THE EPIC OF KAMBILI
By Fritz Pointer
INTRODUCTION

Some Background on the Epic

African oral epics, seen against the background of the genre as a whole, have served, and still serve today, the same purpose in Africa as they have for nearly all of the world's cultures; that is, to instruct people, while entertaining them, about the values, traditions, great heroes and historical events significant to their culture. They are constructed around the exploits of an epic hero, a human being with certain supernatural characteristics, who overcomes major obstacles and eventually triumphs, both spiritually and physically, for the sake of his people. In other words: Departure, Fulfillment, and Return. Or, as the inescapable Joseph Campbell puts it in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*: *"separation – initiation – return:* which might be named the nuclear unit of monomyth" (30).

Epics, universally, are also significant in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people and are usually narrated or performed to the background of music of one or more accompanists. *The Epic of Kambili*, in the hunter's tradition, celebrates the legendary world of Almamy Samori Toure, "the last great Malinke emperor who answered the exigent call for national survival, organizing diverse groups in and outside Mali in one of the longest, most successful defensives against European conquest. He was the last epic hero of Mali before the colonial era whose courage, dignity, willfulness, and military genius inspired the last innovative productions of the *jeliya*" (Salaam 485). Jeliyu or griots are "a caste of traditional singers who only marry within their own caste, thereby safeguarding their secrets and their hereditary monopoly of the profession" (Salaam 60). *The Epic of Kambili*, like all epics, is an artistic vehicle, a literary artifact, of a people's cultural record.

Unfortunately, "the study of the African epic was born in denial" according to Professor Isidore Okpewho ("African Oral Epics" 98). In his seminal book, *Heroic Poetry* (1952), C. M. Bowra has difficulty recognizing the existence of epic or "heroic" poetry in Africa. When discussing pieces of historical praise poetry and lament songs from Uganda and Ethiopia, he observes that in spirit they are "close…to heroic outlook" but that, and here he twists the knife, "the intellectual effort required" to advance such texts to the level of heroic poetry " seems to have been beyond their powers" (Okpewho 98).

Yet another, now hackneyed, disclaimer came from Ruth Finnegan. In her groundbreaking book *Oral Literature in Africa* she dismisses claims of existence of epic traditions in Africa on the basis of form in which available texts were presented to editors. That is, "they do not really qualify to be called 'epics,' because they have been transcribed mostly in ordinary prose, with occasional snatches of song. For this reason, according to her, they do not have the sustained formal characteristics of the established European tradition" (98). Finnegan's conclusion, "epic seems to be of remarkably little significance in African oral literature" (99). There is no better time than now to quote from John Johnson's study of *Son-Jara*: "The Mande Epic":

> It is my hope that the rigid model of Greek epic, a dead tradition that can no longer be observed in action, will not continue to dominate scholarly thinking. The Greek tradition is only one of many. In several places in Africa and elsewhere, living epic traditions can be observed in their natural contexts. (60)

In fact, in her book *Trojan Horses*: "Saving the Classics from Conservatives" Page duBois informs us "recent scholarship suggests that the epic poems attributed to [Homer] are the work of a long oral tradition of nameless bards" (39). In addition, Dr. duBois adds:

> We need to understand our place in global history. America's cultural debts to Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Pacific Islands, to all those parts of the world…One can no longer claim that Hebraic and classical Greek civilizations are the sole origins of a pristine Western culture; we owe to them only part of what we are. And national identity, the understanding Western nation-states have of themselves, is only part of what students who live in the global twenty-first century need to know. (49)

So, it is important, today, to include the histories of Africa, Asia or Latin America, for example, in introductory civilization and literature courses, rather than to continue teaching only the European heritage in Western civilization courses (49). Our heritage as Americans, as a people, as a world is far deeper and complex than that of the Greek. As much as we can learn from the study of ancient Athens, we must also remember it was a slave-owning, militarist, imperialist, xenophobic, patriarchal culture (40).

Examination of several African epics, especially *The Epic of Kambili*, shows that their plots are as complicated as in the best epics from anyplace or period in the world. They employ all the familiar elements of characterization, from physical description to interior monologue and other devices of psychological probing of character, and they do not leave out exploration of character by action, dialogue, or observation through the minds and comments of other characters. Chinweizu continues, "In the matter of narrative texture, like all oral traditions they

display precise and deft use of detail as well as summations, variations in perceptual distance, and montage. Their presentations of their stories also employ philosophical reflections on human life, on death, fate, destiny, and the paradoxes of social existence, whether in the narrator's voice or in the voice of characters within the tale. And proverbs, aphorisms, and judicious allusions are not at all lacking" (59). So, the study of the African epic is, as Okpewho would have it, of necessity, a comparative undertaking (111). He goes on: "Those who resist this imperative either do not really understand the Indo-European traditions they so eagerly separate from the African or are not willing to do the demanding work entailed by this field of study. To insist that the African epic should be studied only on its own terms is to promote a narrow-minded ethnocentrism of dubious merit and intent" ("African Oral Epics" 111). Dr. Nubia Salaam, in her 2005 Ph.D. Dissertation, poignantly concedes: "The biggest revolutionary leap made in the post-colonial period was the recognition (by the white West – my note) that a historical epic tradition actually existed in Sub-Saharan Africa. Since that time a steadily growing archive of African epics have been collected and published" ("An Investigation of Malinke Historiography" 148).

The promulgation of values and didactic intent of many epics occurs in the very theme and structure of these mythic, coming of age stories. For example, the absolutely ecstatic joy of a mother and community when a young man or woman is able to stand on his or her own two feet. For here is the first victory and triumph. Mamadou Kouyate, narrator of *Sundiata:"* an Epic of Old Mali*"* states:

> When Sogolon saw her son standing, she stood dumb for a moment, then
> Suddenly she sag these words of thanks to God who had given her son
> the use of his legs:

"Oh day, what a beautiful day,

Oh day, day of joy;

Allah Almighty, you never created a finer day.

So my son is going to walk!" (21)

Afterwards, Sundiata's griot, Balla Fasseke, voice of the community, pointing his finger at Sundiata, cries:

"Room, room, make room!

The lion has walked;

Hide antelopes,

Get out of his way." (21)

This is a rebirth. A "virgin" birth, if you will, since as Dr. Ford notes "it is a birth not from another but from oneself, from one mode of self-awareness to another" that is, from our childhood dependence to adult independence and responsibility (37). And, Joseph Campbell, in his seminal study of world mythology *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, says concerning the Biblical story of the virgin birth:

> The story is recounted everywhere; and with such striking uniformity of the main contours, that the early Christian missionaries were forced to think that the devil himself must be throwing up mockeries of their teaching wherever they set their hand. (309)

Images and stories of virgin birth, coming of age and rebirth are universal in traditional tales as well as myth. Creation myths and stories are also universal. Of course, to consider such myths as science or history is absurd. Even our beloved Dr. Martin Luther King's views on the divinity of Jesus include:

> To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bide to follow, is divine in an ontological sense is actually harmful and detrimental. To invest Christ with such supernatural qualities makes the rejoinder: "Oh, well, he had a better chance for that kind of life than we can possibly have…" So the orthodox view of the divinity of Christ is in my mind quite readily denied (Carson *Papers of Martin Luther King* Vol 1 150).

King also understood the "Second Coming" metaphorically, as "every time we open our hearts…every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road…The final doctrine of the second coming is that whenever we turn our lives to the highest and best there for us is the Christ" (*Papers* 270). Nor did King believe a whale swallowed Jonah, that Jesus was born of a virgin or that he ever met John the Baptist (*Papers*, Vol. 6 78).

Coming of age, a second coming, involves expectations that question, for example, men dressing as boys their entire lives. Why don't Americans generally and American males, in particular, want to grow up? Why do they cling to and believe in infantile stories, even as adults? In the words of Joseph Campbell:

> We remain fixated to the unexorcised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the necessary passages of our adulthood. In the United States there is even a pathos of inverted emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young; not to mature away from Mother, but to cleave to her. (11)

The heroic epic image is one response to infantilism: it is said of Kambili "He was to save all the people, And rescue all the great farmers," And, most interestingly, "save all the learned holymen, And save all the wandering merchants, And save all the travelers" (l. 1114-

18). Being "born again" includes more than "born again" Christians but anyone who has been reborn to a new life calling as we find in epic characters like Sundiata and Kambili, the Cid, Gilgamesh, even Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha. Here, I am most appreciative of the erudition and poignancy of Dr. Clyde W. Ford:

> The mythic wisdom of Africa encompasses a wide terrain. Here are epics as grand as Gilgamesh, heroes as hardy as Hercules, heroines as vexing as Venus, adventurers as outstanding as Odysseus, and gods and goddesses as prolific as the pantheons of India and ancient Greece.
>
> What's more, within the body of traditional African mythology lie themes whose harmonies we know well even today. Here are tales of the miraculous creation of the world, intimations of the virgin birth, lessons of the fall, accounts of death and resurrection of a spiritual hero, reports of the flood, records of the ark's voyage, and symbols of the chalice, blade, and cross. But don't be misled; all this is not the evidence of some early Christianization of Africa's soul. These themes appeared in Africa long before the advent of Christianity, and they are found throughout the world's great mythologies as well, although some Christians might wish us to believe their faith has sole possession. (14)

During this, seemingly, global conflict between Christianity, Islam and Judaism it behooves us to look more carefully and critically at our myths, especially our religious myths. Dr. Sam Harris notes: "It seems that if our species ever eradicates itself through war, it will not be because it was written in the stars but because it was written in our books; it is what we do with words like

'God' and 'paradise' and 'sin' in the present that will determine our future" (*The End of Faith* 12). So, it is worthwhile to consider these further observations of Dr. Ford, who finds that:

> Much of Christianity dogmatically insists on a literal interpretation of its mythology. We are to believe, for example, that the miraculous creation of the world, the virgin birth of its spiritual hero, and his ultimate death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven actually took place. Now these same themes appear in African mythology, but the emphasis is on their **metaphorical** rather than their **literal** interpretation. (14)

And, much the same can be said for Islam and Judaism. Fundamentalists of these world religions often insist on a literal interpretation of their myths and that their holy books are the inerrant, infallible word of a Male Deity. One problem, of course, is that there are several such books: *The Vedas*, *Puranas, The Torah* (2000 BC) *The Avesta* (1000 BCE) *The Mahabharata and Ramayana* (500 BCE) *Bhagavad Gita* (400 BCE) *Upanishads, The The Tripitaka* (560 BCE) *The Lotus Sutra* (500 BCE) *The Bible, The Tao Te Ching* (400 CE) *The Koran* (622 CE) *Ancient Wisdom of Native Americans,* for example. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in particular, promote a Male Deity the world should bow to who speaks only Hebrew, Greek or Arabic; certainly not Apache, Cherokee, Zulu or Mandinka or even English, decides matters as vastly diverse as nuclear war, and the end of life as we know it, to what time dinner should be served. Some Christians even believe the *Bible* was actually written by a Creator of the universe. In her powerful and fascinating study, *When God was a Woman,* Merlin Stone reminds us that for centuries, young Christian, Muslim and Jewish children, male and female have been taught that:

> "a MALE deity created the universe and all that is in it, produced MAN in HIS own divine image – and then as an afterthought, created woman, to obediently

> help man in his endeavors. The image of Eve, created for her husband, from her husband, the woman who was supposed to have brought about the downfall of humankind, has in many ways become the image of all women. (Stone xi)

How, we should all wonder, did this idea ever come into being? Most Christians, Jews and Muslims are aware of the tale of Eve heeding the word of a talking snake or serpent, of all things, in a Garden of Eden, eating a forbidden fruit – from the tree of knowledge, interestingly – and then tempting Adam to do the same; well, at least offering. He actually makes up his own mind; without telling Eve of the specific orders given him by the supreme male deity (Essex 7-8). Eve, now a symbol of all women; certainly those who know and identify with this story, is told by same male deity that she will desire her husband and he will rule over her. Or, more emphatically, "And he shall rule over you." As a result, it was decreed by the male deity that woman must submit to the dominance of man (xii). Merlin Stone adds:

> In prehistoric and early historic periods of human development, religions existed in which people revered their supreme creator as female. The Great Goddess – the Divine Ancestress – had been worshipped from the beginnings of the Neolithic periods of 7000 BC until the closing of the last Goddess temples, about AD 500….events of the Bible, which we are generally taught to think of as taking place "in the beginning of time," actually occurred in historic periods. (xii)

In other words, Abraham, first prophet of the Hebrew-Christian God, Yahweh, is believed by most Bible scholars to have lived no earlier than 1800 BC and possibly as late as 1550 BC (Stone xiii). So, how did this new myth come into being? How did men gain the control that now allows such a self-serving myth to dominate?

> Archaeological, mythological and historical evidence all reveal that the female religion, far from naturally fading away, was the victim of centuries of continual persecution and suppression by the advocates of the newer religions which held male deities as supreme. And from these new religions came the creation myth of Adam and Eve, and the tale of the loss of Paradise. (Stone xiii)

West Africa certainly was not and is not immune to such a universal religious myth and its consequences, Native Americans as well. In *The Wisdom of the Native Americans*, Ohiyesa (Charles Alexander Eastman) recounts "The Hypocrisy of the Christians Among Us":

> I am reminded of a time when a missionary undertook to instruct a group of our people in the *truth* of his holy religion. He told them of the creation of the earth in six days, and of the fall of our first parents by eating an apple.
>
> My people were courteous, and listened attentively and after thanking the missionary, one man related in his own turn a very ancient tradition concerning the origin of the maize. But the missionary plainly showed his disgust and disbelief, indignantly saying, "What I delivered to you were sacred truths, but this that you tell me is mere fable and falsehood!" (128)

So, Native Americans' beliefs, like Africans' are condemned by Catholic, Protestant, and I dare say Islamic believers who teach Biblical and Koranic miracles as literal fact. We must, as Ohiyesa suggests, "either deny all miracles or none, and our American Indian myths and hero stories are no less credible than those of the Hebrews of old" (128). What seems so evident and simple is yet a problem for fundamentalists Christians in America (Black and White) and

fundamentalists Muslims and Jews in the Middle East who cling to infantile fantasies and supernatural beings like undeveloped children. Stephen Hawking, in his most recent book, *The Grand Design* said that in early, dare I say primitive, cultures "ignorance of nature's ways led people in ancient times to invent gods to lord it over every aspect of human life. There were gods of love and war; of the sun, earth and sky; of the oceans and rivers; of rain and thunderstorms; even of earthquakes and volcanoes" (17). Attend an African American or White Fundamentalist church on a given Sunday, especially following a natural disaster, and you will come away amazed that for these mesmerized flocks such a god still exists. For some, 300,000 deaths in the Haiti earthquake was punishment by this loving and compassionate god for the people's association with so-called Voodoo, and Katrina happened because Ellen Digeneres, a lesbian from New Orleans, according to televangelist Pat Robertson.

Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow further inform us that the creation of our universe, one of many, created out of nothing "does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god" (8). Now we know "that nature follows consistent principles that could be deciphered. And so began the long process of replacing the notion of the reign of gods with the concept of a universe that is governed by laws of nature" (17). And, Hawking argues, to say the laws of nature were the work of God, as do Kepler, Galileo, Descarte and Newton (especially a white male god – my note) is "to merely substitute one mystery for another" (29). "A scientific law" Hawking continues, "is not a scientific law if it holds only when some supernatural being decides to intervene…there are no miracles, or exceptions to the laws of nature" (30 and 34). This is as true in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America as it is in Europe.

Kambili, the mythical hero of our study is, after all, a Muslim male savior: " You…saved the farmers…may Allah not take the breath from you, Kambili" (l.2635 and 2638). And, while

some scholars note that the *Koran* is borrowed from both Jewish and Christian myths others believe that it is only intelligible in Arabic. They insist that "as the literal Word of God, the *Koran* is the *Koran* only in the revealed text. A translation can never be the *Koran*….A translation can only be an attempt to give the barest suggestion of the meaning of words contained in the *Koran.* This is why all Muslims, whatever their mother tongue, always recite the *Koran* in its original Arabic" (Hitchens 124). While claiming to be "the literal Word of God (Allah)" the Koran shares supernatural elements of talking serpents, a Noah-like flood, virgin birth, Athena-like angels dictating verses or suras, miraculous cures, Ascensions and Resurrections. There is, for example, " the story of Muhammad's 'night flight' to Jerusalem (the hoofprint of his horse, Borak, is still allegedly to be seen on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque)" and we all know that horses cannot and do not fly (Hitchens 140). Karen Armstrong puts it this way in *A Short History of Myth:*

> Myths about flight and ascent have appeared in all cultures, expessing a universal desire for transcendence and liberation from the constraints of the human condition. These myths should not be read literally. When we read of Jesus ascending to heaven, we are not meant to imagine him whirling through the stratosphere. When the Prophet Muhammad flies from Mecca to Jerusalem and then climbs up a ladder to the Divine Throne, we are to understand that he has broken through to a new level of spiritual attainment. (23)

We also know that dead people do not come back to life; that the earth moving at 1,100 miles per hour at the equator cannot stand still to give Joshua extra daylight to continue killing the Amorites in Canaan; even God or Allah can't break the laws of nature (Hawking (87); that "the

learned holyman (who) transformed himself into a black cat" (*Kambili* l. 1252-53) is not real life. What we might choose to believe is quite another matter. "Mythical narratives" Professor Nubia Salaam informs us, "are the most highly valued forms in traditional history" (15). For many, in traditional, pre-modern, cultures these mythological stories that describe human origins and development are regarded as "sacred texts". So, in most traditional and ancient cultures, "Transmutations, transmigration, mental telepathy, divination are commonly accepted" (81). Even today, astonishingly, in modern Western Christian, Middle Eastern Muslim and Jewish cultures, there is an insistence on the absolute veracity and infallibility of the myths of each, with all others being "ambivalently or marginally recognized within popular culture and absolutely dismissed in scientific discourse" (80). Such myths, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, are sacred, I suppose, because the texts themselves say they are, or various authors say they are. Dr. Salaam offers this explanation of myth provided by W.Taylor Stevenson in *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*:

> The essential character of our personal and social lives is shaped by myth; or it is by the power of particular myths which determine, by way of determining our fundamental presuppositions, the way we shape our cultural, social, political, and economic lives. We do nothing of significance which is not informed my myth in a fundamental way, and the more significant our act, the more this is true. It is the symbols within the context of myth which give rise to all thought. (Salaam 15)

Myths, a people's stories, accounts of imaginary or past events, are important to them. The myths, the stories and tales people believe in inform their behavior. Once we believe something

it becomes part of the very apparatus of our mind, determining our desires, fears, expectations and subsequent behavior (Harris 12).

> A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life. Are you a scientist? A liberal? A racist? These are merely species of belief in action. Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings. (*The End of Faith* 12)

This is a discussion relevant to our current twenty-first century malaise. To wit, most people in this world believe that some Creator of the universe has written a book. Unfortunately, there are many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility (13). These world religions, Dr. Harris says, "are in perverse agreement on one point of fundamental importance: 'respect' for other faiths, or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses. While all faiths have been touched, here and there, by the spirit of ecumenicalism, the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete" (13). The next time a Christian bomber pilot does a "fly-by" or a Muslim suicide bomber destroys him or herself along with many innocents we should consider the role of belief, of faith, of religion, of notions of god and country in inspiring, blessing and rationalizing such insanity.

African heroic epics like *Kambili*, *Sundiata*, *The Epic of Shaka*, *The Mwindo Epic*, *The Ozidi Saga*, and other oral narratives, have been told for centuries by *griots*, and their female counterparts *griottes* in West Africa who are, in the words of the griot Mamadou Kouyate: "vessels of speech…the repositories which harbor many secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we

are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations" (Niane 1). Here, it will prove useful to turn to the insights of John William Johnson who identifies two types of epic forms and traditions, *Political Epic* and *Hunters' Epic*, among the Mandinka:

> Epic in Mali and elsewhere in the Mande world may be differentiated by two sets of criteria. First, a structural differentiation between cyclic and unified epic can be established. Second, two varieties of epic exist which represent the recitation of two different, though related, bardic traditions: that of the casted families and that of the hunters' societies. (*Son-Jara: The Mande Epic* 27)

And, "whether political or hunter, cyclic or unified, epic is considered the highest form of the bard. Its structural complexity contributes to its popularity and high status in Mande folklore" (Johnson 29).

The Epic of Kambili is in the familiar proverb-praise mode of the hunters' tradition. Contemporary scholars, intellectuals and writers (Isidore Okpewho, Daniel Kunene, Njabulo Ndebele, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinweizu, Lucy Duran, Cheikh Anta Diop, Leopold Senghor, Alex Haley, Naguib Mahfouz, Ama Ata Aidoo, Amiri Baraka, Charles Bird, Eric Charry, Thomas Hale, Karen Armstrong, Buchi Emecheta, Maya Angelou, Clyde W. Ford, and Nubia Salaam) using the knowledge and resources of the oral literary traditions of Africa, together with the literary traditions of other cultures, have found works of literary art with themes and structures similar to that in *The Epic of Kambili*. In *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu, et. al. offer the following:

> Our examination of several epics show that their plots are as complicated as in the best epics and novels from any place or period in the world. They employ all the familiar elements of characterization, from physical description to interior monologue and other devices of psychological probing or character, and they do not omit exploration of character by action, dialogue, or observation through the minds and comments of other characters. In the matter of narrative texture, like all oral traditions they display precise and deft use of detail as well as summations, variations in perceptual distance, and montage. Their presentations of their stories also employ philosophical reflections on human life, on death, fate, destiny, and the paradoxes of social existence, whether in the narrator's voice or in the voice of characters within the tale. And proverbs, aphorisms, and judicious allusions are not at all lacking. (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 1983)

Such observations are true for *The Mwindo Epic*, *The Epic of Sundiata*, as well as *The Epic of Kambili*. Kambili, like other epic heroes, is an archetype: a character, an image that recurs in literature throughout the world. He is a hero who reflects Peter Hagin's definition of epic poetry in his *The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry*:

> A fictitious action with fictitious characters can perfectly well fulfill the epic requirement as long as by representing things

> profoundly human, thoughts profoundly human, emotions profoundly human, they gain the amplitude and depth of a picture in which we recognize ourselves and our existence. The abandonment of verse, in the process, is only a necessary adaptation, not the negation of the epic purpose. (Hagin 1964,24)

Epic poetry is national poetry; the hero represents a country or a cause which triumphs with his triumph, whose honor would suffer from his defeat. The mythical Kambili is called upon to remember the lessons of nineteenth century Samori Toure, and thirteenth century Sundiata; their values, their vision, and their victories.

The epic poem is fundamentally a song about the heroic deeds of human beings - lest we forget: Sogolon, the buffalo, mother of Sundiata; Dugo, mother of Kambili, who would be pregnant with him during the day, and at night Kambili would exit her womb and walk about the village; or Mary, the *virgin* mother of Jesus - endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context.

The Epic of Kambili is a success story; an account of how a good hero defeats evil men. Like the suitors in Homer's *Odyssey*, the sorcerers and Imams in Seydou Camara's *Kambili* would: with their backward ways, their fraudulent arts, their impotent promises, their lack of tact or restraint, decivilize the Mandinka, Jimini, Africa. Like the reader of *The Odyssey*, one who listens to or reads *The Epic of Kambili* is quickly impressed by the similar thematic role of the suitors, in the case of the former and the sorcerers and "holy-men" in the latter. The suitors like the hypocritical holy men attempt to personify powers they are incapable of proving. So, at one point the poet sings: "Since the very beginning of the world, The holyman and treachery have never been far apart" (l. 1166-67) and later "Ah! All the holymen are by the mosque, But all of

them are not holymen!" (l. 2009-10). The seeming audacity to be critical of Islam or its representatives is stunning and necessary. The source of that boldness has been somewhat explained by Eric Charry in his eloquent and oh so comprehensive *Mande Music:*

> The hunter ancestry of Sunjata supports the common belief that hunters' societies and their musicians still preserve that pre-empire, pre-Islamic heritage. Epics recited by hunter's musicians have not been as extensively documented as those concerning Sunjata, but they are generally believed to refer to a mythic past that predates Islam and the socially differentiated society of the Sunjata era. (67-68)

Seydou Camara, like Homer, goes to great pains to make the deaths of these charlatans expected and deserved, as both aesthetically and thematically necessary. Odysseus shows no mercy toward the suitors who have tried to take his wife and home and kill his son. Likewise, Samori, Kambili's mentor, need show no mercy toward the sorcerers whose presumptive magical arts prove impotent. The suitors and the sorcerers are summarily executed.

Realism, therefore, is one of the aesthetic resources of the griot. In *The Epic of Kambili*, an aspect of this realism can be seen in the executions of the four unsuccessful sorcerers commanded by Amamy Samori Toure. This central motif, in *Kambili*, is indicative of a certain realism, because Samori is an historically verifiable Mandinka Emperor capable of such actions. As noted by Paul Radin, traditional African orature does not appear to be a literature in which wish-fulfillment plays a big role, or one where we can assume that the hero will triumph at the end or where wrongs will be righted (Radin 1952).

African epic orature depicts universal and archetypal elements: characters, plots, themes and structural devices; it uses realism and magic realism; it speaks the language of metaphor and

metaphysical truth; the Jungian "collective unconscious" myth we create of heroes representing our highest values and aspirations: Krishna, Mithras, Zarathustra, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, The Cid, Sundiata, Kambili. Ernst Fischer, for example, says that:

> Art came to the service of religion only after the craftsman had attained a creditable sureness of hand; only then was he recognized as the repository of a certain measure of beauty and then enlisted as a trustee of communal truth. (Fischer 1963)

The symbiosis between private talent and public truth may help clear up some of the misunderstanding of the mimetic or imitative principle under which the traditional artist operates. Much of what we conjecture to be the creative outlook of the traditional African artist depends on what we think is his society's view of reality (Jordan 1973).It is the image, as Professor Scheub relates, that is the basic material for oral narrative art forms and mediates between audience and reality. Image, Scheub relates:

> is so constructed and manipulated in performance that it shapes the audience's perception of the real. Image is composed of works that are given a unique framework by means of rhythm, for example, and by intonation and gesture, by body movements which tend to dance, verbal and nonverbal elements which tend to drama and song. Image is a visualized action or set of actions evoked in the minds of the audience by verbal and nonverbal elements arranged by the performer, requiring a common experience of images held by both artist and audience, the artist seeking by a judicious and artistic use of images to shape that experience and to give it meaning. (Scheub n.d.)

In African oral literature, orature, rarely has man been depicted as more completely and inextricably anchored in this world, more obsessively earthbound: the human experience is the fundamental frame of reference. Contrary to the belief widespread throughout the world, it appears, man in Africa is never thought of as having once possessed a portion of a divinity and then lost it. Rather, man is observed in his own integral circumstances, and his success and failures are seen in relation to his admirable courage or else of his moral shortcomings (Okpewho 1979). It appears, however, that the traditional African artist is first and foremost a realist artist. Dr. Daniel Kunene bears witness to this category of realism in his seminal work, *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho*, and, at the same time, provides this study with a definition of "hero" that will be a standard against which "heroism" will be judged in *The Epic of Kambili*:

> The heroes are not superior beings except in so far as their earthly deeds make them so, least of all are they gods or descendants of gods. They do not possess supernatural powers, or do battle against other-worldly creatures such as monsters and demons. The do not go on adventures to worlds beyond that of man. Nor are they wont to provide lavish feasts in palatial mansions. In short, they are ordinary human beings engaged in ordinary human activities. Not seldom, however, the poet, in the vividness of his imagination, uses metaphor, imagery, and symbolism which transport these ordinary activities to a level of extraordinariness, and the hero is often described as fighting against monsters, or as being himself a monster or other terrible creature destroying his opponents. But this is never meant to be more than figurative. (Kunene 1971)

The human being, woman and man, is the center of traditional African literature. Though either might act in mystical, bordering on supernatural ways, sometime, in ways inconsistent with an ordinary, reasonable and prudent human beings. So, in most instances, we will find that man does not ascend to heaven to have intercourse with the gods; the gods descend to earth (Radin 1952). And, A.C. Jordan suggests that any "fantastic" world is as germane to the artist's sense of concrete presence as the thicket or cave in the backyard. In spite of the "superior" strength or magical powers of sorcerers, monsters, ogres and other grotesque figures, human beings like Kambili and his mother, Dugo triumphs over them (Jordan 1973). Such human beings are "superior," only in so far as their earthly deeds make them so. This does not preclude the functional and imaginative role of the supernatural and the fantastic in the oral literature of Africa, but this earthbound realism serves to indicate the tremendous empathy the poet establishes between himself and the subjects of his tale, particularly the hero. It is his imagination, his metaphor, symbolism and imagery that transports these ordinary activities to a level of extraordinariness.

Another aspect of aesthetic realism noticeable in *The Epic of Kambili* is the relationship of the poet and poem to landscape. The scholarship of Professor Charles Bird confirms that the field of action in which a traditional Mandinka hunter operates is the bush, an area diametrically opposed to the town or village. These two areas symbolize opposing forces in the Mandinka cosmos. To gain a name sung for posterity means overcoming the deeds of one's predecessors and one's contemporaries (Bird 1974). Success for the hunter presupposes an intimate knowledge and relationship with the land; therefore, the poet, who sings the hunter's exploits, embodies this same reciprocity, this same affinity with his physical surroundings. Isidore Okpewho illuminates our concern here:

> There is perhaps a subtle but quite defensible relationship between art and the landscape out of which grows…And it would appear that a good part of the aesthetic nourishment of traditional African art derives from the nature of the surrounding landscape and the concomitant throb of animate company within it. (1979)

The legends from the savanna, Okpewho reminds us, reflect certain leanness. Even the narrative mirth appears relatively lean in the savanna legends. *The Epic of Kambili* is a good case in point:

> One is struck by a certain haunting and elliptical effect to the whole narrative, and oppressive sense of loss, of decline, and of death. The tales from the forest country tend to explore a victory over death as over its forces, and on the whole reflect the throb, lushness, and elan of the organic life and fellowship around them: a veritable song of life! It is perhaps no accident of detail that whereas in *Kambili* the dominant sentiment is that "all things that stand eventually lie down," in *Mwindo* it is that "whatever sleeps shall awake." (Okpewho)

Okpewho extends his analysis of the relationship between landscape and art to include the plastic arts. Here, he suggests that there is a certain "elegance" in those proportionately long and slender antelope figures, masks, and even ancestral figures that dominate the art of the Bambara and the Dogon of the arid Sudan; here again, the landscape seems to be an influential factor: "There is little in the savanna flora that would supply the kind of stout and lusty wooden material necessary for rotund figures" (Okpewho). In this, and ways noted above, the poet, Seydou Camara exposes and extols significant material and nonmaterial aspects of Mandinka culture.

10. The Story: A Synopsis

The story of Kambili, a mythical hero, is composed of three major sections: the events leading up to his birth, his youth up to his marriage to Kumba, and the events leading up to the death of the Jimini lion-man, Cekura.

The first part opens with Kanji, Samori's field general, going to Samori and asking for his help. Kanji's problem is that he has nine wives, but no children. Samori calls all the omen readers and magicians from Kayirawane to find the answer to Kanji's sterility. If they cannot fully solve the problem, Samori threatens to take their heads.

A number of magicians consult their varied arts for the truth and each discovers that a great son will be born to Kanji. When asked which wife will have the child, the magicians cannot supply the information and they are summarily executed.

Finally, only two seers are left, the Marabout and Bari the Truth-Seer. Both men find out, through their art, that Kanji can only have a son by his rejected wife, Dugo, who has been sent out by the other wives to herd goats. Bari, the Truth-Seer, first discovers the correct answer. The Marabout, through jealousy, tries to trick Bari, but Bari's magical ability is too great and the Marabout withdraws.

This is an extremely interesting aspect of Seydou Camara's Kambili. He does not, necessarily, denigrate Islam but he goes to great pains to show that the knowledge to be gained from Islam is inferior to traditional religion.

Through a series of intrigues, Dugo is brought back to the palace and bedded with Kanji. Soon Kambili is born.

In the second section of the story, Kanji's first wife, who is to blame for all of Dugo's original hardships, tries to kill Kambili, but Kanji rescues him and kills the evil first wife. Kambili grows up to be a great hunter. Numerous episodes are told of his exploits with the animals of the bush. He brings home a leopard, then a buffalo on a leash, thinking them to be his father's stray pets. He becomes a leader of the hunters. This section ends with his marriage to Kumba, a beautiful girl with considerable magical talents of her own.

When it is announced that there is a lion-man in Jimini, Kambili is engaged to destroy him before the lion-man devours the entire village. Kumba learns the identity of the lion-man, and Bari the king of Omens is called to discover the source of the lion-man's secret power.

Bari tells Kumba and Kambili they need some hair from under his arm, and from his crotch; a sandal from his foot; and a pair of his old trousers. Kumba tricks the lion-man, obtains the necessary items, and returns with them.

Bari then tells Kambili to bury the items by the old tree near the market and to consult the idol called Nya-ji. The idol tells Kambili where he is to encounter and kill the lion-man.

Kambili sets the trap, using a young boy as bait. Kumba brings the lion-man into the trap. The lion-man's magic causes Kambili to fall asleep. Just as he is about to devour the boy, the boy's pleas awaken Kambili and he shoots and kills the lion-man. The poem ends with a festive celebration in Jimini, and the Iman grants generous gifts to Kambili and Kumba.

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