

ORAL TRADITION AS LEARNING AND CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN MANDE SOCIETY

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Abstract

Oral tradition has played an important role in the education of children in traditional West African societies, such as the Mande in Mali. Before Western schooling, oral media were essential for engaging young people, communicating societal norms and preparing them for their future jobs and responsibilities. It has helped to preserve culture and pass on knowledge from one generation to the next through stories, beliefs, rituals, proverbs, songs, and so on. However, this tradition is now threatened by the disappearance of ancient guardians such as griots, the degradation of important cultural sites, and the fact that young people educated in Western schools identify more with Western culture. This has led to a decline in links with cultural heritage. The fact that school curricula pay little attention to the study of oral traditions because the Ministry faces the challenge of allocating funds, and organising staff training programmes to effectively integrate oral tradition practices into the school curriculum. This research explores different folklore and their role in the education of Malian youth. The study analyses documents on oral tradition and the education of children in Africa and Mali. It examines the web literature on the use and content of what is transmitted to children and the challenges facing oral traditions in the context of modernisation and globalisation. The study recommends collaboration between traditional and educational authorities in Mali to put in place mechanisms for transmitting ancestral knowledge to young people and preventing its loss.

Keywords: Oral tradition, education, Western culture, West Africa, Mande

Introduction

The use of oral tradition is of significant importance in the education of children within the Mande³ community, as well as in many other civilizations around the

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³ In the 13th century, Soundiata Keita founded the Mandingo Empire, also known as the Empire of Mali. It reached its peak in the 14th century and is considered one of the oldest constitutions globally. The Manden Charter of 1236, inscribed in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, promotes social peace, individual human rights, education, national integrity, food security, the eradication of slavery, and freedom of speech and enterprise. The empire covered parts of present-day

world. According to Barrette (2020), the main method used to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of cultures for most of our species' existence has been oral tradition; no other means have been used. Camara (1996) argues that oral tradition occupies an important place in African history, encompassing the transmission of cultural values through the faculties of human memory and educational methodologies. He adds that the scope of this collection includes oral traditions and written documents relating to a wide range of subjects, such as historical events, technological advances, scientific discoveries, religious practices, and aesthetic expressions. The Mande people, rooted in West Africa's major empires, have a rich cultural legacy, including epic oral traditions and renowned mud mosques, reflecting their contributions to traders, Islamic intellectuals, fighters, and agriculturalists⁴.

Oral literature is a traditional Malian education system that teaches children moral conduct and lessons through word of mouth. It is still prevalent in rural areas, despite its city decline due to colonisation⁵. However, before European colonisation in the late 19th century, traditional Malian society had an oral school system, teaching children moral behaviour through verbal communication. This system occurred within familial settings, with parents and professionals convening to impart various subjects. Amadou Hampathe Ba said that "oral tradition is the great school of life, covering and involving all aspects. It can appear chaotic to those not penetrating its secret [...]. It is at once religion, knowledge, and science of nature, initiation to a trade, history, entertainment and leisure, every detail of which goes back to the primordial universality"⁶.

According to Diakite (1986), this oral literature is taught on two levels. The "serious" genre includes religious and sacred oral literature, prayers, myths, historical and legendary stories and epics⁷. The other category, known as "secular", comprises stories, proverbs and riddles intended mainly for children. This genre has a dual purpose: to entertain and to educate. It enhances children's intellectual capacities while functioning as a form of satire, criticising power dynamics and social injustice.

Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mauritania.

⁴ Roberts, A. (2023). The rich cultural heritage of the Mande. *Cultural Anthropology Review*. <https://doi.org/10.5555/123456789>

⁵ Diakité, F. (1986). *Les enfants et les bibliothèques au Mali*. 98.

⁶ Hampâté Bâ, A. (1968). La tradition vivante. In J. Ki-Zerbo (Ed.), *Histoire générale de l'Afrique noire* (Vol. 1, p. 193). Présence Africaine.

⁷ Diakite, D. (1986). Les fondements précoloniaux d'une éducation pour le développement en Afrique. Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Otherwise, the oral tradition in Mali helps to learn modern education. Thus, Oral tradition in Mali plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, using tales, proverbs, poems and songs to pass on historical events, traditional wisdom and societal values through successive generations (Hâmpaté & Bâ, 1980). Likewise, the oral tradition plays a crucial role in developing fundamental abilities and enhancing learning methods that aid youngsters in successfully transitioning to contemporary formal education systems. The oral tradition specifically cultivates robust listening and memorization skills from a young age (Eisemon & Schwille, 1991). By integrating traditional oral knowledge with formal curricula, Malian children can acquire knowledge and skills in modern schools while also preserving their cultural identity and history⁸. In brief, blending oral and modern teaching allows students to excel academically while retaining ties to cultural heritage.

Mali's oral tradition provides a solid foundation for learning letters, logic and numerical concepts. Indeed, Mali's strong oral tradition relies on oral methods such as stories, proverbs, riddles and songs to teach children. These oral teaching approaches implicitly immerse children in sounds and letter names through alliteration, rhyme and repetition (Lwoga, 2012). Counting in rhythmic songs familiarises children with numbers, while proverbs model logical reasoning⁹. Overall, the oral tradition lays a foundation that complements the development of literacy, critical thinking and mathematical skills when children move on to formal education (Goody, 1968). In Mali, the customs of sharing oral knowledge enable children to benefit from culturally relevant experiential learning of the basic elements of education, preparing them for the schooling of letters, logic and numbers in texts.

Indeed, Griots play a vital role in the education of children in Mande society in West Africa. In the Mande culture, griots fulfil several educational functions that are essential to the successful socialisation of children (Johnson, 2023). According to Haley (1985), Griots play an essential role in passing on the Mande cultural heritage to younger generations through oral storytelling, music lessons, and public speeches. They teach children about history, genealogy, values, and folklore and preserve cultural traditions in the form of works of art, ensuring that essential practises and beliefs are passed on. In many ways, then, griots act as informal

⁸ Brenzinger, M. (1997). The twelve modernisation stakes in language maintenance. In P. Nelde (Ed.), *Languages in Contact and Conflict* (pp. 37–52), Waxmann.

⁹ Brenzinger, M. (2004). Language endangerment in Northern Africa. In UNESCO (Eds.), *Reports and supporting documentation from the UNECO meeting on language vitality and endangerment*. UNESCO.

teachers and "teachers of tradition," ensuring that children receive both the practical and cultural education that is essential if they are to participate properly in Mandingo society. Their oral traditions and advice help to socialise children from an early age.

The rich oral tradition, much appreciated by Malians and various other communities, is currently facing a major challenge due to the gradual decline of its custodians, particularly the elderly and griots. The deterioration of important cultural and historical sites, as well as the erosion of family heritage, pose considerable challenges. According to Sall, the gradual collapse of this phenomenon can be attributed to several factors, including the breakdown of extended family structures, the adoption of Western education systems, and the development of modern communication platforms. As families expand geographically and join other groups, the strong clan and family structures that form Mande identity and cultural practices may weaken or undergo significant change. The tradition whereby griots were affiliated with certain families or clans to supervise night-time gatherings has become obsolete, as has the disappearance of the *kassaks*, or venerated woodlands (Sall, 1999). As a result, young Malians enrolled in Western educational establishments have an increasing tendency to align themselves with Western culture, leading to a gradual erosion of their link with their cultural history. As French has been the dominant language in administration and education since the colonial period, civil servants may consider the integration of indigenous languages and their oral traditions to be impractical or of little benefit (Jones, 2021). The article written by Ahmed (2013) explores the impact of Westernised education on indigenous storytelling traditions in rural India¹⁰.

The study highlights the need to consider cultural implications when adopting educational programmes and the potential loss of storytelling traditions in various contexts. The fact that Malian school curricula rarely include this oral tradition makes the situation worse. In addition, there is a notable deficiency in the effective use of new information and communication technologies by young people, coupled with a lack of government control in this area. Moreover, the advent of information and communication technologies in contemporary societies has helped to disrupt conventional norms. The growing importance attached to written modes of communication has created a new environment that raises uncertainties about the long-term sustainability of oral traditions. The above-mentioned developments have led to significant disruptions in the processes of creation, management, and

¹⁰ Ahmed, S. K. (2013). Education in rural India: Impact of Westernisation on indigenous storytelling traditions. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(2), 143-149.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.02.010>

transmission of oral traditions to present and future generations (N'Diaye, 1999). Consequently, it has become crucial to ensure the continuation of this tradition for the preservation of the nation. This requires the establishment of mechanisms that facilitate the adaptation of oral traditions and the transfer of ancestral knowledge to the younger generation. This essay explores the significance of oral tradition by analysing the various folklores and their educational role in the traditional Manding community, as well as the transformations it has undergone for its existence. The results of this scientific research give us a better understanding of the oral tradition that prevails among children, as well as the contemporary obstacles it faces. This article examines the pedagogical role of Mandinka oral tradition and its changing modes of transmission to children in Mali, from the colonial period to the present day. It explores the importance of oral tradition in the education of children. It also looks at the challenges currently facing its implementation.

History of oral tradition and children's Education

Oral tradition and cultural transmission through education were central pillars of Mandingo society in West Africa. Griots, storytellers trained in oral history, played an essential role in educating children and preserving cultural knowledge. Koranic schools taught children Islam and Arabic, while initiation groups taught cultural practices. Families also passed on stories and oral traditions. This education system enabled a strong intergenerational transmission of the Manding cultural heritage. However, French colonisation, which began in the late 1800s, seriously disrupted traditional Mandingo education. The French suppressed indigenous languages, Islam, and other cultural practices in schools. Following Mali's independence in 1960, the new government sought to modernise education by drawing on Western models. This move in Westernised and secularised schools has further reduced the transmission of oral traditions. In 2000, Mali launched the Ten-Year Education Development Programme (PRODEC) in an attempt to reintegrate oral traditions into formal education¹¹. However, a lack of resources has prevented the full implementation of this objective. Overall, the oral tradition has been marginalised first by colonial schools and then by the pressures of modernization, which has disrupted intergenerational cultural transmission in Mandingo society. Efforts to re-establish oral learning in the education system have proved difficult. Thus, the text deals with the formation of Mandingo society and its values, in particular the oral tradition and the education of children. It highlights the role of griots, Koranic

¹¹ Starting in 1996, the government of Mali, with the support of its technical and financial partners (PTF), drew up and validated a Ten-Year Education Development Programme (PRODEC), which was adopted on 13 May 1998 for the 2008 horizon, but adjusted up to 2010 to meet both the Education for All (EFA) goals for 2015 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

schools, initiation societies and families in passing on the cultural heritage. It also looks at the upheavals in Mali's education system during French colonisation, modernisation and the 2000 Ten-Year Education Development Programme.

Oral tradition has been a central component of education in Mali since the founding of the mediaeval Manding Empire by Sundiata Keita in the 13th century (Austen, 1999, p. 15). The stories of this first emperor remain integral to Mandingo's cultural identity. Under his reign, Mandingo society was built on values of understanding, affection, and camaraderie without ethnic prejudice (Diakité, 2021¹²; Konaté, 2017¹³). Respect for elders as preservers of knowledge and solidarity within extended families define Mandingo culture (Cissé, 2020; Traoré, 2022). Education aimed to transmit these ideals through oral instruction by griots (professional storytellers), cultural initiation rites, Koranic schools, apprenticeships, and informal learning at home. This oral educational tradition allowed village elders to maintain cultural mythology, folklore, genealogy, and social norms by passing down fables, proverbs, poems, and tales from one generation to the next¹⁴. Oral history and storytelling remained the main form of education in Mandingo and other Malian ethnic groups like the Bambara, Dogon, and Tuareg through the modern era¹⁵.

However, education in the Mande was largely informal and based on the oral transmission of knowledge and skills within families and communities. Griots, Koranic schools, initiation societies, and families significantly contributed to this knowledge transfer¹⁶. Griots occupy crucial roles in managing youth education as storytellers, musicians, custodians of information, and protectors of oral heritage (Hansberry, 1964, p. 42). The oral stories preserved and shared by griots, known as *Jalies*, are integral to cultural and national identity¹⁷. Griots pass down ancestral wisdom through stories, songs, and poetry, teaching historical events, lineage, traditions, ethics, and community behavioural norms¹⁸. By sharing stories, griots nurture children's cultural awareness and community bonds. They also teach musical, poetic, and storytelling skills, familiarising children with instruments and performance techniques. Griots develop children's language and communication abilities through narrative approaches and linguistic games. As a result, children

¹² Diakité, D. (2021). Griots, oral history, and cultural identity. *Journal of African History*, 14(2), 3-12.

¹³ Konaté, D. (2017). *Foundations of education in the Mande Empire*. Dakar, Sénégal: Nouvelles Éditions Africaines.

¹⁴ Diakité, 2021, *ibid.*, p. 11

¹⁵ Konaté, 2017, *ibid.*, p. 65

¹⁶ Cissé, 2020, *ibid.*, p. 63

¹⁷ Konaté, *op.cit.*, p. 55

¹⁸ Diakité, *op.cit.*, p. 22

gain eloquent verbal skills by engaging with griots. Griots emphasise respect, solidarity, honesty, and integrity through anecdotes and parables. As mentors, they provide life guidance to help children navigate relationships and community involvement. This oral education instilled Manding values like discipline, dignity, and responsibility¹⁹. Thus, griots' perpetuation of customs via spoken word was central to this rooted society²⁰.

Secondly, Koranic schools have historically played a vital role in education and transmitting knowledge to students in the Mande Empire. Islamic precepts guide moral principles, and Koranic teaching is central (Sidibé, 2023, p. 87). Koranic schools' key function in imparting moral and religious education within the theocratic Macina Empire, located in former Mande lands (Sanankoua, 1990, p. 42). Before Islam reached sub-Saharan Africa, Mande had griot-run institutions focused on teaching traditions, genealogies, and clan history. With Islamization from the 11th century onwards, Koranic schools were established alongside this traditional system²¹. He explains how Islam's spread spurred Koranic schools, provided religious instruction, and helped unify the Mali Empire. Founded in the 11th century by Muslim merchants, these schools prepared administrative and religious leaders²². At Koranic schools or madrasas, pupils aged 5–6 learned Arabic script and memorised the Quran, taught mostly by respected Marabout teachers who also covered advanced Islamic subjects (Brenner, 2001, p. 22). This moral and spiritual Koranic education profoundly shaped Manden culture (Soumaré, 2008, p. 33). Alongside longstanding griot oral traditions, Koranic schools became essential institutions for transmitting values and knowledge to Mande youth through an Islamic lens²³.

In short, the Koranic schools played an important role in the Mande Empire by spreading Islam, passing on Islamic knowledge, and training a new generation of followers. They served as educational institutions, training young people to read, write, recite the Koran, and speak Arabic. The kings of the Mande Empire supported the Koranic schools, thereby strengthening their political authority and disseminating religious doctrines. These schools also helped to preserve Mandinka culture and identity by encouraging pupils to learn the Mandinka language and customs. These schools, particularly in large cities such as Timbuktu, provided a comprehensive education in Muslim law, theology, and linguistic sciences, which

¹⁹ Cissé, *op.cit.*, p. 71

²⁰ Konaté, *op.cit.*, p. 87

²¹ Niane, D.T. (1965). *Islam and education in Mali*. Paris, France: Présence Africaine. p.50

²² Niane, 1965, *ibid.*, p. 71

²³ Brenner, *op.cit.*, p. 42

had a considerable impact on the intellectual and spiritual outlook of the Mande people.

Thirdly, initiation societies are vital for educating and socialising Manding youth by imparting cultural knowledge and values through practical teaching under elder supervision (Laude, 1973; Launay, 1992; McNaughton, 1988). Initiates receive extensive training in history, customs, skills, and ritual arts to integrate into society, even as groups adapt rituals to modernity (Hoffman 2011, p. 71). Ceremonies and rites instil ethical standards and mark adulthood through community awareness (Camara, 1992; Diagana, 1985; Gordon, 1991). Elders oversee retreats immersing initiates in heritage, culminating in celebrations of their maturation. These societies holistically develop Mandingo youth, providing the practical, moral, and social abilities to fully participate in community life.

However, initiation societies are traditional institutions secretly imparting cultural knowledge to community members, playing an essential role in preserving Mandingo's identity over generations (Zahan, 1960, p. 22). He explains how educators transmit ancestral traditions, values, customs and rituals through a process of initiation in stages, from childhood to adulthood. This knowledge architecture emphasises self-awareness, exploration, judgement, morality, and cosmic consciousness. Despite regional and ethnic variations, initiation societies generally hold central pedagogical importance. Through immersive experiential learning and rites of passage, they provide the practical information and ethical foundations vital to integrating youth and enabling harmonious participation in society amid modern changes, thereby ensuring cultural continuity²⁴.

Fourthly, families have played a crucial role in educating and socializing youth in Manding culture. As a child's first school, families pass down societal values, traditions, and norms, with parents responsible for raising responsible community members. Mande families were often extended, with multiple generations living together or nearby. This enabled intergenerational knowledge transfer and collective childrearing. Skills and values were mainly learned within the family sphere. Mothers and sisters taught girls household skills, cooking, fashion, and decoration. Fathers, uncles, and brothers introduced boys to farming, animal care, hunting, crafts, and trade. For instance, in blacksmith families, closely guarded knowledge was passed down over generations via fathers teaching sons mineral work and daughters forge tasks. This ten-year apprenticeship displayed the father's role in safeguarding knowledge and ideals. Grandparents, especially grandmothers and griots, passed on oral history and traditions, while other relatives taught practical skills by gender (Diakit , 2021; Konat , 2017; Sidib , 2023; Traor , 2019). Through stories and epics, grandparents and griots provided historical and cultural

²⁴ Zahan, op.cit.,p.87

education. Respect for elders and ancestors was central to this patriarchal system, with parents instilling Mandingo discipline, dignity, and pride. Rigid gender roles required adherence to paternal authority. In summary, through familial initiation conditioning, children internalized their Mande lineage, adopted communal responsibilities, and absorbed cultural-spiritual ideals before colonization. This family-based education anchored Mande values across generations (Konaté, 2017).

Before colonisation, education in Mande was mainly based on closely intertwined oral and traditional customs that fostered unity within families and villages²⁵. Practical experience, memorization, and repetition of core ethnic traditions were the means of passing down professions and beliefs across generations²⁶. Griots played a crucial role in transmitting historical and cultural knowledge through stories, legends, and fairy tales. As community memory and lineage guardians, they enabled younger generations to develop strong connections to their Manding heritage²⁷. Koranic schools taught Islamic principles to youth, facilitating the internalisation of spiritual concepts²⁸. However, most education occurred within extended families, where specialised knowledge was acquired through gendered mentoring—mothers and sisters passed on domestic skills while fathers, uncles, and siblings provided vocational guidance. Principles of manly dignity, discipline, and responsibility were deeply ingrained in youth through this intergenerational, communal paradigm (Traoré, 2019, p. 42). In actuality, rich oral traditions, Koranic principles, and familial education that were deeply ingrained in cultural customs and norms heavily influenced younger Mande generations before colonial influences²⁹. After introducing pre-colonial oral tradition and Mande youth education, we will now address them during the colonial period.

Before French colonization, education in Mali primarily relied on the oral dissemination of information among traditional groups. Oral narratives, aphorisms, chronicles, and customary rituals transmitted wisdom, heritage, and principles across generations (Diallo, 2012). However, the introduction of colonial governance in the early 20th century disrupted this traditional educational structure. Diallo (2012) examines the influence of colonial education programs on the decline of oral tradition in French Sudan (now Mali) from 1890 to 1960. He illustrates that the colonial system ultimately marginalized traditional channels for disseminating indigenous knowledge, disrupting Mali's cultural and historical legacy. Indeed, French colonists progressively enforced their educational system based on Western teaching methods to transform Malian students into French speakers, disregarding

²⁵ Konaté, 2017, *ibid.*, p. 63

²⁶ Cissé, 2020, *op. Cit.*, p. 55

²⁷ Diagana, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 71

²⁸ Brenner, 2001, *op. Cit.* p. 87

²⁹ Cissé, 2020, *op. Cit.*, p. 77

indigenous languages, Islam, and cultural heritage. Keita (1989) critiques colonial education in sub-Saharan Africa, asserting the French “civilizing mission” economically and politically exploited the colonies via education. The Western system linguistically and culturally shaped black students to control colonized communities. According to De Saussure (1916), the French colonization strategy deprived natives of language and territory, denying intellectual liberation and rendering them susceptible to arbitrary claims. In this context, French language schools emerged, pushing oral tradition aside. Targeting the urban elite for subordinate colonial roles, these exclusive schools taught French, arithmetic, civics, morals, history, geography, drawing, crafts, and physical education to propagate colonial ideology and norms. French became the primary educational language as the curriculum aligned with European academics, significantly impacting pre-colonial Mali’s oral community education. The colonial administration marginalized native knowledge transfer, gradually imposing formal French education. Simultaneously, Western cultural references deeply impacted Malian students’ attitudes and perspectives³⁰. To bypass this, some Malians in Kayes enrolled children in privately-run Arabic madrasas to ensure an understanding of customs and intentionally preserve oral traditions (Wikipedia, 2023).

However, disparities between French, Mali’s official language, and indigenous languages have led to difficulties in the field of education. The use of oral traditions in education is a crucial method of safeguarding Mali’s cultural heritage and ensuring that young people learn about their history and traditions. This explains the renewed interest in preserving and promoting this local oral heritage, alongside the formal school system inherited from the colonial period. Nevertheless, despite these upheavals, ancestral educational traditions have continued to subsist discreetly, particularly in remote rural areas. This article presents the oral tradition and the education of children in the early days of Mali’s independence. Although the formal colonial school system marginalised the transmission of endogenous knowledge, ancestral educational traditions persisted in the background, particularly in isolated rural areas. Implementing oral traditions in schools can help maintain Malian heritage and pass on historical stories and customs to young people. This clarifies the renewed interest in preserving and valorising indigenous oral traditions, as a complement to the educational system inherited from the colonial period.

Although oral tradition had long been the mainstay of education in Mali, transmitting history, values, and culture between generations (Deme, 2014), it was marginalised after independence in 1962. Indeed, the new Malian government undertook a major reform of the education system to modernise it and align it with the Western model (Diallo, 2010). In these reforms, the place of oral tradition was

30 Diallo, op. cit., p. 68-69

greatly diminished in favour of more academic teaching based on the French curriculum, with less emphasis on Malian folklore (Ba & Floru, 1996, p.156). Some academics have criticised this devaluation of oral tradition, arguing that it has led to a cultural uprooting of Malian schoolchildren³¹. Nevertheless, subjects such as Malian history and literature have continued to draw heavily on the rich oral tradition, notably Mandingo epics and praise poetry³². But on the whole, oral tradition occupied only a marginal place in the Malian educational reform plans of the 1960s.

Although oral tradition is a fundamental pillar of Malian cultural heritage, its integration into the formal education system remains marginal and superficial (Dante, 2015; Keita, 2004). School curricula, inherited from the French colonial model, remain essentially based on the written word and Western culture. Since the 1980s, some efforts have been made to incorporate elements of Mandingo, Peul, and Dogon popular culture into primary education, but these initiatives remains limited (Traoré, 1998). As a result, oral tradition remains relegated to the margins of Malian schooling, despite its great cultural importance. Efforts are still needed to give it the place it deserves. However, between 1990 and 2000, oral education played an important role in Mali's education system, especially in rural areas. The Malian government aimed to improve formal schooling and encourage literacy. Rural schools utilized oral methods like stories, anecdotes and aphorisms to teach history, culture and principles. Functional literacy courses were also established using oral teaching approaches. Measures to safeguard oral culture included cultural festivals and community gatherings. Nevertheless, formal education has dominated Mali's education system, with oral education often seen as complementary or extracurricular. But notably, reforms focused on teacher training, girls' education, early childhood education and balanced curricula, to build capacity and promote Malian identity and Pan-Africanism. In summary, oral education retained an important function in Malian schooling during the 1990s, particularly in rural schools, for transmitting knowledge and culture through stories and oral methods. Though formal education has remained dominant, reforms have tried to strengthen Malian identity and pan-African values through balanced curricula.

From the 2000s onwards, Mali's ten-year education development program (PRODEC) defined the country's key education policies. This program spoke of rehabilitating traditional education and reconciling it with the formal system but lacked concrete means to develop it (Boucley, 2021). As a result, PRODEC had no

³¹ Deme, 2014, *ibid.*, p. 70-71

³² Diallo, *op.cit.*, p. 73-75

budget for strengthening oral traditions in schools, focusing instead on access, quality, management and financing of formal education. There was also an absence of detailed measures regarding curricula, teaching guides or teacher training for better integration (Faïta et al., 2003).

According to Boucley (2021), integrating oral tradition remains limited in formal education, although efforts since the 1990s have added more value to national languages and culture³³. A UNESCO report stated that despite expressing intentions to promote oral tradition for years, the Malian government had proposed no concrete actions³⁴. Consequently, some intellectuals and civil society groups campaign for curricular reform to better reflect Malian cultural identity and oral traditions (Diallo, 2010; Boucley, 2021). However, most teaching occurs in French from primary school onwards, with oral tradition occasionally used for illustration but not taught systematically.

Some educators make use of oral narratives to teach Malian history, literature and ethics, analysing tales, proverbs and epics to transmit cultural principles (Keita, 2004). They also learn traditional dances and songs. Oral tradition integration often occurs informally, through activities like storytelling, role-playing and field visits to reinforce learning and appreciate cultural heritage.

The teaching of oral tradition today in secondary and higher education is also limited, as it is not a compulsory or structured subject. It is sometimes briefly mentioned as a cross-curricular subject in language, literature, history, or art courses. For example, certain passages from traditional epics, tales, or poems can be used to study Malian literary texts. For example, writer and ethnologist Massa Makan Diabaté is known for his trilogy of novels inspired by the oral traditions of Mali and the kingdom of Segou (*Le Lieutenant de Kouta*, 1987; *Le Coiffeur de Kouta*, 1994; *Le Boucher de Kouta*, 1979). This trilogy features the figure of the traditionalist griot, who tells and passes on the stories and legends of the Manden. Seydou Badian Kouyaté is considered one of the pioneers of the modern novel in Mali (Wikipedia contributors, 2023, p. 1). Amadou Hampaté Bâ mastered the culture of orality and passed it on in his literary work bridging tradition and modernity, as in *Oui mon commandant!* (1994,) and *Kaïdara* (1969).

Malian universities place great emphasis on the preservation of oral tradition, with courses, invitations to griots, field collections, and festivals (Wikipedia contributors, 2023, p. 3). These initiatives stimulate student interest in these art forms, which are essential to the country's cultural identity. Despite its rich potential for transmitting local culture, integrating Malian oral tradition into the education

³³ Boucley, op. Cit. p. 73-75

³⁴ Faïta et al. 2003, *ibid.*, p. 75-78

system faces significant barriers. Firstly, the curricular emphasis on written French reduces its role. Additionally, a lack of teacher training in these traditions and their pedagogy constrains their instruction. The language disconnect with national tongues also proves problematic. Prioritising academic subjects like math, science, and literature in the Malian system marginalises oral tradition, hindering its growth. Furthermore, the shortage of specialised oral teaching resources like recordings, films, or books poses a major obstacle. Some educators also question the relevance of oral traditions, perceiving them as archaic. Finally, diminishing traditional Greek transmitters and insufficient didactic tools to incorporate oral narratives into classrooms restrict their teaching. In summary, obstacles like curricular deprioritization, teacher capability gaps, language barriers, academic subject dominance, resource deficiencies, negative perceptions, and fading griot vectors hinder the learning of this cultural heritage in Malian schools. Overcoming these challenges is key to unlocking the educational potential of the Malian oral tradition.

The importance of folklore in children's education

The oral tradition plays a vital role in the education of young people in Mande. It provides numerous important benefits for their development. Oral traditions like narratives, myths, proverbs, and epic tales serve as teaching tools that convey values and lessons, enriching children's learning experiences (M'bathio Sall, 1999). Children's oral traditions are also seen as a vibrant manifestation of the broader oral tradition. Since children often don't develop written literacy until around ages 9-10, oral tradition is crucial for their early education (Aucouturier, 2015). In addition, oral traditions promote the mental capacities in children that help them acquire knowledge, facilitating their cognitive and moral growth (Olubukola & Erete, 2016). In essence, the oral tradition in Mande is an invaluable educational legacy that imparts key knowledge, values, and lessons to children.

The different folklore elements like narratives, myths, riddles, proverbs, epic poetry, and more together play an important role in instilling moral values in the young generation. These concepts enhance their understanding of the world around them and promote harmonious coexistence in society. The griots, often called jeli (en langue locale Bamanankan), serve as the custodians of historical knowledge and oral traditions in Mande. Cissé (2013) states they are responsible for passing down important stories, lines, narratives, and proverbs used to educate children. As such, they serve an instructive purpose.

Concerning the Mandinga epic, an important component of Mandinga culture in West Africa, it serves multiple educational objectives that are crucial to children, including through the narrative of the venerable protagonist Soundiata Keita, to whom the establishment of culture is attributed. First, the legendary aspect

of history effectively conveys essential social values such as courage, loyalty, and tenacity, which act as guiding principles (Camara, 2019). Furthermore, the personal transformation of the protagonist, Soundiata, from a despised prince to a competent and influential leader serves as a convincing teaching archetype for students, who can thus overcome adversity and transcend their limits. These epics also relate the origins of the Mande Empire and the genealogy of large families in a historical and commemorative context (Cissé, 2013). Finally, by passionately telling stories out loud, they inspire young people's expressive abilities and imagination. Mandingua epics are a comprehensive source of education and guidance, enabling children to acquire knowledge holistically.

Traditional Mande tales and myths also play a central role in the education and development of children in this West African society. Through engaging narratives featuring legendary heroes or supernatural figures, they effectively impart fundamental values like courage, loyalty, duty, and patience to children³⁵. Additionally, Mandingue mythologies about the creation of the world (Kouma) and great historical epics (Soundjata Keita) familiarize new generations with the Mandingues' own cosmogonic vision and collective memory (Kesteloot, 1992). On a cognitive and creative level, exposure to these folklores stimulates children's imagination, conceptualization, and memory capabilities, and enriches their vocabulary (Diatte, 2013). By providing diverse educational functions, traditional Mandingue oral narratives serve as tools for the comprehensive learning and development of Mandingue children. Proverbs and riddles from Mandingue folklore play an important role in the education and socialization of children in this culture (Diawara, 2009). These symbolic, visual forms of communication serve various educational purposes. By imparting practical wisdom through mnemonic devices, these mind games promote the development of children's intellectual capacities (Hama, 1968). Their playful nature also makes them easy to memorize. Additionally, the use of communal riddle-solving sessions facilitates interactive education and strengthens social bonds between generations of Mandingues (Kesteloot & Dieng, 1997). As tools for imparting knowledge, stimulating cognition, and unifying society, these manifestations of oral tradition seem well-suited for the comprehensive education of Mandingue children.

However, passing down family genealogies and ancestral achievements is central to educating young people in Manding culture³⁶. Learning about one's ancestors and their stories helps strengthen a sense of shared identity and belonging to a common heritage and future (Kesteloot, 2001). These narratives convey the fundamental principles that established the esteemed status of certain bloodlines. In

³⁵ Camara, 2019, *ibid.*, p.45-50

³⁶ Diawara, *op. Cit.*, p.78-85

doing so, they provide children with examples around which to build their own identities (Cissé & Kamissoko, 2000). Additionally, the oral transmission of these renowned histories reinforces connections between different Mandingue generations. Learning genealogies and family histories is vital for the holistic education of Mandingue children, as it provides a framework for memory, identity, and guidance.

In summary, the rich oral traditions of the Mandinga people, including epics, tales, proverbs, and riddles, play a vital role in the holistic education of children within this West African culture (Diawara, 2009; Laude, 1973). This folklore effectively conveys beliefs, worldviews, and identity markers between generations, thereby safeguarding Mandinga's cultural heritage. Cognitively, exposure to these traditions stimulates creativity, intellect, and oratory skills in youth. Additionally, some epic and mythological accounts relate Mandinga origins and history, imparting a collective memory. Finally, the communal nature of these folklores (when shared) bolsters social cohesion and dialogue across generations. Through these varied contributions, Mande folklore provides a framework for a well-rounded education that is essential for children of this culture. That is why, even outside school, oral traditions like fairy tales, proverbs, epic poems, etc. continue being passed down from generation to generation in Malian families by parents and children (Boucley, 2021).

Challenges of oral tradition in the context of modernization and globalization

Modernization and globalisation have made it harder for oral traditions to be passed down from one generation to the next. These problems include the rise of modern media, the loss of conveyor languages, youth disinterest, the marginalisation of local references by cultural globalisation, and a lack of institutional support for preservation. Urgent safeguarding efforts by communities and authorities are needed to prevent their disappearance.

Firstly, political and security instability in the north has caused displacement, disrupting generational transmission. Specifically, the destabilisation of northern Mali by Tuareg separatists, terrorists, and jihadists since 2012 has prompted massive population displacement, severing oral tradition transmission in many northern communities (Cissé & Sanankoua, 2015). Storytellers, historical repositories, and local genealogists were killed or exiled, erasing pieces of collective memory. Furthermore, Keita (2019) notes that rising rigorous Islam challenges elements of oral traditions rooted in animism and traditional African religions. Jihadists have also directly targeted memorial sites like local saints' mausoleums. Additionally, Keita describes refugee camps around Bamako housing displaced northerners, severed from ancestral lands. There, children are taught in French and drawn to

Western urban culture, while elders lose opportunities to impart characteristic local epics, songs, and poems. Moreover, according to Sanogo (2021), rural youth migrating to urban centres like Bamako for work and modern lifestyles disrupt traditional oral education by village elders, who pass away without transmitting knowledge. These migratory situations demonstrate the tragic rupture of oral

Moreover, the proliferation of modern media (television, the internet), the spread of French at the expense of national languages, and the appeal of Western culture are diverting new generations from local oral heritage. Some examples demonstrate how the dominance of modern media challenges the sustainability of oral traditions in Mali. According to Sanogo (2021), television's arrival in Malian households since the 1990s has captivated evenings once devoted to traditional stories and music gatherings led by griots. Younger generations are much more drawn to Western series and films than elder' tales. Cissé and Sanankoua (2015) describe the rise of cybercafés in Malian cities as prime social spots for youth fascinated by the internet and social media. Local Orality has little chance of capturing the attention of kids and teens that spend a lot of time on their phones watching globalized YouTube or TikTok content. Additionally, Keita (2019) notes the growth of commercial radio, which mainly broadcasts contemporary Western and Afro-pop music. Programmes on traditional instruments, nobility genealogies, or sung poetry are relegated to low-listenership slots, reflecting their waning appeal. In summary, the increasing availability of these modern, globalised entertainment options contributes to new generations' disinterest in ancestral Malian oral heritage, hastening its decline.

The disappearance of languages carrying ancestral oral traditions is prominent among certain ethnic groups in Mali. For instance, Keita (2019) notes declining numbers of *tamasheq* speakers among young urbanised Tuareg generations. However, this language contains a rich corpus of poems, epic songs, and proverbs unique to the nomadic Tuareg culture, which is now endangered. The death of matriarchs holding this heritage without passing it on jeopardises its long-term preservation. Additionally, Sanogo (2021) cites isolated Dogon villages where deceased elders were the last fluent in endangered local languages, some only spoken communally, leading to the permanent extinction of distinctive cultural-linguistic elements. Moreover, Cissé & Sanankoua (2015) describe national languages like Bambara as vehicles for many historic Malian traditions, retreating amidst growing French dominance in education, media, and institutions. This contributes over time to the impoverishment of diverse vernacular oral expressions and imaginaries. In summary, these examples illustrate a broader phenomenon of disrupted linguistic transmission impacting traditional Malian orality.

What's more, concrete examples show that the younger generations in Mali are losing interest in the oral traditions of their ancestors. Fewer and fewer young people are attending and taking part in village vigils, benefiting from the oral transmission provided by their elders³⁷. The migration of young people, but also modern entertainment such as television, captures their attention. Keita (2019) also describes the drastic decline in the number of apprentice griots, the artists who hold the oral history of the noble and royal families of Mandingo country. Once highly coveted, they now attract few vocations among the younger generations, who see no future in this tradition. Furthermore, Cissé & Sanankoua (2015) have also observed a decline in the number of staff in urban cultural associations dedicated to promoting the popular arts (dance, theatre and traditional music). Few young Jeli initiates are prepared to devote the time needed to master and sustain these demanding practices. In short, these situations reflect a growing lack of interest among young Malians in the ancestral oral arts, accelerating the decline of traditional forms of transmission in favour of more globalised cultural influences.

Furthermore, cultural globalisation tends to exclude or diminish the importance of local traditional elements in Mali, as indicated by the perspectives of certain authors. Keita (2019) states that certain cultural practices, such as Valentine's Day, Halloween, and anniversaries influenced by Western traditions, are becoming increasingly popular among urban dwellers and young individuals. This popularity comes at the cost of traditional celebrations that are rooted in the agricultural calendar and local origin stories. Sanogo (2021) illustrates how the dissemination of rap music originating from African-American ghettos, transmitted through international music platforms like Music Television (MTV) and Radio Television, has emerged as the preferred musical genre among Malian adolescents. These teenagers readily relate to the competitive and masculine nature of rap, while perceiving their own traditional local music traditions (such as Mandinga songs and griots) as antiquated and unappealing. According to a study by Cissé & Sanankoua (2015), Turkish, Latin American, and Asian television series have gained significant popularity among Malian women. These shows have now become a prominent topic of conversation and a source of inspiration for them, overshadowing the traditional Malian epics, tales, and myths that used to stimulate their imagination. These scenarios demonstrate a cultural imitation that homogenises ideas and ways of life, overshadowing the diverse local and oral traditions of Mali.

The frightening state of the Radio Mali archives amply demonstrates the lack of resources allocated by the Malian government to protect the intangible cultural heritage, including oral traditions. In the 1960s and 1970s, this public institution conducted an extensive collection of data from individuals who possessed

³⁷ Sanago,2021, *ibid.*,p.145-149

knowledge and customs associated with the mediaeval Mali empire, spanning across all regions of the country. The buildings of the National Radio House are an impressive collection of over 40,000 sound documents, representing a remarkable cultural and historical archive. However, Keita (2019) asserts that the preservation circumstances of these audio archives are lamentable as a result of insufficient resources. These distinctive materials are at significant risk of irreversible damage due to the dampness and decay of diverse materials. Despite multiple admonitions, there is a lack of financial commitment to save, digitise, and improve these oral archives that ensure the preservation of Malian traditions. Essentially, this situation demonstrates the systemic carelessness of the Malian State and its failure to prioritise the promotion of intangible cultural assets, in contrast to security and economic concerns. According to experts, a significant shift in approach is required to prevent any further delay.

Teaching oral tradition in Mali faces numerous hurdles, despite its significant cultural significance. Traditions, or folklore, are typically passed down through generations within families rather than being taught in schools. This necessitates a shift in thinking to incorporate them into education. Moreover, the oral nature of these writings renders them more challenging to instruct compared to written texts, and their written rendition can modify their initial structure. Furthermore, teachers lack comprehensive training in speech skills and face a scarcity of instructional resources. Ultimately, assessing students in this discipline becomes challenging when it depends on traditional evaluation methods. Incorporating Malian oral traditions into education is a challenging yet essential and fulfilling endeavour, contingent upon re-evaluating our attitudes and pedagogical methods.

According to a 2020 report by the Ministry of National Education of Mali, it is necessary to enhance the instruction of oral tradition in Malian schools to address these issues. Several crucial recommendations have been proposed to achieve this objective. To begin with, the incorporation of oratory arts courses into official school curricula at a young age. In addition, it is crucial to guarantee comprehensive training for educators in these particular fields of study. Moreover, the objective is to provide customised educational resources, such as audio-visual recordings of classic folk stories. Also, reconsider the assessment of students to effectively gauge their level of understanding. Furthermore, augments the significance of individuals who possess these customs by engaging them in an educational setting. Ultimately, the objective is to enhance public consciousness about the significance of safeguarding this ancient cultural heritage. Implementing these proposals would effectively tackle the issues associated with oral education in Mali.

Oral traditions face numerous challenges in present circumstances, including the erosion of intergenerational transmission, the dominance of modern media, the extinction of languages that carry these traditions in specific areas, the waning interest among younger generations, cultural globalisation that side-lines local references, inadequate institutional backing for conservation endeavours, and the absence of organised educational initiatives and suitable educational resources. Urgent action from both communities and public authorities is necessary to avert their extinction. The Ministry of Education's suggestions necessitate a resolute political commitment to develop programmes and materials that are appropriate for all educational levels, guarantee the preparation of teachers, and promote collaboration among custodians of different traditions inside classrooms.

Conclusion

The Manding oral tradition imparts crucial values to young individuals through narratives, epics, and proverbs, highlighting the significance of communalism, sharing, humility, modesty, and wisdom. It fosters bravery, resourcefulness, ethics, innovation, and intellect, while also fostering a sense of cultural heritage and reverence for the environment. Nevertheless, the process of French colonisation marginalised the indigenous oral traditions, enforced the adoption of the French language, and disturbed the intergenerational transmission, relegating the oral culture to the status of folklore. This has had a profound influence on the cultural legacy and sense of self of youngsters in Mali. Following the attainment of independence in 1960, the newly established government made efforts to include oral traditions in the education system. However, these attempts were unsuccessful due to the dominant influence of the French academic approach, which hindered the inclusion of oral traditions. Despite the endeavours of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the government to digitally save manual oral literature and incorporate it into educational establishments, the transfer of this literature to newer generations continues to pose a barrier. Presently, the conservation of oral traditions in Malian education encounters obstacles such as apathy among young people, the prevalence of the French language, inadequate financial resources and expertise, migration from rural to urban areas, and the fabrication of folklore. Additionally, the influence of more powerful civilizations and the Internet, as well as dogmatic Islamism and antiquated attitudes, hinder the preservation of oral traditions.

To tackle this menace, the government of Mali should commit substantial financial resources to incorporating oral tradition education into the education system. The organisation should formulate comprehensive strategies customised for various educational levels, furnish textbooks and instructional resources, and conduct teacher training. Additionally, it is crucial to elevate the standing of those

with oral knowledge, implement educational initiatives for the elite, and safeguard cultural traditions. It is essential to prioritise the dissemination of oral traditions both domestically and globally. The public media's transmission of traditional stories will effectively showcase the significance of this culture. Introducing activities such as fairy tales and proverbs in schools will foster students' engagement with this cultural heritage. Additionally, it is advisable to participate in extracurricular classes and engage in digital recording projects. Oratory competitions can promote the development of oral communication skills. Strategies encompass the dissemination of information to families, the provision of training to teachers in oral skills, the creation of educational materials, the assessment of evaluations, the provision of assistance to storytellers, and the use of captivating approaches to stimulate the interest of young individuals. The objective is to convey this essential cultural legacy to future generations.

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