up. The Baharga then travelled to Yatakou to seek the help of Dourba, a reputed Gourmantché diviner-sorcerer. Through the divination technique of sand-scarring, the Gourmantché told the Baharga that only a sacrifice of a young girl, an only child, aged seventeen to eighteen, would make a good Gorou-Gondi. Within the Baharga company, some brothers recalled that they had a sister who had an only child, named Toulé. She met the sorcerer's requirements. Unbeknownst to Toulé and her mother, the

Baharga consented to make Toulé the sacrificial victim. [In Songhoï magical practices, the giving of someone's name is the equivalent of the giving of the physical individual. When the Baharga gave the Gourmantché Toulé's name, they essentially gave him her body]. The Gourmantché did his magic and then gave the Baharga visitors some ritual objects that they were to place in the middle of the nearest pond. The effect of the magical operation would be that whoever's name was given as sacrificial victim during the magical operations, if the individual happens to go by the pond, they would inevitably enter the water and be caught by the magical charms under the water. Once caught in the pond, the victim would undergo the macabre transformation into a water-snake. This was precisely what happened to Toulé whose name was given as sacrificial victim.

Some time after the Gourmantché's work, Toulé and her friends happened to pass by the pond. They wanted to cross over to the other shore to get some wild fruits. Once the young girls went into the pond, the water "became bad" and kept Toulé stuck while all her friends were able to get out and ran to the safety.

Toulé's mother, who knew nothing about the tragedy, was informed by a captive woman named Nomdjissi that the mother's brother's had given Toulé as a sacrifice. The desperate woman immediately went to the pond and called for her daughter. At each call, some bubbles rose to the surface. She recognized the breathing of a water snake. It was none other than her daughter Toulé. The woman requested from her spirit daughter that from that day until the end of time that Toulé choose her victims only from members of the masculine branch and to spare members of the feminine branch. As a result, according to the legend, the revengeful spirit of Toulé killed so many people that eventually the whole Baharga clan had to abandon the area. From their dispersal came the following Songhoï clans: the Darba, the Tégué, Tourikoukeye and a portion of the village of Sirfikoyeré. (62-64).

IV-3- Version #3, *Toula*, The Modern Text By Boubou Hama

This legendary adventure has obvious contemporary implications: the substrate is the recurrent droughts that hit the Sahel. At an unspecified time, the Songhoï community of the Baharga of the Yalambouli region is confronted with one of the worst droughts ever known in human memory. Powerless against the drought, the king of the Baharga summons a Gourmantché diviner-sorcerer, Bapouri, in order to identify an appropriate sacrifice for the Yalambouli pond water snake spirit. This sacrifice would be made in exchange for the return of the rain. We learn that the disgruntled guardian spirit of the Baharga stopped the rain because he was unhappy that the king and his people had neglected him. By no longer paying their respects

to the guardian spirit, they had interrupted the cult and troubled the pact that linked the god with the community.

So we learn from the mouth of the spirit himself that in the distant past the ancestors of the Baharga and spirit of the Yalambouli pond had entered into a pact. Eventually, humans started to ignore the spirit. This act offended the spirit. Therefore the spirit decided to retaliate against the king and his community by stopping the rain. The king then went to the Gourmantché geomancer Bapouri to consult the sand (a divinatory technique) whose answer is tragic: the king must sacrifice his own daughter, or at least a girl whom he holds dear. Though overwhelmed by the prospect of a sacrifice, he accepts the sacrifice as necessary for the good of his people. At first he tried to offer his own daughter as a sacrifice to spirit of the Yalambouli pond. However, this would be a serious violation of the custom for, as the biological parent, the king had no right of life and death upon his own daughter. In Songhoï culture, it is the maternal uncles who have the right to control the life and death of their uterine nephews and nieces. In Zarma-Songhoï supernatural practices, the body of an individual belongs to that individual's maternal uncles who represent the symbolic mother. In the story, the maternal uncles refuse the king's plan to sacrifice his daughter. Ultimately, the dilemma is resolved when the king finds himself obliged to sacrifice his niece Toula. As her maternal uncle, king possesses customary absolute rights of life and death over Toula. Although the custom also recommends that the king obtain the consent of the mother of Toula for these types of situations, the king overstepped this customary requirement. As a result, neither Toula nor her mother were made aware of the tragedy in preparation. The day of the ceremony, the king organized a sumptuous feast and invited all the young men and women of the village to gather for a rain dance ceremony in order to appease the spirit of the Yalambouli pond. The feast, however, was a trap preparing Toula's sacrifice. The

girls of the village, including Toula, unaware of the choice of the king danced and pleaded for rain. Ultimately, the rain falls, the pond fills, and the serpent takes Toula. he accepts her death while the villagers cry her name. She then becomes a symbol of life beyond death. Alarmed, Toula's mother races to the edge of the pond and her drowned daughter reappears. Toula becomes the spirit of the nourishing water. She says, "do not complain, my mother, I'm alive. I became the life that does not die "(211). But the mother requests from her spirit daughter that from that day until the end of times, that Toulé was to choose her victims only from members of the masculine branch and to spare members of the feminine branch.

IV-4- Version #4, The Film "Toula Ou Le Génie Des Eaux" By Moustapha Alhassane

Although this fourth version is not addressed in this study, it is important to acknowledge it so as to provide a comprehensive view of existing versions for the story of *Toula*. A sorcerer requires the sacrifice of a young woman, the beautiful *Toula*, in order to end the wrath of the gods who had decided to severely punish the community with one of the bitterest droughts. A young man, Ado, is in love with Toula. He decides to go in search of water to prevent the tragic end. But by the time he returns with good news, the girl is already dead. In this film adaptation of Hama's text, Moustapha Alhassane confronts the issue of the drought in Niger through a traditional tale. In the film, the physical argument between Ado, Toula's suitor and the priest who had Toula sacrificed can be understood as the producer's condemnation of traditional beliefs and obscurantist practices as they can have disastrous consequences.

CHAPTER II

OF USURPATION AND DISTORTION: COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE THREE LITERARY VERSIONS OF THE STORY OF *TOULA*

I. ISSUES OF CATEGORIZATION

In what precedes I have presented the three major versions of the story of Toulé/Toula. The first presents the myth and cult of Toulé. The second is this story as it is told in the oral tradition. The third is Hama's modern text. During this discussion, I alluded to ways in which myth, legend and folklore are to be differentiated. What follows is an explicitly comparative analysis of these three versions. The purpose of this analysis is to specify differences between these versions as well as to highlight areas of interplay between myth, legend and fable. Before beginning, it is necessary to explain the terminology used to differentiate one version from another. For the purposes of this comparative study, I suggest three levels of categorization and differentiation. The first categorization concerns the opposition of literary genres of myth vs. legend and fable; the second concerns authenticity and originality vs. falsification; and the third concerns a differentiation between a religious tone, a cultural tone and a political tone. These categories help to articulate the contours of each version of the story. The first version, the earliest known iteration of the Gorou-Gondi cult, falls into the category of myth. This sacred story stands as a "religious" version. Against this myth and religious version are the two literary and profane versions (*Toulé* and *Toula*). While the myth version carries a certain "originality" with regard to the cult of the water snake spirit as practiced in real life, the other versions present a distortion of the ritual. This, I argue, must be understood as modification of the original version, which

presents a falsified view of cultural practices. The two profane versions can be differentiated on a number of levels. First, the oral text of *Toulé* is an oral legend while Hama's *Toula* is a modern, written francophone text. The latter represents the fable version of the story. Next, the oral legend serves as a cultural version of the story while Hama's fable serves as a political version. Lastly, while deeply religious attitudes characterize the myth version, a cultural tone dominates the oral legend and a political tone colors the modern, written texts. While not fully addressed in this study, Alhassane's cinematographic version extends and intensifies the dramatization of the modern written text.

The oral legend, Hama's text, and even the film, represent what might be called "public" texts. Both the oral and written narratives are established in Niger's Zarma-Songhoï culture as texts. The myth version holds an entirely different status. It is not a public text. This sacred version essentially presents what I believe to represent the "authentic" (i.e. socio-culturally 'real') cult of the Gorou-Gondi. Whatever texts are involved in the actual ritual performance of the cult are only known to the esoteric circles. This version does not exist in a textual format. However, the legend of *Toulé* is recounted orally by storytellers and the modern fable of *Toula*, written by Hama, is available in a collection of written texts. In these retellings one encounters significant distortions of the original, religious version of the cult of the Gorou-Gondi.

Certain objections might be made regarding the way in which I have chosen to categorize these texts. By terming them "myth," "legend," and "fable" and by linking the first to the sacred and the last two to the profane, I introduce a hierarchy and suggest a notion of distortion into the reading of these versions. Because I argue that the profane versions represent a fundamental argument with the sacred version, it is necessary to clarify the manner in which I use the terms "myth," "legend," and "fable" in reference to these stories of the Gorou-Gondi.

I-1- Myth

Though I term the first version “myth,” the application of such an exogenous concept to Zarma-Songhoï cultural traditions is problematic. The central issue regarding the definition of the story of the cult of the Gorou-Gondi as a myth lies in the fact that myth is currently understood to be a text, literary in nature, which is fixed in time and space. As such, a myth is detached from supernatural operations involved because those operations, rituals, and performances are considered to have happened in a very remote, primordial time. As we shall see, this understanding conflicts with the cult version of the Gorou-Gondi’s story because it concerns rituals that are not only performed very close to the present time but are very much active. Thus, given the notable cultural differences between the meaning assigned to myth and the Zarma-Songhoï cultural reality, any attempt to apply these concepts does require some level of “special accommodation.” In the meantime, Mircea Eliade in *Aspects du mythe* gives the following definition of myth:

Le mythe est une réalité culturelle extrêmement complexe, qui peut être abordée et interprétée dans des perspectives multiples et complémentaires. Personnellement, la définition qui me semble la moins imparfaite, parce que la plus large, est la suivante: le mythe raconte une histoire sacrée; il relate un événement qui a lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des « commencements ». (...) C’est donc toujours le récit d’une « création »: on rapporte comment quelque chose a été produit, a commencé à être. Le mythe ne parle que de ce qui est arrivé réellement, de ce qui s’est pleinement manifesté. Les personnages des mythes sont des Êtres Surnaturels. Ils sont connus surtout par ce qu’ils ont fait dans le temps prestigieux des « commencements ». Les mythes révèlent donc leur activité créatrice et dévoilent la sacralité (ou simplement la « surnaturalité ») de leurs œuvres. En somme, les mythes décrivent les diverses, et parfois dramatiques, irruptions du sacré (ou du « sur-naturel ») dans le Monde. C’est cette irruption du sacré qui fonde réellement le Monde et qui le fait tel qu’il est aujourd’hui. (...) Le mythe est une histoire sacrée, et donc une « histoire vraie », parce qu’il se réfère toujours à des réalités. Le mythe cosmogonique est « vrai » parce que l’existence du Monde est là pour le prouver; le mythe de l’origine de la mort est également « vrai » parce que la mortalité de l’homme le prouve». (11).

In *Littérature Nègre*, Jacques Chevrier, on the other hand, posits that:

Le mythe apparaît en relation directe avec les forces qui commandent l'architecture du monde et le sens de l'univers ; c'est l'expression de ces valeurs, formulées non pas comme un traité philosophique abstrait, mais selon les contours d'un récit ou d'une suite de récits. Le mythe fait partie de la parole sérieuse qui est objet de croyance et d'initiation, il forme l'arrière-plan de la pensée et de la vision traditionnelles du monde. ()193.

On the conditions of its narration, Eliade adds:

«On ne peut pas raconter indifféremment les mythes. Chez beaucoup de tribus, ils ne sont pas récités devant les femmes ou les enfants (...) Généralement, les vieux instructeurs communiquent les mythes aux néophytes, pendant leur période d'isolement dans la brousse, et ceci fait partie de leur initiation (...) Tandis que les «histoires fausses» peuvent être racontées n'importe quand et n'importe où, les mythes ne doivent être récités que pendant un laps de temps sacré..... et seulement la nuit». (21-22).

Thus, in its current definition, the term “myth” is valid in so far as it is taken as a literary text and is as such distinct from a ritual. Myths are human texts, rituals are human actions that invoke or interact with the supernatural. For a text to be framed as a myth that is fixed in time and space and has a purely literary, or entertainment, function, it is necessary that the supernatural operations involved be “dead.” When these operations, rituals or magical performances, are extinct, they allow for the belated enunciation of an “inactive” text. In this way, the retelling of the ritual does not risk triggering the supernatural forces present in the rituals. In regard to the cult of the Gorou-Gondi, it is important to mention that the cult of the Gorou-Gondi was actively practiced up through the 1960s. Because of its recent practice, it is simply too early to arrive at a literary text that is detached from the ritualized condition of enunciation and performance.

It is also important to mention that the Zarma-Songhoï process of “creation” of divinities follows two paths: divine creation or human creation. While the Zarma-Songhoï mythology involves texts that could satisfy the current definition of myth, it is important to note that these sacred texts only concern the group of divinities that have divine origins. This is because this group was created during primordial times and their experiences are sufficiently distant so as to

allow their literary and textual representation. The group of divinities that are of human origin cannot be situated in the distant past. They are in a continual state of creation. It would be difficult to have a concrete text about this second group as their genesis is ongoing. It should be noted that, while the human created divinities are continuously made, there are some recently made divinities of divine origin. In Zarma-Songhoï mythology, the French colonial period of the 1920s saw the birth of an entirely new group of divinities, the powerful Haouka.

With the Gorou-Gondi spirits belonging to the category of human made divinities, the central issue with the application of the term “myth” to this cult is that the myth-text material regarding the Gorou-Gondi is simply too “alive,” and the ritual so potently charged that its enunciation, even if meant as a literary text, would to activate the actual ritual. Often, local researchers and those in contact with the supernatural, such as Boubou Hama, Djouldé Laya, or Jean Rouch, are able to bypass this risk of triggering the supernatural either by voluntarily creating grammatical mistakes in the text or by telling and recording the sacred text into another neighboring language.

As it is, the cult of the Gorou-Gondi does not have any immediate text that would satisfy an equivalency with myth as currently defined. However, if some accommodations are made, one can envision the validity of the definition of myth when applied to the Zarma-Songhoï cultural reality. Though there is the absence of a text, the Zarma-Songhoï themselves establish the story of the Gorou-Gondi as a myth. This designation is appropriate if one considers that the cult, what I hold to be the first version of the story of the Gorou-Gondi, belongs to the Zarma-Songhoï collective body of knowledge that explains the origins of the various divinities that populate the Zarma-Songhoï pantheon. It is in this manner that I apply the term “myth” to this first version of the story.

I-2- Legend

Against the above definition of myth as being concerned with primordial times and almost exclusively with the supernatural world, legends can be said to be concerned with more recent times and to involve some mixture of human and supernatural presences. The first version of the Gorou-Gondi story is myth in that it works to explain the foundation of the Gorou-Gondi. Additionally, it links this cult with a specific religious experience. The second version of this story, the oral narrative of *Toulé*, falls into the register of legend.

While framing the original story of the Gorou-Gondi as a myth poses some terminological problems, the application of the term “legend” to the second version of this story, the oral narrative of *Toulé*, poses fewer challenges. The oral text of *Toulé* satisfies the definition of a legend as representing a literary story which is considered true. Unlike myths, legends are temporally situated closer to present time or to current human society. In Zarma-Songhoï culture, the story of *Toulé* is believed to originate from events that occurred between three and five hundred years ago. They are considered to have been actual events. Interestingly, these events maintain a high degree of potency in current Zarma-Songhoï society. Many Baharga village clans continue to identify and differentiate themselves with personages in the legend. The most basic separation can be seen in the believed affiliation with either the female family line (from which the sacrificial victim *Toulé* was taken) or the masculine family branch (which sacrificed *Toulé* and symbolically wronged the female line). The story occupies an important place in Zarma-Songhoï oral culture and traditional storytelling. A high degree of craft is involved in the telling of this story because of these social tensions *Toulé* invokes. Due to the uneasy rapport between the descendants of the two lineages—uneasiness caused by the “unlawful” victimization

of Toulé—, the storyteller, even today, must carefully accommodate these tensions through the careful articulation of the circumstances of the sacrifice before the story can be told. Due to real societal and cultural implications that this story has, its telling evokes a certain sacred aura that other types of traditional folktales do not involve. Though related to magico-religious practices, this text is not considered to be a pure sacred text as it is never involved in any magico-religious act. It occupies a literary space. Consequently, this legend must be seen as being a hybrid text, situated in the space between the sacred and the profane.

As the text resides in an intermediary space between the sacred and the profane, it is appropriate to see this legend as taking on tones of a myth. In this version of the story of the Gorou-Gondi, the sacrificial victim, Toulé, becomes a Gorou-Gondi that retaliates against descendants of the masculine branch by attacking them whenever they approach her pond. This transformation is believed to be real in the Songhoï localities associated with this story. Though this legend contains a high degree of religious and supernatural content, such a high degree that one might be tempted to categorize this oral version as a myth, the Zarma-Songhoï do consider this oral narrative to be a legend. Initially apparent is the fact that the narration seems to be devoid of any religious objective: it does not have a connection to a specific religious rite. However, the local justification for this classification reposes upon the notion that this story does not have a place within Zarma-Songhoï mythology. In spite of this, it is important to note that this rationale can lead to considerable confusion as there are other Gorou-Gondi spirits that have entered into the Zarma-Songhoï pantheon. It is simply that the Toulé Gorou-Gondi has not. This leads one to question the local disqualification of the spirit of Toulé from the pantheon and of the story of her transformation into a Gorou-Gondi from local mythology. To answer this question, one must look at the rejection of this version of the story as myth as being related to the

illegitimate, even illegal, transformation of Toulé into a Gorou-Gondi. This point will be explored in more detail later.

I-3- Fable

The third version of the story of the Gorou-Gondi comes from the pen of Boubou Hama. His written text, *Toula*, falls squarely into the domain of fables. The author himself states that his story is a “conte,” or a fable. I will later argue that this innocent label protects the text from a political interpretation that reveals *Toula* to be a cleverly disguised bitter political satire. Before venturing into this zone of Nigérien politics, it is crucial to situate the text in the category of fable, for it is only through this lens that one can appreciate the potency of the astute and subtle political critique Hama ventured in his *Toula*.

When judging the content of the story in relation to the Gorou-Gondi, it is clear that this modern text satisfies the current definition of fable. The text deflates the sacred mythical dimension of the legend of Toulé in order to make the experience of the text accessible, casual, and non-sacred. This accessibility also emerges from the language in which Hama wrote. By opting to write *Toula* in a language foreign to Zarma-Songhoï culture, the story can be read without touching the legendary and linguistic triggers that divide Zarma-Songhoï society. Beyond the author’s labeling his text a “conte,” the work of Chevrier in the genre of myths and fables tends to support the alignment of *Toula* with a fable. Chevrier explains the differences between these genres as follows:

La zone de transition entre le mythe et le conte est parfois floue, mais ce que l’on peut dire avec certitude c’est que dès que le mythe commence à se désacraliser, à relâcher ses liens avec le monde surnaturel, nous abordons aux rives du conte. Dans le mythe, le surnaturel occupait encore une place prépondérante, dans le conte le partage entre le réel et le surnaturel tend à

s'équilibrer, de même que s'équilibrent l'émotion, qui faisait la force essentielle du mythe, et la sagesse de la raison pratique, qui définit le conte : à travers les péripéties du conte prennent forme les structures et les personnages de la société humaine. Ainsi, les contes Bambara sont par excellence le moyen qui permet de prendre connaissance de la vie sociale, des institutions qui la régissent et de se familiariser avec les notions qui sont à la base même du savoir. Contes et fables constituent donc un enseignement intégral à la portée de tous, et ne nécessitant aucune initiation préalable. Ils visent au déploiement sous une forme allégorique, dans le temps et dans l'espace, du contenu conceptuel de la pensée. (p. 193).

Chevrier's distinction between myth and fable is most useful in distinguishing the modern text *Toula* from the oral legend *Toulé* as the oral legend occupies the borderline between sacred and profane, and myth and legend.

Furthermore, in forming a fable out of a devalued legend, Hama enjoys greater freedom in shaping the imaginary narrative space of his text. In this way, Hama, the modern author, detaches himself from the constraints of traditional storytelling. Rather than working as a traditional storyteller bound to a uni-dimensional format, Hama exploits the "thickness" of modern narration in order to create a multi-dimensional textual infrastructure.

II. AUTHENTICITY VS. DISTORTED DEPICTION OF RITUALS AND BELIEFS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERSIONS

II-1- Authenticity And Local Reception Of Distortion of Rituals

"Authenticity" here relates to whether or not cultural elements or depictions are true and should not be seen as considering one version to represent the "authentic" version against another. As such, my usage of the term authentic conveys a sense of cultural acceptability and authenticity applies here to socio-cultural facts.

When moving through the characteristics of the three versions of the Gorou-Gondi story, the differences between the stories are obvious. While other methods of distinction are available (oral literature v. written literature, mythology v. political, supernatural v. real, etc.) I have opted to classify the versions as myth, legend and fable. As noted, one of the central issues regarding the second version of the story is the question of whether or not the text is more myth than legend. In relation to the first version, the cult version, it is not entirely clear which version of the story came first. It is not clear which story is the “authentic” version to be distinguished from the modified one, the one that represents a profane transgression. Additional ethnographic elements could help establish a clear demarcation between authenticity and alteration.

Cultural reactions to the versions provide clues for establishing relationships between the various versions. When the cinematographic adaptation of *Toula* was first shown in public in Niger in the early 1980’s, it provoked fierce condemnation from the occult circles of initiates of the cult of the Gorou-Gondi. They reproached what they understood to be a misrepresentation of the cult and an unacceptable transgression of such a fundamental traditional practice. The admonition can only be explained by the fact that their cult predates what happens in the film which is entirely built upon Hama’s text. This text, in its turn, essentially revamped the oral legend. The initiates criticism is directly linked to what they see as an unacceptable denaturation of a sacred heritage. As I discuss later, the local Zarma-Songhoï rejection of what appears to involve unacceptable levels of distorted depiction of cultural beliefs and practices in reality underscores a threat to the Zarma-Songhoï cultural hegemony upon neighboring groups. As I detail later, the story of *Toula* must be properly placed within the tense socio-political context of the arid Sahelian region where control of access to vital natural resources such as water fuels deadly interethnic struggles. In the various cultures that co-exist in this region, it is still

traditionally believed that spiritual powers can control access to such vital natural resources. It is therefore understandable that the spiritual control of access to vital natural resources comes with a form of political supremacy that establishes dependency of one group upon the other. Thus, as I discuss further below, the depiction of the confiscation of supernatural powers to bring or stop rains from one group and their reappropriation by another isn't without underscoring a certain metaphorical attempt to subvert the spiritual, thus the political, hegemony of one group by another. In the meantime, this conflict between the initiates and the artistic representations of the cult of the water snake spirit helps to establish the perceived hierarchy of versions in Zarma-Songhoï society.

From a purely functionalist approach, the first version appears to explain the function of the cult. The oral legend is simply told as an adventure that happened, not in primordial times, but sometime during human existence. The oral legend does not appear to possess this foundational and "initiatc" dimension generally attributed to myths. And certainly, the disastrous consequences that follow the tempering with sacred materials could be considered as punishment for transgressing sacred beliefs and practices.

Given all the above information, one can safely assume that vis-à-vis the oldest version, the events in the oral legend present a profound level of distorted depictions of the rituals and beliefs. Had the transformation of *Toulé* into a Gorou-Gondi followed the correct protocol, the community would not have found itself haunted by such a vengeful spirit. One of the principle reasons for this crisis is that it was not the Koyoy, the elected, of the authentic cult; rather it was the Bonfouto, the misfortune one. The disastrous consequence of this is that the spirit of Toulé terrorizes and preys on the very community it was meant to protect. The violence of this spirit

underscores the idea that something had gone terribly wrong in the creation of the spirit. Only a sizeable transgression would result in such a haunting and terrifying spirit.

II-2- Comparative Analysis Between Hama's Fictional *Toula* And The Legend Of *Toulé*

If we hold that the cult of the Gorou-Gondi represents something closer to the original version of the story (because it is the oldest version) and that it does represent the sacred and authentic ritual of the creation of water snake spirits, then we can clearly observe levels important of distorted depictions of the rituals and beliefs in the profane versions. In effect, the magical “manipulations” that create the Gorou-Gondi in the legend seems to convey, vis-à-vis the oldest version, a transgression in the sense of tampering with the sacred. This transgression resulted in a spirit that terrorizes the community, rather than protecting it. And, it is upon this legend that Hama constructed his modern text. However, even if Hama drew inspiration from the oral legend, one can observe notable distortions of the legend. Analysis of the similarities and divergences between the two literary versions, on the one hand, and between the sacred and the profane versions, on the other, will help to explicate what is at play in Hama's text.

II-3- Similarities Between The Oral Legend Of *Toulé* And The Modern Written Text Of *Toula*

Both texts concern the Songhoï clan of the Baharga who live in the vicinity of the Yalambouli pond. In both texts, a group of people confront a serious drought. To seek relief from this drought, the people look to create a Gorou-Gondi spirit, a spirit who protects the water needs of its community. In both texts, the group of people requires assistance in the creation of this

spirit. Thus, they enlist the help of a Gourmantché sorcerer-diviner, called Dourba in the legend and Bapouri in the modern text. This Gourmantché engages a sand-scarring divination séance and learns from it that a young girl must be sacrificed in order to resolve the water shortage issue. In the oral legend the Baharga who summoned the Gourmantché's assistance are all members of the masculine branch of the sacrificial victim's family. The same is true in the modern text where King Baharga Béri is Toula's maternal uncle. In *Toulé* as in *Toula*, the sacrificial victim is a female, aged eighteen years old and an only child to her mother who is alive in both instances. The names bear striking resemblance: Toulé and Toula. In both texts, the decision to offer the sacrificial victim is made by members of the masculine branch without informing the victim and her mother. Finally, in both texts the sacrificial victim is trapped in a pond following a ritual.

II-4- Divergences Between The Oral Legend Of *Toulé* And The Modern Written Text Of *Toula*

Despite the above overwhelming similarities between the oral legend and the modern fable, the two texts have notable differences. First, while the text of *Toulé* is essentially an oral text conserved in the Zarma-Songhoï language, Hama wrote his *Toula* in French. According to popular belief, the events recounted in the oral text of *Toulé* date back to three to five hundred years ago. *Toula*, however, was written and published in 1972. If both texts are situated within the Baharga clan, the Baharga community in the modern text is linked to a king who is primarily concerned with the drought. The community in the oral legend must report to a king from another Songhoï group (King Balma Farimonzon) who resides in a distant locality and is removed from the Baharga's suffering. In the oral legend, Toulé is the one intended, upon

completion of the ritual, to transform into a water snake spirit. This conforms to original occult practices and beliefs. In the modern text, Toula is intended as ritual food for the spirit of the pond. This stands as a major point of departure from the authentic cult.

If in both texts we have a negotiation between the spirit world and the human world about what type of sacrifice would bring a mystical resolution of the drought, the negotiation is, however, conducted in the oral legend through the intervention of the Gourmantché sorcerer-diviner, while in the modern text we see the king and the water snake spirit himself conducting the negotiations. During the transactions we learn in the modern text that humans are to blame for the ecological crisis because they have neglected their duties to the god of the pond, the source of their water. The legend does not indicate any mystical reason for the water shortage. It only states that the human population explosion had outgrown the well's capacity to cover sufficiently the needs of the community.

In the oral legend, no physical description of Toulé is given. The focus of the narrative rests upon those who select her as the sacrificial victim. The reverse is true in Hama's version. He gives Toula qualities of extreme beauty and kindness. This directs the reader's attentions to her and elicits the reader's compassion.

If in the legend the ritual bath of the authentic cult and its spiritual and mystical significance is corrupted into a sort of crime scene where ritualized objects are placed so as to eventually entrap the Toulé, the modern text gives us a depiction of the sacrifice that hews more closely to the rites of the authentic cult. Though still corrupted, the Hama's text presents Toula's peers and the king accompanying Toula to the pond.

II-5- Distorted Depiction Of Rituals And Beliefs

Both literary versions involve some notable divergences from the original cult version of the Gorou-Gondi and from one another. Being that the modern fable draws upon the legend, this modern text offers a doubled set of alterations. The first level of socio-cultural transgression relates to the oral legend. The second level relates to amplified profanations of the sacred version of the cult of the Gorou-Gondi. These usurpations and fabrications will be of great importance to the rest of this study.

An initial deviation can be seen in the sacrificial victim disqualification to satisfy the physical, physiological and psychological condition of the “chosen one.” The original version of the Gorou-Gondi story explicitly states that the child must be no older than seven years old and that the child must be an orphan. In the legend and in the fable, the young girl is eighteen years old and has at least one parent alive. The film adaptation further complicates this matter by providing the victim a suitor. The myth does not specify the sex of the “elected” child. We see, however, in the texts the requirement that the sacrificial victim be female.

The second deviation and devaluation of the original version of the ritual relates to the way in which the oral legend and the modern fable, which recuperates the legend, portray the process of the sacrifice. In the original version, the sacrificial child receives a lengthy preparation that is at once psychological and spiritual. In the literary versions neither young girl nor her mother are informed of the impending ritual and sacrifice. It is certainly this aspect that caused the greatest concern of the initiates who spoke against the film version.

Finally, the most important form of deviation can be seen in the participants whom the legend and the fable involve in the ritual. Vis-à-vis the culturally more accurate version, neither

text presents individuals who qualify for such magical and supernatural practices. We can observe in characters in both texts a clear motivation to usurp the prerogatives normally devoted to other ritual actors. In the fable, the initiator of the ritual of the creation of the Gorou-Gondi is King Baharga Béri, a man not at all qualified for such a role. In the legend, the initiators of the ritual are the Baharga people themselves. Neither the king nor the people belong to the priesthood family of the Sorko, the only individuals who are qualified to undertake and preside over this type of ritual. Thus, King Baharga of *Toula* and the Baharga group in *Toulé* have usurped a sacred function of the highest order.

This textual depiction of the “wrong” social actors fulfilling the role, in fact takes the dimension of a metaphorical usurpation of ritual power when we consider the intervention of a Gourmantché sorcerer as replacement for the Sorko priests in the original cult. This in reality represents a metaphorical attempt to usurp political power and/or represents a symbolic act of political defiance and resistance. In effect, as I discuss below, within the geopolitical context of the arid Sahelian region where control of the rarissime vital natural resources (water) fuel deadly interethnic tensions, the belief in and recognition by one group that the other group possesses a spiritual control of the natural resources comes with a political supremacy of the group having the supernatural powers upon the lacking ones. Before I discuss this metaphorical usurpation of power, both spiritual and political, it is important to first understand the intervention of the Gourmantché in this story.

The ceremony of Gorou-Gondi cult should, according to the myth, be conducted by a congregation of initiates presided by a high priest. In both texts, the ceremony is organized by a group of people. And, while the high priest of the authentic version must necessarily belong to the Sorko family, the texts remove this Sorko high priest. A Gourmantché sorcerer-diviner fills

this vacancy. One even sees in Hama's version that King Baharga arrogates for himself certain powers of the priest. This detail of replacing the Sorko priest with a Gourmantché poses a tremendous problem that scholars both inside and outside of Niger have neglected to address. The Gourmantché are an ethnic group who live primarily in what is now Burkina Faso. They also have an important presence in neighboring countries such as Niger, Mali, and Benin. The Gourmantché are considered the first "owners" of the land and have been subsequently conquered by several neighboring groups. Gourmantché migrants to Niger are considered to occupy lower-levels of the socio-economic spectrum. They are typically involved with manual farm labor. As the first "masters" of the land, they are, however, considered to possess great magic. The two texts make this apparent in their presentation of the Gourmantché and their renowned sand-scarring divination practices. When the narrator in *Toula* says the sand of the Gourmantché does not lie, the narrator is simply conveying verbatim what is thought and said about the Gourmantché geomancers in Zarma-Songhoï culture. Thus, although they are often rather despised and considered lowly agricultural laborers in countries such as Niger, they are also feared because of their presumed magical powers. Having a Gourmantché perform the ritual of the Gorou-Gondi does not initially appear to be troublesome as they are known for their magical prowess. However, to the extent that outside Burkina Faso they face extreme discrimination, then it becomes highly problematic that Gourmantché would be presented as taking over the role of a Sorko priest, a pillar in Zarma-Songhoï spirituality.

III. METAPHORICAL USURPATION OF SPIRITUAL AND POLITICAL POWERS

III-1- Textual Misrepresentation Of Fundamental Rituals

When approached from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, by highlighting this severe form of punishment, the vision of the literary texts must be viewed as a form of textual as well as cultural resistance against an attempt by the Gourmantché clan, by the *outsider* and enemy, to usurp and subvert the spiritual as well as political authorities of the Zarma-Songhoï clan. For, if in what precedes, levels of profound distortion of the water-snake ritual are exposed, yet even more severe a distortion is to be found in the textual misrepresentation of the *Yenendi*, the only recognized and accepted Zarma-Songhoï ritual to request rain from supernatural source. This deviation from the “normal” ritual is aggravated by a complete perversion of the *hampi*, the single most important ritual object involved in any *Yenendi* ceremony.

III-2- Deviation From The “Normal” Rain Intercession Ritual

In both literary interpretations of the story of *Toulé*, the community turns to the ritual of the water-snake spirits, the Gorou-Gondi, in order to request rain from supernatural source. This represents a fundamental departure from the *Yenendi* ceremony, the only prescriptive ritual for rain intercession in the Zarma-Songhoï traditional society. In his study about the artistic and literary interpretations of the story of *Toulé*, Ali Seyni becomes infuriated that: “Les significations spirituelles ne sont pas mises avant...aucune référence n’est faite aux solutions rituelles prévues lors de crises écologiques et spirituelles de cet ordre” (275).

Ali Seyni belongs to that traditional audience for whom the cult of the Gorou-Gondi is such a living reality that they become infuriated at what they saw as unacceptable cinematographic misrepresentation of the local cult of the water-snake spirit. Through the preceding quote, local readers of Seyni's work immediately understands that his anger is directed towards the textual overwhelming deviation from the only locally accredited "normal" process to request rain from the supernatural source, the *Yenendi* ceremony, as Jean Rouch explains:

Yenendi – Ce mot signifie « *faire frais* », car cette fête est destinée, tout à la fois à demander la pluie et à calmer Dongo [god of thunder and rains]. (Ainsi la terre est *fraîche* de pluie, et Dongo est « *frais* » : sans colère). C'est la fête la plus importante du culte des *Holley*... Les *Sorko* organisent cette fête au début de la saison des pluies... En fait, le *Yenendi* est la *seule* grande fête obligatoire des *Holley* [who control the rains]... Si les *Sorko* n'arrivent pas à apaiser *Dongo* [through appropriate ritual, i.e., *Yenendi*], il n'y aura pas de pluie, mais de la foudre et des foudroyés. (*La religion* 235-239).

Thus, in the Zarma-Songhoï tradition,, when drought menaces, the only prescriptive ritual is the organization of a *Yenendi* ceremony, which reached their height during the Seyni Kountché military rule of the 1980's when the *Yenendi* used to be openly and abundantly performed in military barracks. Even today when Islamic prayer sessions have superseded ancestral ways, discreet *Yenendi* ceremonies continue nonetheless to be cautiously performed concomitant to the Islamic intercession prayers. Thus, from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, the deviations, in the literary texts, from the "normal," ritual and the recourse to non-recognized rituals denote a level of misrepresentation consistent with the traditional audience's rejection of the film version.

III-3- Perversion Of The Ritual Vase *Hampi*

This unacceptable deviation from the *Yenendi* authority is yet aggravated by the perverted usage, in the legend text, of the *hampi*, the indispensable ritual vase involved in every *Yenendi*.

The vase *Hampi*, as Rouch explains, represents the most important ritual object associated with the *Yenendi* ceremony, held at the beginning of the rainy season:

C'est un grand vase d'argile hémisphérique dont l'usage domestique est celui d'une bassine à eau. Il fut le premier objet rituel donné par les génies Tôrou au Sorko Faran Maka, au cours du premier *yéné*. C'est par lui que furent réunis les Tôrou, c'est grâce à lui que Dongo (dieu de la foudre et de la pluie) put secourir ses victimes. Le mythe et les textes attribuent ce *hampi* initial à Dandou Ourfama [the father of the Tôrou]...Le *hampi* est tout à la fois le vase sacré où se préparent les liquides rituels, le symbole de « l'amas de terre rouge » d'où sortirent les premiers hommes, le symbole du monde autour duquel se réunissent les génies Tôrou. [...] Le *hampi* apparaît ainsi comme une sorte d'autel permanent...comme le vase sacré auquel les Tôrou s'abreuvent pendant la cérémonie capitale du *Yenendi*. (*La religion* 167-168).

In the legend version, when the Baharga group, seeking water, goes to a Gourmantché sorcerer, the latter asked them to bring him, among other ritual objects, a *hampi*:

Les Baharga retournèrent auprès du Gourmantché. Ce dernier leur demanda de lui apporter un bouc roux, un *hampi*, et une fiche métallique... Le géomancien égorgea le bouc, le plaça dans le *hampi* nécessaire, et expliqua qu'ils devaient enterrer le vase au milieu de la nuit. (Hammadou 113-114).

Thus, the Gourmantché sorcerer uses the *hampi* as a mystical entrapment to be buried beneath the pond where the diabolical magical apparatus is meant to attract and hold hostage the soul of the victim. This misguided usage of the *hampi* in the literary texts denaturizes the essence of the *hampi* as originally a positive ritual object, the usage of which, in its original Zarma-Songhoï *Yenendi* ceremony, is imbued but with positivity. Jean Rouch's following presentation of the June 25th 1942 *Yenendi* of the village of *Sakoyé* allows to perceive a presence of the *hampi* that contrasts with its appearance in the literary text: "La pluie n'étant pas arrivée à cette date, le chef de quartier Yaya demande au Sorko Issa d'organiser un *Yenendi*. Issa convoque tout le monde. [...] Une femme apporte le *hampi* du Sorko Issa et trois poulets, blanc, noir et rouge" (114). The ceremony proceeds and soon the Tôrou, gods that control rain and thunder, "descend" upon their human horses:

Les quatre Tôrou viennent alors autour du *hampi*, le Sorko Issa vient avec eux. Ils [humans and gods] s'accroupissent tous autour du *hampi* en posant deux doigts de la main droite sur le bord... Le symbolisme de cette cérémonie est assez clair : le *hampi* posé sur les fossés en croix représente le monde (le ciel posé sur la terre). Les trois sacrifices au moment du *hampi singi* (« poser le *hampi* ») lui confèrent certaines forces : il est le monde vivant. Les *Sorko* et les génies du ciel posent deux doigts sur le bord du *hampi*, ce bord sur lequel se tiennent les génies et qui est aussi le premier ciel. (114).

And then begins the negotiation between humans and gods about mutual agreements of “dons/contre-dons” whereby gods promise to release the rains in exchange for humans sacrificing to the gods. In the above illustrations, not only does the *Yenendi* represent the sole spiritual authority for any rain intercession undertaking, the authority of the *Sorko*, the Zarma-Songhoï clan of the fishermen-fetishists, as master of ceremony as well as sole guardian of the *hampi* becomes prominent. This profoundly contrasts with entrusting a rain intercession ritual, in the legend text, not to a *Sorko*, but worse to a Gourmantché, a group with which the Zarma-Songhoï have been traditionally engaged in conflicts around the control of natural resources.

Thus, the appearance and involvement of the *hampi* (in the legend of *Toulé*) in a magical operation (by a Gourmantché sorcerer and not by a *Sorko*; and not for the purpose of a *Yenendi* ceremony) does involve, from the Songhoï perspective, a grave usurpation, an illegitimate appropriation. This form of misappropriation for misguided purposes, already a serious mischief, is aggravated by the perversion and complete denaturation of the very essence associated with the ritualistic usage of the *hampi*. In effect, in the *Yenendi* ceremony, the usage of the *hampi* is imbued with positivity: on the one hand, *Dongo*, the god of thunder, uses the *hampi* for therapeutic purposes, (to heal people struck by thunder); on the other, through the *Yenendi* performance, it is the magical properties of the ritual *hampi* that are believed to attract the beneficent rains. Thus, the *hampi*, in its original Zarma-Songhoï cultural base, is used to bring life and thus represents a positive object. Conversely, in the legend version, the *hampi* is used to

take life, notably by attracting and entrapping, not rains, but innocent human victims beneath the waters.

From this observation, influenced by a Zarma-Songhoï mythological perspective, the deviation from the *Yenendi* ceremony, in the legend of *Toulé*, and the recourse to manipulation by a Gourmantché sorcerer involve two forms of violations against sacred values: transgression against the authority of the *Yenendi* ceremony itself as sole authority for rain intercession and perversion of the positivist nature of the ritualistic usage of the *hampi*, originally as giver of life, now in the legend as taker of life. The public display of the *hampi* through the *Yenendi* communal ceremony vividly contrasts with the covert usage in the legend, by a groupuscule, to achieve hidden purposes moved motives so questionable they must be undertaken covertly in the middle of the night. It is therefore not surprising that, from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective,, the Gourmantché unlawful and perverted manipulation of such a symbolic ritual object legend of *Toulé* must come with some form of retribution.

III-4- Geopolitical Issues Of Control Of Supernatural Access To Natural Resources

The above claim for an unacceptable distortion that is involved in the literary misrepresentations of the rain intercession must be placed within the local sociopolitical context where spiritual supremacy is equated with political supremacy. In effect, in this drought-prone region, different ethnic groups are engaged in ageless conflicts essentially around the control of natural resources, chief among which is water. Thus, the issue of access to water that prevails in the legend of *Toulé* represents a regional geopolitical important one. Traditionally, in all the

groups that inhabit this region, rain is accessed through supernatural source as is the case in the stories of *Toulé* and *Toula*.

In the geopolitics of this region, the belief in the capacity of one ethnic group to possess the supernatural powers that bring rain (or that interrupt them, for that matter) establishes a spiritual supremacy of that group over others. Because the spiritual becomes a means to accessing, thus to controlling, natural resources, the recognition and acceptance by one group of the powers of another to control natural resources creates a form of dependence that in turn legitimizes a form of political supremacy of the group that controls the supernatural sources over the lacking group that becomes dependent, thus inferior. The following case of Zarma-Songhoï spiritual colonization resulting in subsequent political supremacy over the Hausa can help illustrate the importance of the stakes involved in usurping the spiritual powers to bring rain from the Zarma and re-attributing them to the Gourmantché clan. In *Prayer has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, And Identity In An Islamic Town of Niger*, Adeline Masquelier presents the invasion of the “dangerous figures” of Zarma spirits over Hausaland as symbolizing Zarma political and economic domination of the Hausa in Niger’s Postcolony:

At independence in 1960, the French political withdrawal left Niger [...] with a bitter struggle for power between the two major ethnic groups, the Zarma and the Hausa... As memories of formal colonial exactions faded, the Hausa, who constituted the largest ethnic group in the country, fell under the domination of the [...] Zarma, who took the reins of government when the French departed in 1960. The appearance of the [Zarma] spirits in [Niger’s Hausaland] coincided with the coming to power of Zarma elites at the head of independent Niger. Like many of the spirits who have become familiar *bori* [Hausa cult of possession] figures, they are not native to the area. They are Zarma, and like the Zarma people, they come from the West. In the Zarma-Songhay region of Niger, where they first appeared, they constitute a family of noble spirits, the Tooru, who govern the winds, the clouds, lightning, and the rain, in addition to controlling the Niger river... In Aréwa [Niger’s Hausaland] the Tooru are known as the Zarma. They are also referred to as *babba’ku* (black ones), presumably because some of them wear black robes and hats. “The ones from above” is another name for them: the black spirits live in the sky, from which they control the clouds that bring rain. (269).

Two observations can be made from the appearance and integration of the Zarma spirits into the Hausa landscape in a manner that relates to the current discussion. First, for these agrarian communities, whoever controls the spiritual source of rain also exerts political supremacy over other groups who, then, become dependent of the group that controls the rains. As Masquelier confirms:

In the event of drought or insufficient rain, [Hausa] *bori* adepts now sacrifice to the Zarma spirits, because they have the power to bring rain. “What proves it,” argued a bori chief, “is that if the sky spirits kill someone, we are going to see clouds in the sky, and it will soon start raining.” (271).

To sacrifice to the spirits that belong to another group legitimizes the supremacy of that group over the one that makes the sacrifice. Because the Hausa have come to accept that rain can only be accessed through the Zarma spirituality, the Hausa therefore lend themselves to become subject to Zarma political rule, so much so that Zarma have become to symbolize important cultural references and directions to the Hausa: “Frequently solicited by individuals seeking advice, help, or protection, the Zarma spirits are guests of honor during the most important annual bori ritual in Dogondoutchi” (271).

In fact, Masquelier’s view of the Zarma spirits as “guests of honor” to Hausa possession ceremonies in reality masks the political power that the Zarma people have come to exercise over the Hausa as illustrated on the spiritual level by the judicial authority that the Zarma spirits exercise in Hausa court as the authorities “whose merciless justice Muslim and ‘*yan bori* alike fear greatly:

When two parties are in disagreement and need to find out who is telling the truth and who is lying [...], the individual whose actions and words caused suspicion will be expected to swear solemnly (not on Allah, not on a Hausa spirit) on the axes of the Zarma spirits that he did not commit the deed he is accused of having committed. The axes, which are the sacred property of the [Zarma] spirits, symbolize thunder and the *babba’ku*’s (Zarma spirits) control over natural elements... A guilty person is more likely to forgo the swearing and admit his

culpability rather than run the risk of being struck by lightning the following rainy season. Invisible, yet omnipresent, the Zarma spirits always catch up with offenders. (275-276).

The Hausa acceptance of the Zarma spirits' supernatural power to kill derives from the belief in the Zarma spirits' control of lightning. In these traditional communities where superstitious explanation conditions worldview, lightning represents one of the most feared causes of death, so dreaded that in these traditional communities, lightning has come to symbolize divine châtiment. Thus, the worse type of death is that which results from lightning because it is connoted with supernatural sanction. Thus, if the Hausa fear the Zarma spirits the most, it is not only because they can interrupt the rains, but also because they control lightning as Masquelier confirms:

[In the Hausa regions,] prior to the coming of the Zarma spirits at [Niger's] independence, lightning was held to be caused by human *mayu* (sorcerers) who flew in the rain and struck people's houses out of malice. In the 1960's [around Niger independence year and Zarma accession to power] "those of the West" – as Zarma spirits are often called – started throwing lightning.

By 1969, chiefs of [Hausa] bori cult had determined that the series of lightning-related incidents that had occurred over the last three years were caused not by human sorcerers but by spirits sorcerers who had come from the West to destroy the country (1992). Their [Zarma spirits] brutal possession of [Hausa] bori devotees symptomatized the unethical politics of the pro-Zarma regime... In Aréwa the *babba'ku*'s (Zarma spirits) potency and cruelty stands for the neo-imperialist character of the Zarma-controlled government that ruled the new Republic of Niger. (270).

Exactly like the tension between Zarma and Hausa, the Zarma-Songhoï and the Gourmantché, are engaged in ageless tense sociopolitical confrontation over the control of natural resources, mainly water. Exactly like the control of the spiritual powers to bring rain, above, helps establish ethnic supremacy, the deviation (in the legend of *Toulé*, as well as in the modern text of *Toula*) from the Zarma-Songhoï "normal" rain intercession could be viewed, from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, as a serious attempt to overthrow spiritual supremacy with overwhelming disastrous political consequences for the Zarma-Songhoï. In this case, failure

through the literary texts of *Toulé* and *Toula* to detect any underlying resistance in having a Gourmantché perform a rain intercession ritual on behalf of a Songhoï clan would be equivalent to recognizing and accepting the Zarma-Songhoï acceptance of the spiritual, thus political, supremacy of the Gourmantché over the Zarma-Songhoï. Such view would be inconsistent with local ethnography and certainly the disastrous end of the Gourmantché manipulation point to a textual resistance, from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, of a Gourmantché spiritual supremacy. Thus, read against local sociopolitical context, having the ‘fabricated’ spirit by the Gourmantché sorcerer turn against and destroy the very Baharga community that had tempered with a Zarma-Songhoï spiritual property could be seen, from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, as a textual resistance against any attempt to subvert Zarma-Songhoï spiritual authority.

Just as with the story of Askia, the literary representation of the story of *Toulé*, when approached from a Zarma-Songhoï perspective, points to important sociopolitical stakes, the magnitude and significance of which can only be understood when the literary is properly placed in the local geopolitical context. Just as with the story of Askia, a reading of the story of *Toulé* against the Zarma-Songhoï ethnographic specificities reveal a concern for disrespect of sociocultural values. Askia transgresses against inviolable cultural values in order to access political power to which he is culturally unqualified; consequently, he personally receives severe punishment while the entire lineage is punished with divine retribution. The Baharga subgroup of the Zarma-Songhoï attempted to deviate from the “normal” *Yenendi* ritual process (maybe also a symbolic attempt to free from political hegemony) in order to access rain, (and perhaps thereby to politically establish their clan autonomy and independence from the Zarma-Songhoï hegemony); consequently, their tempering with powerful mystical forces created a monster that ends up consuming the community.

PART III

KAAYI CEEYAN, SUMMNONING THE ANCESTORS, OR THE FUNCTIONAL INTERTEXTUALITY

CHAPTER I

TOULA AS POLITICAL SATIRE

I. INTRODUCTION

As earlier stated, when tracking internal literary developments and extra-textual cultural information one is able to uncover within *Toula* an embedded subversive political message. Although the Nigérien government has never officially censored Hama's writing, it is undeniable that even today official circles perceive his work as something of a nuisance. Consequently, his writings suffer from a sort a collective disdain and willful avoidance. Though unverifiable, some have claimed that authorities had banned for a certain period both the text as well as cinematographic adaptation of it. This is especially the case with *Toula*. On the surface, this work that the author frames as a tale does not seem capable of offending or of slanting toward a politically subversive discourse

That said, there are two key elements that angle the text toward a form of political attack: the situation of the story of Toula in the socio-political context of post-independence Niger of the 1970's. Here, there are parallels that could be made between Niger's President at the time, Diori Hamani, and the king Baharga Béri in the story when considering the manner in which they reacted to the drought situation. Without these two rapprochements, to accuse Boubou Hama of writing against the regime of Diori Hamani would be preposterous. During the period in question, Hama was not only the President of the Assembly, but he was also the second in command in Diori's regime. He wielded significant power. Why and how could such an

important person in the apparatus of the State and of Diori's regime envisage sabotaging the structure to which he belonged and even worked to control? One would expect subversive moves to come from any member of the opposing SAWABA Party, but never from someone like Boubou Hama who was considered one of, if not the, founding fathers of the very regime *Toula* had been accused of subverting. If one accepts the possibility of *Toula* serving as a piercing critique of the government, it seems to me that it is precisely because of the unlikelihood of an attack from Hama has been skillfully exploited in order to launch and conceal a political attack.

II. CONTEXT OF THE 1970'S DROUGHT

Before we examine the level of possible rapprochements between the text and the socio-political context, it is first necessary to present the dramatic context of the bitter drought that hit Niger and the whole Sahel zone in the 1970's. In *Mémoires d'un compagnon de Seyni Kountché*, the late Moumouni Adamou Djermakoye presents a remarkably vivid depiction of the measure of the suffering:

[Commencée en 1968] la sécheresse s'installa par étapes et se prolonge jusqu'en 1974. D'abord, ce fut l'extinction lente et inexorable de la végétation, suivie de celle des animaux, qui par manque de pâturages, maigrissaient à vue d'œil et finissaient par s'écrouler. La population des zones éprouvées, hommes, femmes, enfants, vieillards, n'ayant plus rien à manger, et la force d'atteindre des lieux plus cléments, s'effondrait d'inanition, terrassée par la faim. Les récoltes catastrophiques, les populations et le cheptel en grande partie décimé, la nation fait face à une des plus grandes épreuves de son existence. (48-49).

In comparison, here is how Hama presents the crisis in the *Toula*:

La mare de Yalambouli est à sec. L'air fluide surchauffé flambe. Tout dans la nature écrasé est cuit sous le soleil brulant. Les mares, les puits et les rivières ont tari. L'herbe poussée dru à la première pluie s'était desséchée. Elle s'envola dans le souffle chaud du vent. Le sol argileux se fendilla sous l'étreinte de la chaleur. Les arbres sous l'action du soleil languirent ; ils perdirent leurs feuilles. Les animaux manquant d'herbe moururent en masse. Les hommes, eux-mêmes,

torturés par la soif et la faim commencèrent à craindre pour leur vie. L'hivernage mal établi ne les rassura guère. La situation devint dramatique. (p. 170).

Later, the king himself admits: "Tout brûle autour de moi et mon peuple meurt de soif et de faim.

Tout, dans mon pays, les arbres, les animaux, tout périt" (p.172).

III. EXTRA-TEXTUAL EXTRAPOLATION

Even if the oral legend of Toulé inspired Hama, we observe considerable efforts on the part of Hama to exaggerate the isolated, limited and localized nature of the water shortage in the legend. He explodes the regional drought into a national one with serious political implications. In this way, the drought in *Toula* echoes the severe drought that hit Niger at the time the text was written.

The limited and localized nature of the drought in the oral legend is evidenced, first, by the relatively smaller population size. In effect, if a single spring could suffice to cover the total water needs of the Baharga community, it means that the population size would be about a few hundreds of people. Second, if the legend indicates that the Baharga travelled to the generous King Balma Farimonzon, who is of another Songhoï clan, it signals the minor political position of this community within the regional political chessboard. Finally, when they met with King Balma Farimonzon to request his permission to fabricate a Gorou-Gondi, the king appeared perplexed because the problems of such little importance did not reach the king's attention as quickly as a major crisis would. When trying to gain the king's permission, the Baharga of the oral legend had to reassure the king that the ritual would only affect their region. The king's region, incidentally, was suffering no water shortage. These factors all indicate that the water shortage was an isolated and minor issue.

From this isolated and minor issue in the oral legend, we get, in Hama's text, a magnified and overwhelming crisis of national proportions. It was precisely this type of drought that plagued Niger in the 1970's. In order to clearly situate the story within the socio-political context of the time, the author opens the story with verbs in the present tense: "La mare de Yalambouli est à sec. L'air fluide surchauffé flambe. Tout dans la nature écrasé est cuit sous le soleil brulant" (170). Then, he gradually takes the story into a distant past: "Les mares, les puits et les rivières ont tari. L'herbe poussée dru à la première pluie s'était desséchée. Elle s'envola dans le souffle chaud du vent. Le sol argileux se fendilla sous l'étreinte de la chaleur" (p. 170).

IV. PARALLELS BETWEEN THE DIORI REGIME AND KING BAHARGA BERI

In addition to the above elements that suggest that Hama's story takes place during the 1972 drought, the text also presents some interesting parallels between the opposed manners with which the Government of President Diouri and the King Baharga Béri responded to the catastrophe.

On April 15 1974, a group of military officers, led by lieutenant-colonel Seyni Kountché, toppled Diouri's moribund regime. They argued the coup was necessary in order to replace an ineffective government and to bring relief to the suffering population. They also made accusations of corruption and embezzlement of the foreign aid destined to assist drought victims. In his address to the nation announcing and justifying the coup, Seyni Kountché and the CMS (Conseil Militaire Suprême) stressed the regime's incompetence and corruption:

Nigériens, Nigériennes. Ce jour 15 avril 1974, l'armée a décidé de prendre ses responsabilités en mettant fin au régime que vous connaissez. Après 15 ans de règne jalonné d'injustice, de corruption, d'égoïsme et d'indifférence à l'endroit du peuple auquel il prétendait assurer le bonheur, nous [l'armée] ne pouvions plus tolérer la permanence de cette oligarchie. En ma

qualité de Chef d'Etat-Major Général de l'armée, je décide et proclame la suspension de la constitution, la dissolution de l'Assemblée Nationale, la suppression de toutes les organisations politiques et para-politiques [les milices]. (Kountché, 1974).

The regime of Diori is presented as incompetent and is accused of feeding off the carcasses of the drought stricken populations. In *Toula* we find the opposite traits King Baharga Béri. Although he is confronted with one of the gravest disasters to hit his people, King Baharga Béri is determined to fight body and soul in order to find an adequate solution to the crisis:

Baharga Béri, le roi des Baharga, n'en dort plus. Il chercha, en vain, une solution possible. Il s'acharna, la mort dans l'âme, à en trouver une.
Grand Dieu, quel mal ai-je commis pour mériter un tel sort ?
..., puisque chef, je suis responsable de la vie de mon peuple. Je veux faire quelque chose pour le sauver... même au prix de ma vie (171-173).

In their relentless efforts to resolve the crisis, King Baharga Béri and his entourage are portrayed as an admirable and competent team that tirelessly collaborates. They work only for the good of the people. In contrast to the efforts of King Baharga Béri and his entourage, Djermakoye depicts the inexcusably irresponsible attitude of the Diori Government.

Quand la sécheresse s'abattit sur le Sahel, décimant hommes et troupeaux, le pouvoir en place, ne sut comment réagir adéquatement. Pire, certains dignitaires du régime, tels des charognards guettant toute occasion propice, stockaient des vivres dans des magasins, tandis que le peuple agonisait. Ils profitaient des malheurs du peuple et s'enrichissaient ainsi sans vergogne. La corruption était si généralisée qu'elle en devenait tout simplement banale. Comment le régime pouvait-il tout ignorer ? N'était-il pas tout simplement usé et incapable de réaction salutaire ? [...] Ce ne fut que tardivement que le régime prit la juste mesure du drame qui se nouait. [...] Cependant, l'organisation des secours provenant de la solidarité des pays étrangers laissait fort à désirer. La fébrilité des uns le disputait à l'insouciance des autres. Autant le régime en place était côté à l'extérieur, autant à l'intérieur il était décrié. Tout le monde se rendait compte qu'il ne parvenait pas à juguler l'un des plus grands sinistres humains que le Niger ait connus. Tout le monde voyait qu'il s'empêtrait dans les querelles byzantines de son parti unique. Tout le monde voyait l'étalage éhonté d'une corruption généralisée.(48-49).

As many Nigériens agree with both the military revolt against the Diori Government as well as Djermakoye's description, if *Toula* is meant to make a comparison between fiction and reality,

then can agree that the author's attack against Diiori's regime was well-founded. This regime was reckless, as Richard Higgott description clearly indicates:

The Government's most urgent need was to alleviate the catastrophic situation which had arisen as a result of the drought. This had brought with it a new level of misery and poverty, unprecedented even in a country of Niger's lowly means, and was to succeed in exposing the excesses and incompetence of a corrupt regime which had, for so long, been obscured by the prestige of its leader. The Tuareg lost almost all their cattle, and tax receipts in Niger fell by over 40 per cent. The last 18 months prior to the coup d'etat saw an influx of nearly 500,000 refugees from Mali - a similar number of Nigeriens were estimated to have gone south into Nigeria - and small tented cities of people seeking respite from the rigours of the drought grew up around Niamey. Obvious as the drought problem in general was as a factor for instability for Diiori's regime, of greater political damage was the not only incompetent, but blatantly corrupt handling of the relief aid by members of the P.P.N. Immediately after the coup, over 40 vehicles supplied by international agencies were found plying for hire as taxis in Niamey, and over 3,000 tons of grain were discovered in a Zinder warehouse waiting for prices to rise. According to Colonel Kountché, the leader of the Supreme Military Council, the army had brought the situation to the notice of the President on several occasions, without any action being taken. The abuse of the relief aid was, however, merely the last excess of an already dishonest regime. (390).

Unlike the imprudence and inert nature of the Diiori Government before the suffering of the people, the devotion of King Baharga Béri to his people is limitless. He does not hesitate to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his own life should it bring relief to victims of the drought. The king's wife, Gouri, behaves in a similar way. While the Diiori regime faced accusations of embezzlement and confiscation of foreign aid destined to the victims, Gouri offers to contribute all her valuables:

Aucun sacrifice n'est grand pour sauver des vies humaines, pour sauver de la soif nos campagnes dessolées, pour arracher à la faim et à la soif le peuple de notre royaume. Il n'y a que nous pour consentir ce sacrifice pour notre peuple. Nous avons assez de poulets, de chèvres, de moutons, de bœufs, en quantité suffisante, tous les animaux domestiques, de l'or, de l'argent, toutes les richesses du monde. Celles-ci n'ont de valeur réelle que dans la mesure où elles contribuent à soulager la souffrance de notre peuple. Je suis prête à donner à mon mari tout ce que je possède, mes habits de soie, mes bijoux d'or et d'argent. (181-182).

In a direct contrast to Gouri's humanism and generosity, is Diori's wife's narcissism. In "The 1974 Coup d'Etat in Niger: Towards an Explanation," Higgott offers the following portrait of Madame Diori:

The corruption of the P.P.N. elite had been common knowledge in Niamey for several years, personified by Madame Diori, the President's wife, whom the students called 'l'Autrichienne' after Marie Antoinette. She had acquired a considerable fortune, including many luxury houses in Niamey which she rented to foreign embassies and state corporations at exorbitant rates. She had also obtained for herself some of the choicest areas of fertile land on the banks of the Niger, close to Niamey. Many other members of the P.P.N. elite were also profiteering, but not, it must be stated, in as grand a fashion as Madame Diori. (390).

All of the worldly material possessions that the king's wife proposes to sacrifice for the good of the people represent exactly what the entourage of President Diori is accused of stealing from their rightful owner, the people. Against this accusation of carelessness, we see in *Toula* a reigning family who is dedicated to the protection of the people. Unlike the entourage of President Diori, for King Baharga Béri and his entourage no effort is spared in trying to secure relief for his people.

In spite of the rapprochements between the text and the socio-political context of Niger in 1972, it remains important to address the question of whether or not it is conceivable for someone like Hama to attack the Diori regime. As mentioned above, Hama represented the veritable backbone of the Diori regime. He was the veritable *éminence grise*. He was the President of the PPN RDA (Parti Progressiste Nigérien, section nigérienne du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain) and Diori Hamani, the General Secretary of the party. It was the PPN-RDA that led Diori and Hama to assume supreme command of newly independent Niger. Diori was elected President of the Republic and Hama, President of the Assembly. Apart from serving as the powerful President of the Assembly, he was truly the number two of the Diori regime. At the time, the trio Diori, Hama, Djamballa (Interior Minister) represented a well "welded"

company. However, the duo Diori-Boubou was at the head of all policymaking processes and decisions. Hama and Diori Hamani were longtime friends and worked closely to not only lead Niger to independence, but most importantly to fight for the viability of the fragile, newly independent and impoverished country. Eventually, the relationship strained. After fourteen years as leaders of Niger, the duo Diori-Boubou, as they were then known, started to split apart. The dissention between the two leaders and former friends quickly developed into a veritable war, with Diori's supporters as the young and dynamic reformers and Hama's supporters as the stalwarts of the old generation. Tensions between the two groups were so fierce that Niger was leaning towards a full-scale civil war, as Djermakoye rightly puts it:

...au sommet de l'Etat, la dissension entre Diori Hamani et Boubou Hama, était de notoriété publique. [...] Les réunions de concertation ou réunions du congrès de la vérité du PPNRDA se déroulaient à Niamey dans une atmosphère lourde de méfiance, de coups bas, de cris et de fureur, prémices d'une débandade annoncée. Les dignitaires ne cessaient de s'accuser mutuellement et de se jeter l'anathème, lors de ces réunions préparatoires du Congrès. [...] Des arrestations succédaient aux arrestations. Les populations rurales étaient accablées de mille malheurs. Ceux des centres urbains cachaient de moins en moins leur dépit. L'arrogance des miliciens du parti, omniprésents, ne faisait qu'amplifier la tension ambiante. (53).

Coincidentally, it was during this time of heightened tensions with Diori that Hama penned *Toula*. Thus, if Hama did intend to use *Toula* as an indirect indictment against the Diori Government, the common Nigérien would probably understand and agree. In the text one finds a contextualization of the drought, an idealized "government" response to drought as seen in King Baharga Béri's actions, and an idealized "First Lady" as seen in Gouri's humanism. These elements create a political attack that is striking in its bitterness.

V. ATTEMPTING TO ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION BY WAY OF THE LITERARY

Even if we have evidence that the literary text may be functioning as a political attack on the Diori Government, didacticism is a centerpiece of Hama's oeuvre. To read his text as a mere political attack would be an incomplete reading of *Toula*. In light of Hama's overt didacticism and his desire to be considered as a traditional African village elder, it is necessary to reach beyond the satirical elements of the text in order to locate the presentation of a moral. If, as the author himself encourages by presenting *Toula* as a tale, or a fable, then it must necessarily teach a valuable lesson on morality. There are two important elements in the text that support the pursuit of a moral. In 1972, Hama fell into a deadlock with President Diori. It is possible that Hama looked to the literary to attempt to communicate with the younger Diori when direct communication was difficult. If this is the case, then framing the text as a tale would be very much in line with Zarma-Songhoï tradition where the literary is very often used as an infallible means of diplomacy. These elements are the intended audience of the text. If reading the text in this manner, the presence of the mysterious character of the king's close friend comes into view. While this character does not occupy any official executive position, he is a veritable *Deus ex-machina*, effectively coaching the overwhelmed king into the right direction, thus greatly contributing to resolving the crisis.

VI. THE AUDIENCE

Hama concludes the story of *Toula* with the consecrated formula of the Zarma-Songhoï tale: "Le conte est fini. Je l'ai enroulé. Je l'ai mis sous l'aile d'un oiseau blanc. Il ira, chaque soir, le

raconter à d'autres enfants, à tous les enfants du monde auxquels je le destine" (212). In the context of one of the bitterest political attacks, the destinataires "les enfants," the children, " need extreme caution and space for reflection. First of all, the structure of the story actually does appear to follow that of a tale. We have an initial crisis leading to a climax before it is resolved. Why use the structure of the tale? Why present the text as a tale? One way to answer these questions would be to see the alignment with a tale as a method of seeking protection from eventual retaliation should this text be equated with a political attack. Since tales in Niger are meant to be ludic narratives destined for children – and the author does indicate that it's destined to children – then who would dare attack harmless diversions for children without risking societal condemnation? Second, the author could well defend himself by stating that he was merely reporting a legend. Such a defense would only work if the reader did not know the original oral legend and failed to detect the author's "additions" to the oral legend. Here, the problem is that the majority of Niger's officials at the time were of Zarma-Songhoï traditions. It was, therefore, likely that they would have known the oral legend and would have perceived the subversive nature of Hama's text.

To whom was Hama truly addressing this text? In the Niger of the 1970's, about one child out of fifty in the remote villages had a Western education. And, in 1972 as in today, there are simply no Nigérien schoolchildren that would be able to understand Hama's *Toula*. At the time, the only people in Niger who had received an education that would have allowed them to understand this text, let alone have access to printed copy, were government officials and other civil servants. The cost of the printed text may be too high for the high schools and college students. Therefore, it seems that the author would have known that the text would only have been accessible to members of the Government. Did Hama have this particular audience in

mind? If the text was effectively meant to open channels of communication, then we can assume the answer to be yes.

VII. DEUS EX-MACHINA

Even more convincing for text being used to establish communication is the presence of King Baharga Béri's mysterious close friend, Zongom. This friend functions as a veritable Deus ex-machina who disappears as mysteriously as he appears during the denouement. In effect, from the initial to the effective resolution, King Baharga Béri is seconded by Zongom, who does not hold any official position. He is simply present as a friend. In following this view that *Toula* is a highly political text that is being used as attempt to establish communication and is more than a simple political attack, I believe that Zongom represents an imaginary Hama. This "wise elder" is attempting to coach President Diori toward a successful resolution of the famine. Even if they were at loggerheads, if Hama is true to his role as a village elder, then no matter the intensity of his feud with President Diori, it was Hama's moral responsibility to still accompany this younger man through the trials of life. And, since Hama could not do so directly in real life, the literary allows him to create an imaginary space for this relationship.

Zongom, like Hama in real life, is the great savant of the secrets of tradition. This is recognized in Niger even by his fiercest detractors. It is interesting to observe that Zongom appears in the text exactly at the most heated moment in the crisis when King Baharga Béri is visibly overwhelmed by the crisis. This period echoes the moment when Diori, as Head of State, confronted similar issues and needed effective counsel. Zongom plays a double role: that of a spiritual guide and that of a political strategist, two important strengths missing to president

Diori in the heat of the 1972 crisis. Zongom's presence follows the structure of the story: the king finds himself in great turmoil, Zongom intervenes, the king regains strength and is able to carry on to the next step in resolving the crisis. Throughout, Zongom is present to guide the king and to help him learn as he negotiates a solution.

Zongom is an opportune *Deus ex-machina*. He is the one who signaled to the king the importance of looking to tradition for the adequate solution to resolving the crisis: "Baharga Béri, le roi des Baharga, n'en dort plus. Il chercha, en vain, une solution possible. Il s'acharna, la mort dans l'âme, à en trouver une. Tous ses efforts furent vains" (171). The king's efforts are fruitless in finding the right solution because he had lost ties with his own culture. Only Zongom, with his deep knowledge of tradition and local secrets, knows to go back to the community's past to find the answer: "Ô grand roi! Ne crois-tu pas que tu dois consulter un devin pour qu'il te dise lequel de nos dieux a été offensé ? Rien ne se produit sans cause, même quand celle-ci nous est encore cachée, nous est inconnue" (172). Upon this counsel, the king sees clearer. He regains strength: "Baharga Béri s'arracha au vide de sa pensée. Quittant son vaste rêve, il revint, un instant à lui-même, de sa poitrine haletante, une bouffée d'air 'ouf' sortit, humide et chaude" (173). Zongom is a political strategist. As such he is able to make the king realize the cosmic proportion of his position as a ruler: "Baharga Béri, n'oublies pas que tu es un roi. Aucun malheur ne doit t'abattre, si grand soit-il. Baharga Béri, en effet, se ressaisit" (187). Zongom is a savant. When the king is contemplating the abominable idea of offering his own daughter to sacrifice, Zongom is able to caution the king: "Mais, grand roi, sais-tu que tu n'as pas le droit de sacrifier ta fille ... contre le gré de ses oncles maternels " (180)? Finally, Zongom is also a spiritual guide: "O grand roi ! le chef est d'abord un "principe". Il ne peut transiger avec le

“devoir”... O ! grand roi, reviens à toi. Montre-toi digne de nos aïeux. Eux, dans une telle situation, n’hésitaient pas devant leur devoir pour sauver des milliers de vies humaines” (179).

It seems that this Zongom fills a position that Hama greatly values: being treated as a village elder, being approached for his great knowledge of the secrets of tradition. Even if *Toula* may have been intended as a political attack against the Diori Government for its incompetence in resolving the crisis of the 1970’s, I believe that the intended audience as well as the role and function of Zongom signal that this text may have been intended as a way of opening the channel of communication with President Diori.

CHAPTER II

KAAYI CEEYAN, SUMMONING THE ANCESTORS, OR THE FUNCTIONAL INTERTEXTUALITY

I. INTRODUCTION

When possessing a full cultural and ethnographic understanding of the environment out of which Boubou Hama's *Toula* emerged, readers undoubtedly note that this modern Francophone text functions as a direct response to the Songhoï indigenous oral text of *Askia Mohammed*. This intertextual exchange comments upon this traditional story in which Askia Mohammed commits a series of grave transgressions against fundamental Songhoï values. These acts constitute a moral stain against the whole of Songhoï tradition. As such, they disturb the peace of the ancestors, compromise the prosperity of the current generation and threaten the wellbeing of future generations.

Traditionally, corrective rituals designed to cleanse the entire community from the taint of serious transgressions belong to the domain of Magic. When Hama senses the story of *Toula*, he engages in a compensatory practice that, I argue, subtly aligns Hama's gesture with those who practice such ritualistic Magic. Put differently, I contend that Hama arrogates for himself the powers of a Songhoï sorcerer and uses his text to simulate a corrective, magical ritual. *Toula*'s intertextual absorption of *Askia Mohammed* is, on one level, certainly a case of traditional oral literature influencing contemporary written literature. Such an observation is commonplace and follows the tack of much current research on Francophone texts (Kane 1982; Koné 1985; Dabla 1986). A thorough study of the texts in question here indicates something much different than a

simple case of oral traditions influencing contemporary writers. It is my argument that the intertextual relationship between Hama's text and the tale of *Askia* aims at something deeper: a stylized, ritualistic act, simulated upon actual ritual in real life, and designed to have concrete, corrective effects in real life. Hama performs within *Toula* a simulacrum of an actual magical corrective ritual that parallels such rituals that real-life Zarma-Songhoï practitioners undertake within a mythico-poetic environment.

II. INTERVENTION OF *THE EPIC OF WAGADU* AS ACCESSORY

While it is my contention that *Toula*'s intertextual interaction with *Askia* functions as a "corrective" ritual, *Toula* also shares a critical relationship with the old Soninké *Epic of Wagadu*. The Zarma-Songhoï (who identify themselves as being of Soninké origin) consider this traditional story as one of their greatest cultural artifacts. In some ways, *Toula* represents a continuation of the Wagadu legend which, in turn, shares similarities with the story of *Askia*. Though it may initially seem that considering this tertiary tale of the *Epic of Wagadu* might dilute the bond I envision between *Toula* and *Askia*, this tale is indispensable when one attempts to compare the place of the supernatural in both *Toula* and *Askia*. Additionally, extending the scope of the analysis to include this second oral narrative provides added clarity to the intertextual dialogue between Hama's text and its oral antecedents. What is more, the Zarma-Songhoï treatment of the story of the Wagadu and its presentation of specific cultural models further strengthen Hama's gesture of operating a "corrective" ritual in *Toula*.

Given the complexity of the cultural elements involved in Hama's *Toula* and of the important level of implicit references Hama makes to Zarma-Songhoï history, culture and

society, it is important to note the impossibility of presenting any adequate explanation of any of the character's motivations without extra-textual information. When reading *Askia*, for example, without a strong grasp on Songhoï cultural values and traditions, one might be quick to condemn King Sonni Ali Ber for murdering his nephews. However, when placed in its proper cultural context, these acts represent the text's unapologetic portrayal of King Sonni Ali Ber as a just adherent to tradition and a morally-irreproachable individual. Likewise, without understanding the contours of the blood pact that binds the Baharga community to the genie of the pond in *Toula*, one may misinterpret the human sacrifice of Toula as repulsive. Consequently, one may erroneously hold a negative view of the genie character. Only knowledge of the local culture can allow one to comprehend the correctness of Toula's sacrifice and the righteousness of the genie. It is with the intention of preventing such errors that one must consider the importance of *The Epic of Wagadu* in the study of the intertextuality between *Toula* and *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*.

Currently, there exists some scholarly debate on whether or not *The Epic of Wagadu* should be treated as a part of Zarma-Songhoï cultural heritage. For both the purpose of this study and this debate, it is crucial to recognize that, setting the opinions of scholars aside, the Zarma-Songhoï consider this epic to be their own. This belief emerges out of Zarma-Songhoï claims to be the descendants of the Soninké and that the corrective ritual outlined in *The Epic of Wagadu* (one that was supposed to correct transgressions that symbolically led to the downfall and ruin of the once-glorious Ghana Empire) aligns with rituals in use in Zarma-Songhoï culture. Accordingly, this study will treat the epic as very much a part of Zarma-Songhoï tradition. The geographic and temporal distance between Hama and the ancient Ghana Empire lends gravity to Hama's creation of a corrective ritual in *Toula*. Hama not only intends to undertake a

corrective ritual that addresses contemporary cultural transgressions, but rather ones that extend deeply into time and broadly throughout Western Africa.

II-1- *The Epic Of Wagadu*

Drawing from the many variants of the story found in *L'Empire du Ghana*, the following is a summary of the story of the Wagadu:

At an undetermined point in the distant past, a drought forces a group of Soninké people out of their homeland. The people then wander in search of a new place to settle. When they finally reached a fertile land they find this already inhabited by a supernatural being, a snake-spirit called the Bida. After long negotiations between humans and the Wagadu Bida, the following agreement is reached: the spirit will allow the humans to occupy the land. He will also ensure abundant rains, protection and prosperity to the humans. In exchange, every year the humans will offer to the Bida the most beautiful woman in the village. For some time the people and the Bida lived harmoniously. However, one day a Muslim holy man, Bilis Sakho, came to settle in the village. Because of the prestige of this holy man, the king offers to him one of his daughters in marriage. The holy man, a foreigner, and his local wife gave birth to a son named Mamadi Séfé. When Mamadi becomes a young man, he falls in love with the most beautiful girl in the village, Khia. Much like Toula in Hama's text, Khia of the Wagadu legend is not only renowned for her unrivaled beauty but also for her generosity. It is precisely this perfection that makes Khia an exemplary sacrifice to the Bida. Once Khia is formerly proclaimed as that year's sacrificial victim, the community begins the appropriate preparations. In the meantime, she sorrowfully informs her suitor, Mamadi, of her fate. Mamadi quickly leaves the village. Seven

days later he returns with an enchanted sword, the blade of which alone is worth one thousand pieces of gold according to one version. On the day of the sacrifice, Mamadi hides his magical sword and skillfully infiltrates the ceremonial cortege. When the Bida springs from his cave to swallow the sacrificial victim Khia, Mamadi brandishes his magical sword and severs the Bida's seven heads. Before the Bida dies, he curses the community and promises them long years of drought, suffering and misery. Mamadi flees to his mother's home before the crowd can catch and punish him. After his escape, the terrible punishment falls upon the community. The once-glorious Wagadu becomes ruined and the people dispersed. (Trans. from Dieterlen 189-238).

III. COMPARISON BETWEEN *THE EPIC OF WAGADU* AND BOUBOU HAMA'S *TOULA*

As mentioned above, the Wagadu legend finds its continuation in *Toula*. The stories relate to the same peoples. They share the same rituals and supernatural practices relating to the cult of the snake-spirit. Most notably, even today many supernatural practices in the Zarma-Songhoï culture are conducted in an archaic form of the Soninké language.

The clearest narrative link between these two texts is that *Toula* starts precisely where the Wagadu legend ends. In every version, the Wagadu legend closes with Mamadi beheading the Bida and the subsequent ruin and dispersal of the clan. The story of *Toula* begins in this atmosphere of a cursed land and people as the Baharga community suffers a drought that the disgruntled snake-spirit has imposed. This spirit (one might even suggest the vengeful Bida snake-spirit) punishes the community because of its violation of its pact with the spirit. Paralleling the Wagadu legend, only the sacrifice of the most beautiful girl in the village promises the return of prosperity and abundance. Given the striking similarities between the

cults of the snake-spirit in both Zarma-Songhoï culture and in the old Soninké Wagadu and the fact that many Zarma-Songhoï identify themselves as of Soninké descent and share many cultural traits with ancient Soninké, there is no doubt that the stories have a shared origin. Thus, one can imagine or see *Toula* as a response to the story of the Wagadu. Hama uses Mamadi's sacrilege and the curse of the beheaded snake-spirit as a backdrop to his *Toula*. This reference to the very real destruction of the Soninké community indicates the expansive nature of the Soninké diaspora throughout West Africa. Interestingly, it also indicates the curious way in which the dispersion of the oral story of the Wagadu leapt from one part of the diaspora to another. It was disseminated across vast geographic and temporal expanses. Thus, one finds echoes of the old cult of the water snake-spirit in *Toula*. Consequently, in this study of fundamental intertextual dialogue between oral tradition and modern literature in West Africa, the Baharga community of *Toula* should be seen as one of the many Soninké diasporas of the ancient Wagadu and as a community who has continued the practice of the same ancient snake-spirit cult. In this way they differ from the neighboring people in the Zarmaganda village of Simiri who have shifted from the ancient cult to a much more symbolic Yenendi practice.

IV. CONFLUENCE BETWEEN THE MAGICAL AND THE LITERARY: CORRECTIVE RITUAL WITHIN THE MYTHICO-POETIC ENVIRONMENT

Just as Mamadi's transgression provokes supernatural retaliation, so too do the acts of Askia Mohammed. His violation of sacred supernatural values symbolically caused the downfall of the once-glorious Songhoï Empire in the same way that Mamadi's misconduct destroyed the prosperous Ghana Empire. By forsaking the sacred bond between the water snake-spirit and the community it protected, Mamadi, like Askia, unleashed the fatal chain of events that inevitably

led to the ruin of the community. As noted above, there remains a cultural belief that certain types of socio-cultural wrongs must be corrected, even if retroactively in time and space. This work must be done in order to protect the entire lineage, from ancestors to future generations, from further reprisals and suffering.

Although separated from the ancient Wagadu by several centuries and by no less than 3,000 miles, in the realm of occult magic the persistence of ancient Wagadu culture in Zarma-Songhoï culture is real. The Zimas (Chief-Fetishists) of the village of Simiri in today's Zarmaganda region in western Niger Republic perform an annual cult ritual that not only serves to commemorate the disastrous events described in the *Epic of Wagadu*, but to repair symbolically the transgressions present in this tale. Outside of Simiri, one encounters a more generalized belief that the *Epic of Wagadu* demonstrates the power of supernatural forces. The ruin of the Ghana Empire supports this belief.

It was the ethno-cineaste Jean Rouch who the first reported this rather unusual ritual. On April 23, 1951, Rouch attended the Simiri region's Zimas' ritual during the *Yenendi* ceremony. He noted that, according to the Zimas of the Simiri village, if Mamadi was able to commit his sacrilege of severing the Bida's heads before Khia's sacrifice, it is only because their ancestors were also Zimas. They conceive of Mamadi as their own nephew, an affiliation that, as we see in the story of Askia, is imbued with powerful cultural meaning and symbolism. Thus implicated in this crime, today's Zimas now work to symbolically correct this grave error. Rouch's observations follow his description of the *Yenendi* ceremony in Simiri, the heart of Zarma sorcery. Organized as a possession dance ceremony, the *Yenendi* (which, in the Zarma language, means "to make fresh, or misty) represents the ceremony and asks for an abundant rainy season from the *Tooru*, the *Holley* divinities that govern the sky and weather. After the possession dance

section ended, Rouch noted the rather unusual manner in which the animal sacrifice is performed: “Les sacrifices des poulets sont très particuliers, Wadi [the *Yenendi* high priest] leur coupe une aile et une patte qu’il place dans le trou sous le *hampi* [ceremonial vase]. Après avoir humecté de sang la base du *hampi*, il enterre dans le puits les poulets mutilés, mais vivants.”(*La Religion* 333).

If the question of the mutilated, then sacrificed chickens drew Rouch’s attention during the Simiri *Yenendi* of 1951, it is most certainly because this peculiar manner of sacrificing chickens is not part of the usual *Yenendi* ceremony. Usually the accompanying series of animal sacrifices during the *Yenendi* ceremony is done differently. Usually, the animals are simply slaughtered following a routine pattern. Why did the Zimas of Simiri add this unusual ritual? Rouch found an explanation some twenty years later from the son of the priest who organized the 1951 *Yenendi* in Simiri. The Simiri priests, it came to be known, were undertaking a corrective ritual aimed at repairing the wrongs that the high priest had committed centuries ago in Wagadu when Mamadi beheaded the Bida snake-spirit to save his beloved Khia, that year’s sacrificial victim to the snake-spirit.

Vingt ans plus tard, en revoyant ce film [of the Simiri *Yenendi* ceremony], le petit-fils de Wadi, Daouda Sorko, actuellement responsable du *Yenendi* de Simiri, m’a donné une interprétation supplémentaire du sacrifice du soir au vase *hampi* : il s’agit là de la commémoration du meurtre du serpent Bida, qui était responsable de la pluie et de l’or du Wagadu, le vieil Empire du Ghana, le premier Etat connu d’Afrique Occidentale. Les traditions des Soninké concordent toutes sur cette catastrophe. Bida ne donnait l’eau et l’or qu’à condition de recevoir, en sacrifice, la plus belle jeune vierge du Wagadu. Mais, un jour, le fiancé de la jeune fille coupa la tête du serpent Bida qui sortait de son puits pour y entraîner sa victime : ce fut la ruine du Wagadu, la sécheresse et le début de la *diaspora* des Soninké. Pour Daouda Sorko, ce meurtre ne fut possible que parce que les assistants devaient se retourner et ne pas regarder le sacrifice, comme le font les assistants du *hampi* de Simiri. Le trou sur lequel est posé le *hampi* [de Simiri] représente, en fait, le puits du serpent Bida. La tradition de Simiri rejoint alors la tradition des Soninké et le complète. Les ancêtres de Wadi étaient responsables du culte du « Serpent du Mandé » (le serpent Bida), et le fiancé assassin, leur neveu-assistant. Daouda nous donna tous les détails : la jeune vierge était conduite à cheval au bord du puits. Après avoir demandé aux assistants de se retourner (car la vue de la tête du serpent pourrait les rendre fous), le prêtre du culte appelait le serpent trois fois de suite. Au premier appel, le serpent grognait ; au deuxième il grognait encore mais sortait sa tête ; au troisième il grognait plus fort et se dressait pour saisir sa victime. Le neveu-assistant profita de cette troisième apparition pour lui couper la tête. Les

fidèles ne se rendirent compte de rien (ils ne remarquèrent pas que la tête coupée du serpent grognait des menaces terribles). Le prêtre ne put (ou ne voulut) pas arrêter son neveu qui s'enfuyait avec la jeune fille. Le prêtre dit aux fidèles de repartir vers le village. Ce qu'ils firent, toujours sans se tourner (comme le font, aujourd'hui, les assistants du *Yenendi* de Simiri). Cela donna tout le temps au neveu de s'enfuir à cheval avec sa fiancée vers le sud. Il serait allé jusqu'au pays Bambara... Le prêtre du Bida dut quitter alors le Wagadu desséché, il se refugia sur les bords du fleuve Niger, vers Tindirma. C'est de là que partirent les migrants Zerma, avec ce prêtre (ou ses descendants) comme guide. Il les amena jusqu'à Simiri, où il posa le premier *hampi* et où il continua à commémorer le sacrifice du serpent du puits, accompagné par le sacrifice étrange des poulets noirs et blancs dont on coupe une aile et une patte que l'on place dans le trou du puits et où on les enterre vivant. Ainsi la tradition orale rejoint le mythe, dans ce pays Songhay-Zerma où, aujourd'hui encore, les griots parlent la langue Soninké, la langue du vieux Wagadou. (335-7).

V. FUNDAMENTAL COMPLICITY BETWEEN THE LITERARY AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE ZARMA-SONGHOÏ CULTURE

From the above *Yenendi* ceremony, we observe that the ritualistic actions of these fetishists, although they are real actions done in ritual space, nonetheless are meant to make reference to and to respond to events recorded in a text.

What is striking in Rouch's experience of the altered *Yenendi* ceremony is the active belief in the long lasting effects of Mamadi's actions and in the continued damage it has caused to the entire Soninké culture and diaspora. Questions of time and space are irrelevant. Those who consider themselves to be as direct descendants of the original transgressors assume the heavy responsibility of correcting their ancestors' wrongs in order to save their culture. They are obliged to do so. This corrective ritual in real life not only demonstrates strong fundamental cultural ties between the Zarma-Songhoï and the ancient Soninké of Wagadu, but it indicates a zone where the literary and the supernatural intersect in this culture.

If these Simiri Zimas are able to perform a magical corrective ritual within a mythico-poetic environment with the aim of achieving a concrete real life outcome, it is because this culture sees a fundamental compatibility between the imaginary, fictional environment of the literary frame

and the virtual realm of magic. This conceptualization allows for the easy transference of symbols from one sphere to the other. Traditionally, bodies, events and phenomena are symbolized differently in literary and magical environments. While they are envisioned as forces and energies in the magical space, they become characters and motivations in the literary space. This difference notwithstanding, the Simiri Fetishists believe that the compatibility between the two spheres authorizes their operation of corrective, magical rituals from within a literary space. Though far removed from the original transgressions in question, the Zimas who work symbolically to repair these wrongs as reported through oral tradition only have the fictional events of the literary text as practical ground on which to undertake their enterprise. Oral literature provides their only access to distant original events. Oral literature conditions their response. This issue relates to the *Yenendi* ceremony in Simiri where there is a clear transference of concerns from the realm of oral literature to the realm of magic. The question remains, how does this ceremony constitute a practical corrective ritual as it relates to contemporary concerns in Simiri?

The whole cult of the Bida snake-spirit in ancient Wagadu (and the Gorou-Gondi cult in *Toula*), represents an agrarian cult preoccupied with ensuring the continuity of rain in a drought-prone region. Mamadi's beheading of the Bida, much like Askia's beheading of his uncle, represents a serious attack upon Tradition. The transgression is an attack upon the heart of the community. In the village of Simiri, also located in a drought-prone region, the priests of the *Yenendi* ceremony revive the oral story through their enactment of a corrective ritual designed to compensate for the original transgression. However powerful these priests may be, without the accessory of the oral tradition, their efforts would be fruitless.

VI. COMPARISON BETWEEN *THE EPIC OF WAGADU* AND *THE EPIC OF ASKIA MOHAMMED*

While *The Epic of Wagadu* enriches one's understanding of *Toula*, it also draws out important considerations in any serious analysis of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. In both epic tales, an individual, moved by personal interests violates cultural norms and values. These actions have ruinous consequences for the community as a whole. Mamadi and Askia each face an overwhelming dilemma that both relate to and is exacerbated by sacred, communal values. Mamadi refuses what he perceives to be the community's unjust sacrifice of his beloved Khia to the Bida snake-spirit. Askia refuses what he perceives to be the King's unjust murder of his siblings. Interestingly, each text displays the intrusion of an Islamic element that helps fuel tensions and further alienates Mamadi and Askia from the pagan culture of their upbringing. In each case, this representative of Islam is none other than the transgressor's father. This significance of this element lies in the symbolic alignment of Islam with nefarious, foreign acts that threaten local culture.

As mentioned above, the originators of the oral story of Askia drew considerable attention to the ways in which Askia's Islamic identity hindered his personal prosperity. Additionally, they clearly portrayed his indigenous pagan values as superior to the Islamic ones. This preoccupation with Islam is absent in the modern written text *Toula*. Unlike the above two oral stories, no character in *Toula*, human or supernatural, even has a Muslim name nor is there any reference to anything Islamic in nature. Boubou Hama effectively erases Islam from the cultural landscape of the text. The import of this move will become apparent shortly. First, however, it is necessary to make one final comment upon Mamadi's and Askia's relationship with their respective communities. Each man's move against their community's values is predicated upon an initial

withdrawal from their community. It is in this move outward that both Mamadi and Askia secure the tools that enable the treasonous betrayal of their own culture as they literally and symbolically sever the head of the community's prosperity. Rejected by their respective community, each man finds refuge with his mother. Through the mothers' adept interpretation of powerful cultural symbols, each man's life is saved.

VII. FUNCTIONAL INTERPLAY: *TOULA* ABSORBS AND CORRECTS THE FATAL ERRORS COMMITTED IN *THE EPIC OF ASKIA MOHAMMED*

What the *Epic of Wagadu*, its continuation in *Toula*, and its ongoing relevance in Zima magical practices provide is a model for understanding the way in which oral tradition, contemporary written narratives, and magico-religious practices communicate. This model facilitates a deeper analysis of the intertextual relationship between *Toula* and *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and a clearer grasp of how contemporary Francophone literature has become host to symbolic corrective rituals in the Zarma-Songhoï context. The examination of this relationship will necessarily implicate common tensions between the sacred and the profane, between the interests of the individual and the demands of the community, which often threaten those interests. However, the main focus of this study will bend toward what I perceive to be Hama's advocacy of local culture as a competent mediator between opposing parties.

In *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and *Toula*, one finds two different postures vis-à-vis indigenous culture. Askia, of the oral text, and King Baharga, of the modern written text, face challenges that put into sharp relief the way in which adherence to sacred and communal values demands the sublimation of personal desires. While Askia allows individual interests to guide a rebellion against tradition, King Baharga's actions exemplify the righteousness of upholding

such traditions. By beheading his king, Askia commits an irreparable affront against tradition because this action represents a culturally inappropriate response to the crime he perceived in the king's slaughter of his nieces and nephews. Askia's approach does not operate within the strictures of local culture. Furthermore, it makes use of a culturally ignorant advisor: a foreign, Muslim spirit who is antagonistic to cultural values.

In contrast, when faced with his own dilemma, King Baharga looks to tradition and embraces a collective, rather than individualistic, approach to managing his challenge. While Askia turns away from his culture for advice, King Baharga turns toward his culture, thus gaining the support of culturally qualified and knowledgeable advisors who help him in managing the crisis. Askia's approach is essentially anti-conformist and, consequently, doomed to fail. King Baharga's approach is conformist. As a result, King Baharga's solution ensures a successful resolution of the conflict.

In reading *Toula* as a work that enters into an intertextual dialogue with *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, it is possible to see King Baharga's acts as restoring harmony to a community harmed by Askia's moral turpitude and debasing of traditional cultural values. The collusion of literature and supernatural practices in this culture enables Hama's gesture. Hama effectively exploits this special relationship between literary and supernatural spheres in order to symbolically draw Askia into a new, fictional narrative environment. Through the character of King Baharga, a character who faces a dilemma similar to that of Askia, Hama demonstrates the feasibility of locating a culturally appropriate solution to the crisis. King Baharga's adherence to traditional values allows him to alter his title. He goes from "Baharga *Béri*" to "Baharga *Koy*," a title with positive connotations. Askia, however, undergoes an opposite transformation from the

culturally positive title of *Mamar Kassai* to *Askia*, a name that portrays him negatively. This shift underscores his failure.

VIII. PARALLEL FATES: ASKIA AND KING BAHARGA

Both Askia and King Baharga evolve in a closed traditional society with a highly delineated separation of powers between women (and those attached to their line) and men (and those attached to their line). While the former holds spiritual power, the latter holds political power. The prosperity and harmony of the entire community depends on the strict observance of this inviolable balance of powers. No member of the community can assume positions of power in both the spiritual domain and the political domain at the same time.

What drives the conflict in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* is King Sonni Ali Ber's murder of his nieces and nephews. Askia's internal conflict derives from the fact that the victims are his siblings and their murderer is his maternal uncle. So long as his uncle lives, Askia has a legitimate fear for his own life. Two major issues strain Askia's ability to resolve the conflict: 1) religious and familial rules give maternal uncles the right to control questions of life and death as they regard their nieces and nephews; 2) Askia is ineligible to assume the throne and take over political power. Consequently, Askia cannot be able to resolve his conflict without seizing power that he is culturally denied.

Next, in a culture that highly values the role of elders in advising younger generations, Askia finds himself at a serious disadvantage. Where a father might normally serve as a strong, knowledgeable advisor, Askia has the misfortune of having a father who is foreign to local culture. Being both a supernatural being and a figure linked to by name to Islam, the spirit

Aboubacar cannot properly advise his son. Aboubacar is a figure that has stained Songhoï traditional values by luring the desperate Kassaï (Askia's mother) away from her husband and bedding her. From their adulterous union came Askia. In this highly conservative culture, Aboubacar is a dangerous figure. His intervention produces a son who becomes a weapon against Songhoï traditions. When Askia beheads the king, he symbolically slays his own culture.

Askia's transgression against the sacred values is a disruption and inversion of the sacred order. By killing his maternal uncle, Askia kills what Songhoï tradition envisions as the inviolable. This act also puts political power into his hands. Being a member of the female branch of his family, Askia is culturally ineligible for this role. By arrogating for himself the powers reserved for the male branch of a family, Askia seizes both spiritual and political power. This fundamentally disrupts social harmony and violates the culture's separation of powers.

Just as the *Yenendi* ceremony in Simiri demonstrates continued concern for the repercussions of Mamadi's violation of ancient Wagadu cultural values, Askia's transgressions have provoked similar contemporary reactions. His acts are understood as having stained the whole Zarma-Songhoï community. Consequently, they qualify, as did Mamadi's acts, for retroactive corrective rituals. I argue that Hama undertakes such a corrective ritual, not within the realm of the supernatural, but within that of the literary.

As noted above, *Toula's* King Baharga faces a dilemma whose only resolution seems to lie in acts that would violate traditional sacred values. In order to end the drought and return rains to his community, the gods ordered King Baharga to offer a human sacrifice to the local water snake spirit. King Baharga initially decides to designate his own daughter, Koundoum, as the sacrifice. This decision poses three fundamental problems: 1) King Baharga, belonging to the masculine branch, does not have the right to preside over spiritual matters and rituals as this is

the domain of the female branch; 2) A political leader cannot also be a spiritual leader; 3) As the father of Koundoum, King Baharga does not have the authority to make life and death decisions for his daughter as this is the role of the maternal uncle. As king and father, King Baharga is ineligible to decide independently a solution to his community's crisis. In his initial decision to act unilaterally and offer his own daughter in sacrifice, King Baharga acts parallel those of Askia and Mamadi. He appears to be rejecting the strictures of the sacred and to order to affirm his individuality and power in this traditional, communal society.

As long as King Baharga refuses the help of his community in addressing the problem of the drought, the king risks violating tradition just like Askia. But Hama would have a different fate for King Baharga. Appealing to immeasurable magical and literary powers of ambivalence, Hama creates a framework for King Baharga's culturally appropriate resolution of the local crisis. The only conceivable way for King Baharga to attain legitimate spiritual authority necessary to designate a human sacrificial victim is for him to temporarily leave the male branch and join the female branch so that he can take advantage of the role of a maternal uncle. This position, we remember from *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, is a formidable one as it entitles this uncle to complete control over the life and death of his nieces and nephews. For King Baharga, this switch in branches simultaneously strips him of his political power and grants the spiritual power needed to name a sacrificial victim. Through Hama's skillful literary exploitation of ambivalences inherent in the Songhoï categorization of female and male family branches, King Baharga finds solutions to his crisis that were not available to Askia.

It is important to remind that Hama's *Toula* makes direct reference to the oral legend of *Toulé*. In the oral legend, the Gourmantché geomancer was responsible for identifying an appropriate human sacrificial victim. By placing King Baharga in the position of a geomancer,

Hama deviates from the oral legend. The significance of this deviation cannot be understated. In *Toula*, the god who controls the rains asks the king to choose designate a sacrifice. The god gives the king the option to give up his own daughter and any other girl whom he cherished: "Pour te punir de ton inobservance de la coutume, je veux le sang de ta fille ou d'une fille qui t'est aussi chère. C'est à toi de choisir" (187). In this brief statement the god serves as a sort of cultural advisor to the king. Unlike Askia, who seeks advice from the foreign, Muslim spirit Aboubacar, King Baharga here gains the perspective of a cultural "insider." This god provokes the king into following custom. This move is by no means disinterested. This return to traditional ways ensures prosperity not only for the human community, but for the god himself. His wellbeing is dependent upon the human community nourishment of him through belief, worship, and periodic sacrifice. In Zarma-Songhoï supernatural beliefs and practices, a god whose cult is disrupted by the humans gradually loses his vital energy, disintegrates, and eventually dies. Thus, as the god himself proudly claims, he is a fervent observer of tradition and that it was the humans who are at fault:

Que crois-tu roi des Baharga? Tu m'as offensé en me délaissant. Pour te punir de ton inobservance de la coutume, je veux le sang de ta fille ou d'une fille qui t'est aussi chère. C'est à toi de choisir. Je ne veux pas de ton vieux sang. Je n'ai pas le droit de m'en repaître. La coutume me le défend. Moi, j'observe la coutume. (187).

By intervening to persuade the king to return to his ancestral ways, the god reveals his self-interest. To have the community return to tradition means the restoration of the defunct cult. In this moment of disrupted socio-cultural harmony and prosperity, the supernatural stands as an autonomous third culture that intervenes to renew social harmony. Because the supernatural in *Toula* identifies with the autochthonous culture and exemplifies adherence to local indigenous cultural values, unlike the Muslim intruder Aboubacar in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* whose

exogenous solution only brings chaos and uprooting, this autochthonous supernatural intervention in *Toula* also stands as a culturally-competent mediator of human conflicts.

The god in *Toula* is aware that King Baharga is ineligible to designate a sacrificial victim. By creating a moment of ambivalence, the god (or the author?) offers to King Baharga a different solution to his dilemma. He hints at a solution that would allow for the king to fulfill his obligation to designate a sacrificial victim in a manner that conformed to traditional values. In this moment, ambivalence functions as the author's *arme miraculeuse* designed to facilitate the successful denouement of the dilemma. In Zarma-Songhoï supernatural beliefs and practices, ambivalence, or the ambiguous, represents a powerful force because it creates a space of new possibilities. Once this ambivalent virtual space is open, King Baharga finds himself in the same position as Askia on the verge of committing irreparable errors. Unlike Askia, the king has the advantage of this miraculous ambivalent moment made available to him through the cultural leadership of the god. King Baharga finds himself at the crossroads of powerful energies where cosmic forces of the female branch and the male branch symbolically shape the world of humans. Here, the king is able to temporarily cross over the symbolic boundary between the male branch to the female branch, thus losing his political position. This imbues him with the spiritual power to, as maternal uncle, designate not his own daughter but his uterine niece Toula as the sacrificial victim.

Askia committed a sacrilegious misconduct because, as a member of the female branch, he inverts and perverts the sacred rules by violating the sacred boundary between political and spiritual powers. One can read *Toula* as containing a corrective ritual as King Baharga (Askia's descendent), following his switch to the female branch, he opts not to turn away from tradition as Askia did. King Baharga does not ignore the limits of his position in the male branch. It is only

while aligned with the female branch that he decides the fate of Toula. This demonstrates King Baharga's full respect for the traditional limits of his power. He does not, like Askia, ignore the boundaries between political and spiritual spheres or forsake the sacred relationship between maternal uncle and his nieces and neighbors. King Baharga symbolically corrects Askia's error by appealing to the supernatural and tradition. This act supports the notion that adherence to traditional cultural values enables a return to social harmony and prosperity.

Following King Baharga's designation of Toula, harmony is restored. Interestingly, this King Baharga is greatly transformed. Prior to his successful management of the dilemma, the king is simply referred to as Baharga Béri. Béri means village elder. After the resolution of the conflict, the king is called Baharga Koy. Koy means the king. King Baharga, having proven himself to be a competent leader, has his power confirmed. While King Baharga's name shifts in a positive direction, Askia's name shifts toward the negative. Askia begins as "Mamar Kassāi," a positive title that aligns him with Zarma-Songhoï tradition. After his violation of tradition, he becomes "Askia," a contestatory title that reflects the culture's rejection of his misdeeds. It is only after having symbolically corrected Askia's errors that King Baharga undergoes a positive transformation and comes to enjoy the cultural privileges connected with a full respect for tradition.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In writing *Toula*, Nigérien author Boubou Hama poses a fundamental question: in the face of overwhelming adversity or an overwhelming threat to the existence of the community, is our Zarma-Songhoï culture capable of summoning an adequate and culturally appropriate response?

In response to this question, Hama operates a profound denaturation and manipulation of one of the most important Zarma-Songhoï supernatural practices, the occult worship of the Gorou-Gondi, or the water snake spirit. Consequently, the author's complex response should be envisioned as a form of cultural resistance based upon a skillful integration of symbolic ethnographic elements that frame a dialogue with his own Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions. Out of this oral tradition have emerged the epics of *Askia Mohammed* and of *Wagadu* (Ghana Empire) which serve as models for Hama's work. Indeed, it is through dialogue with oral literature that Hama creates his work on cultural resistance.

In effect, through the close study of Zarma-Songhoï culture and history and of the levels of connection between Hama's work and various indigenous, oral traditions related to *Toula* and to *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, one confronts a rare sort of interplay between oral traditions and modern literature. It is at once a political gesture and an act that collides with Zarma-Songhoï spiritual practice. With *Toula*, Hama offers a symbolic response to two different but related provocations. The first is the destruction of ancient Zarma-Songhoï society as depicted in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. The second is the destruction of contemporary Nigérien society at the hands of Hama's former political ally and the then Nigérien President Diori Hamani. As Hama penned *Toula* during the drought of 1970s, one must see Hama's literary presentation of the manner in which a leader works to alleviate the suffering of the drought-stricken Zarma-Songhoï

as paralleling the Nigérien governmental response to the drought in the 1970s. Benefitting from this angle of approach, the reader arrives at a special function of intertextual dialogue in this work. Here, it serves as a veil to conceal a bitter political satire against the government of President Diori Hamani. Hama effectively uses intertextual dialogue to condemn Hamani's and the government's failure to look inside the culture for appropriate authentic solutions for the terrible drought of the 1970s, a drought that decimated communities, livestock, vegetation and other resources of post-independence Niger.

Beyond serving as a tool for discrediting the negligent Hamani government, intertextual dialogue also serves a ritualistic function. When considering Zarma-Songhoï spiritual practices, Hama's cautionary tale against violating sacred cultural rules places fictional characters in the modern text in direct dialogue with figures from oral narratives, such as Askia in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. In effect, through the local oral tradition, Askia Mohammed commits a series of grave transgressions against fundamental Songhoï values. These acts constitute a moral stain against the whole of Songhoï tradition. As such, they disturb the peace of the ancestors, compromise the prosperity of the current generation and threaten the wellbeing of future generations. Thus, from the perspective of this society, Askia's moral turpitude enters a category of cultural wrongs that provoke the punishment of the entire society. This punishment touches the whole community and leaves on it a permanent moral and spiritual stain. Consequently, it represents a deep threat to the prosperity of future generations until the community undertakes the appropriate compensatory ritual to cleanse the whole of the Songhoï community, from the manes of the ancestors down to the future generations, of this mark. In order to restore the socio-cultural harmony that was disrupted within the frame of the oral text, Hama undertakes in the frame of his modern text a simulacrum of corrective ritual. Through the literary dialogue with the

Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions, Hama, the modern author, symbolically rectifies the ruinous mistakes of Askia whose irresponsible conduct, according to the oral traditions, symbolically destroyed and eventually dislocated the once-prosperous Songhoï Empire.

By looking for privileged methods to interact with his culture and his community's past, Hama pointedly reinforces the notion that not only is the Zarma-Songhoï indigenous culture capable of efficiently managing and mitigating internal trauma, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that autochthonous cultural elements will ensure the community's growth and wellbeing. Hama's usage of intertextual dialogue underscores this belief.

In the end, with *Toula*, Hama offers a symbolic response to *Askia* and forces consideration of the necessity of adhering to certain essential, inalienable, autochthonous cultural values. The choice to respect these values facilitates the emancipation and prosperity of the individual and his/her community. The choice to reject these values precipitates a deep alienation from them and, as a consequence, gravely threatens the individual, the community, and, most importantly, one's entire lineage. By righting fatal wrongs, Hama not only helps to achieve societal balance and harmony but most importantly to propose to future Songhoï generations a model for cultural success much in line with the didactic character of this writer. Indeed, ever true to his ideology, Hama supplements his satire with explicit directives on how to effectively use culture to resolve conflicts.

Divided in three parts (Part I, II, and III), this project aimed at attempting to answer some fundamental questions regarding the intertextual dialogue between contemporary and traditional Zarma-Songhoï narratives. This study begun with a General Introductory Chapter that engaged with the problematic of the relationship between African oral traditions and contemporary African literature written in European languages. I contend that the relationship is more

significant and more substantive than one of stylistic continuities or an embrace of echoes. In order to delve into the richness of this relationship, one must adopt an anthropological approach. Such a step brings directly into view indigenous spiritual beliefs that penetrate African oral tradition.

In Part I, I engaged with the problematic *Epic of Askia Mohammed*. If I had to go some great length disqualifying this story as (mis)representing an epic glorification of Askia's (absent) epic heroism, it is because, in my view, conceiving of this story as being sung to glorify Askia, as Thomas Hale proposed, represents a serious cultural offense due to the nature of the transgressions that Askia commits. This first section begun with Chapter One devoted to presenting the Zarma-Songhoï epic as it relates to the issue of the affiliation of the African corpus to the genre. Chapter Two reviewed Thomas Hale's *Scribe, Griot, And Novelist*. Chapter three and Four of this first section aimed at demonstrating how contemporary readings of this purported "epic" are not compatible with Songhoï ethnography and oral tradition. I argued that the misconceptions derive from rampant decontextualized analyses that include the egregious warping of Zarma-Songhoï mores, traditions, and oraliture.

By placing supernatural and spiritual beliefs at the center of my analysis, it becomes clear that the narrative ceases to reflect any characteristics of an epic narrative. It turns from being a glorification of Askia Mohammed's heroism into a poignant display of his abject failure to adhere to sacred Songhoï values. Here I made three principle findings. The text served as: 1) a text primarily used for genealogical purposes as opposed to previously-believed epic text; 2) a political statement against Askia's usurpation of power; and 3) a cultural resistance against Askia's transgression of sacred ancestral values, especially against the principles of *boro-tarey*, the unbreakable "link of the milk." Askia's transgressions, especially as they relate to his

violation of *boro-tarey*, exemplify moral decadence of the most abominable nature for which Askia receives bitter, swift and inescapable retribution. The type of punishment he receives can, then, only be envisioned as *hasan nda hini*, the imminent and inescapable supernatural retribution that mercilessly afflicts violators of the *boro-tarey*. Thus, his acts enter a category of cultural wrongs that can be spiritually righted through ritual. Finally, Chapter Five of Part I articulated the story of *Askia* within a tense power struggle between Islam and Zarma-Songhoï indigenous tradition. The mockery perceptible through the portrayal of Askia's Islamic profile underscores, I argued, a textual resistance against Askia's violations of Songhoï ancestral ways.

In Part II, I presented Boubou Hama's *Toula*. That section examined the different versions of the *Toula* story and how Hama responds to them. I argued that his relationship with not only these antecedents but with other oral traditions, such as *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* and *Wagadu*, should be envisioned as a form of cultural resistance based upon a skillful integration of symbolic ethnographic elements that frame a dialogue with his own Zarma-Songhoï oral traditions. The most salient aspect of the cultural resistance found in *Toula* rests on the distortion of an inviolable institution in traditional Songhoï culture: the sacred separation of powers between the political powers held by the masculine branch of a family and the spiritual powers held by the female branch of a family.

This issue became the angle at which Hama engages *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Thus, in Part III, I fully explored how the contemporary writer Hama responds to 15th century griots around the critical issue of sacrifice as a tool to manage tensions between the female branch and the male branch. More specifically, this section examined how the traditional storyteller and the modern writer exploit the thematic of the supernatural in a manner that accentuates the conscious

call-and-response efforts between authors distanced by at least three centuries and expressing themselves in two different languages and in two different modes.

This move has, as I argued in Chapter I of Part III, significant political import. For Hama, who was the President of the *Partie Progressiste Nigérien* (PPN-RDA), progress does not necessarily come from the wholesale rejection of one's own cultural identity. Nor does it mean adopting imported values whose incomplete assimilation frequently leads communities into complete chaos. In *Toula*, Hama works to show how progress is indigenous to the Zarma-Songhoï culture. To be progressive does not mean to attempt to assimilate to foreign values. Rather than accepting an uneasy integration of these values, a Zarma-Songhoï needs only to look within his own culture to find authentic strength and confidence. This advocacy for conceiving of one's own culture as a source of progress is conditioned, however, by the respect that one has for one's own cultural identity. This respect is the hallmark of Hama's work and forms the didactic character of Hama's identity as a writer.

In Chapter II of Part III, I concluded the study with a discussion of how Hama, through *Toula*, operates a simulacrum of a corrective ritual designed to cleanse the entire culture from the stain of Askia's crimes, crime which represent the act of forsaking traditional values and laws. When Hama takes up the story of *Toula*, he engages in a compensatory practice that, I argued, subtly aligns Hama's gesture with those who practice such ritualistic magic. Put differently, I contended that Hama arrogates for himself the powers of a Songhoï sorcerer and uses his text to simulate a corrective, magical ritual. *Toula's* intertextual absorption of *Askia Mohammed* is, on one level, certainly a case of traditional oral literature influencing contemporary written literature. Such an observation is commonplace and follows the tack of much current research on Francophone texts. A thorough study of these texts indicates something much different than a

simple case of oral traditions influencing contemporary writers. It is my argument that the intertextual relationship between Hama's text and the tale of *Askia* plays at something deeper: a stylized, ritualistic act designed to have concrete, corrective effects in real life. As mentioned earlier, Hama, indeed, operates within the literary environment of *Toula* a veritable magical corrective ritual that parallels such rituals that real-life Zarma-Songhoï practitioners undertake.

While I have restricted my study of intertextual dialogue between Hama's *Toula* and indigenous oral narratives, leaving out other stories related to water serpent spirits and *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, this area of research demonstrates considerable depth. The value of continued work in this field emerges, in part, from an initial critical responsibility to correct previous misleading and erroneous scholarly research. Through the application of ethnographic and cultural knowledge, textual analysis stands on firmer ground. The restoration of these texts to their socio-cultural context allows for deeper levels of understanding and analyses, particularly as it relates to issues of relationships between contemporary and traditional narratives.

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