

The Past Like Silk Cotton Trees: Oral Tradition and West African History

ABBIE WALKER



This paper seeks to demonstrate the value of oral tradition to historical study by overviewing the ancient Jenne Jenno in West Africa. In many ways this city defies traditional theories of civilization and demands that historians incorporate such diversity as they strive to tell an inclusive story of the past. As Christian historians especially, we must celebrate this diversity as concomitant with our biblical calling.

IN MODERN DJENNE of West Africa there stands a great mosque, the heart of the city over which it towers. Every year, members of the community come together to protect its walls from the coming rain. They pass baskets to one another, plastering mud over the cracking walls of the mosque. The entire town collaborates around this one central piece of their identity. The mosque retains its fundamental structure, even as people plaster a fresh coat of mud over it every year.¹ It retains its underlying integrity while evolving as it interacts with the community.

Likewise with oral tradition: it depicts an additive history. Generations add on layers every time they tell it. In this way, the past expands through time, taking on new flavors as it meets new people. Oral history constitutes a way of knowing the past which esteems history as remembered by those who lived it. It gives the whole story to those who intentionally remember the past as a continuation of the present.

Historians and archeologists, and especially Christians practicing these disciplines, need to consider the value of oral tradition. In recognizing oral tradition, they celebrate diverse ways of knowing and include them in their presentation of the past. In this paper, I will present a case study of the ancient West African city, Jenne Jenno. First, I will introduce the city according to archeology, and then outline how oral tradition depicts the same history in a sweeping gestalt of memory, kinship, and identity.

“THE MIDDLE NIGER IS A LANDSCAPE OF MYSTERY FOLDED UPON MYSTERY. . .”²

Archeologists Roderick and Susan McIntosh came to Mali in 1977 under a post-independence atmosphere which encouraged celebration of identity and desire to create a shared past. What they found unleashed a plethora of new excavations and theories among experts in diverse fields. Jenne Jenno represents one of hundreds of cases of “cities without citadels” in the Middle Niger of West Africa.³ Most of these constitute cases of “urban clustering,” with the sites divided into as many as seventy physically distinct parts as with Jenne Jenno.⁴ In this system, each cluster retained its own spatial identity, area of specialization, and political autonomy.

These findings both challenged prior theories of civilization and revealed gaps in the explanations behind these cities without citadels.⁵ For example, the lack of centralization in Jenne Jenno stands in stark contrast against “typical” complex societies. The assumption rested that, as a state developed, a single power must assert control to maintain collective identity and order.⁶ Thus, this decentralized city puzzled archeologists and historians.

These decentralized cities seem to have paralleled a more egalitarian society as well. At Jenne Jenno, McIntosh found no evidence of a class system or any ruling elites; he concluded that corporate groups shared the power⁷ Cities

² Robert J. McIntosh, *Ancient Middle Niger*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ See Kradin’s “Archaeological Criteria of Civilization.”

⁶ McIntosh, 18.

⁷ David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa’s Urban Past* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 31.

¹ *Human Planet*, produced by Brian Leith and Dale Templar (BBC, 2011).

like Jenne Jenno enjoyed relatively peaceful, pluralistic, and most likely flexible societies where many autonomous identity groups collaborated with one another for trade.

McIntosh's findings also characterized these identity groups by intense specialization, where skill united the members of each cluster. That is, on one mound they found exclusive evidence for agriculture, whereas other mounds held evidence of fishing, metallurgy or weaving.⁸ Historians would expect specialization in complex civilizations, but this looked rather different.⁹ Instead of separate districts within the same city, each group organized in their own smaller city, physically distinct on mounds. The McIntoshes also found evidence of iron import and on-site smelting as early as 250 BC, and assumed blacksmiths provided the basis for trade patterns.¹⁰ I will expand on this idea in the section on oral tradition.

The lack of fortifying structures and monumental buildings or citadels in the archeological record reflected the security and solidarity among clusters. Apparently, Jenne Jenno maintained its complexity while largely avoiding oppressive governance or violence among communities. However, archeological analysis alone proves limiting: How did these cities work? How did they maintain this solidarity? What did such an organization really look like? "Kingdoms are like trees; some will be silk-cotton trees, others will remain dwarf palms and the powerful silk-cotton tree will cover them with its shade. Oh, who can recognize in the little child the great king to come?"¹¹

Before the McIntosh excavations, the modern town of Djenne knew about the remains of the neighboring ancient city from both proximity and oral tradition.¹² Archeology only put concrete evidence behind the city already very present in Djenne's collective history. But "the world is full of mystery" and archeology masters the knowledge it directly observes, leaving many mysteries unaddressed. While respecting the aspects of the past that must always remain a mystery, oral tradition sheds light on matters of memory and culture which archeology can only theorize about.

Griots, performing as respected professional artists and historians, exemplify this oral tradition in West Africa, handing down oral history for hundreds of generations.¹³

⁸ Anderson, 24.

⁹ That is, traditional Western historians. See V. Gordon Childe's "The Urban Revolution."

¹⁰ Anderson, 25, 29.

¹¹ N.T. Diane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, (Edinburgh: Longman African Writers, 2001), 5.

¹² McIntosh, 1.

¹³ Nicholas M. Hopkins, "Memories of Griots," *Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, no. 17 (1997): 43-72, Accessed February 27, 2018, 46.

This oral tradition famously remembers Sundiata, the founder of the Mali empire. After desertification made Timbuktu a strategic point of trade along the Niger River, Sundiata consolidated the river network into an empire, united under a common identity as Mali.

The Epic of Sundiata tells his story, which arose out of this historical context of cities without citadels, as intentionally remembered by those who consider themselves his ancestors. Griots have passed down stories like Sundiata's for hundreds of years in oral performances, shaping a unique living history. They preserve the traditions, values, and beliefs of the period, while incorporating and adding those of subsequent generations. These continuous values provide the framework upon which archeology rests. It revolves around central themes of mystery and magic, which have been celebrated for as long as the griot can remember.

Sundiata shows this best in the character of the Buffalo Woman. The speaker introduces his audience to the Buffalo Woman through an interaction of Sundiata's father with a hunter he meets while lounging under his favorite silk-cotton tree. This hunter turns out to be left-handed, which portends his skill at divination—he spreads some cowry shells, mutters some words, and prophesizes Mali's coming greatness.¹⁴ He tells Sundiata's father of mystery and destiny:

Oh king, the world is full of mystery, all is hidden and we know nothing but what we can see. The silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed—that which defies the tempest weighs in its germ no more than a grain of rice. Kingdoms are like trees; some will be silk-cotton trees, others will remain dwarf palms and the powerful silk-cotton tree will cover them with its shade. Oh, who can recognize in the little child the great king to come?¹⁵

This scene of divination and prophecy proves foundational to the rest of the epic. The man also predicts the coming of the Buffalo Woman, who will bear the child to rule Mali. Everything about the Buffalo Woman exudes magic and mystery—the object of grand quests and folklore, she shapeshifts between the form of buffalo and woman.¹⁶ Secrets, magic, and mystery weave into the landscape of the story with the implication that only griots themselves are wholly privy to knowledge of the universe. The Sundiata epic presents magic and folk religion as a natural layer of the world.

This is a layer of the world archeology never revealed with its potsherds and soil samples. But the mystery revealed by oral tradition relates well and even answers to

¹⁴ Diane, 4-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Diane, 6.

the mysteries evoked by archeology. As mentioned briefly above, McIntosh discovered evidence of specialized blacksmiths in Jenne Jenno. Oral tradition remembers the cultural and geographic importance of these blacksmiths. Essentially, the Mande viewed blacksmiths and metallurgists as having special access to the land and the energy within it. They call this energy *nyama*, and their skill as a smith includes the ability to recognize and manipulate this mysterious natural power.¹⁷ Because *nyama* resides in the earth, geography is sacred to a smith; the land represents a vast power grid, where certain locations hold more potential or *nyama* than others.¹⁸ For this reason, blacksmiths naturally would have congregated in one region—in one cluster, one might say. Indeed, the magic and mystery obvious in oral tradition may provide the framework from which one understands the settlement pattern of McIntosh's clustered city. Thus, this constitutes a practical reason for historians to implement oral tradition as they seek a holistic understanding of the past.

But more than this, Christian historians should value awareness of this layer of magic and mystery as they strive to communicate the God who acted in history to cultures who embrace different ways of knowing the past. How can we compellingly present the gospel without recognizing the ways other cultures intentionally remember history? When cultures remember history with layers of the supernatural, to some extent Christians must accept this at face value. It seems like there may even be room to acknowledge some common ground in moving from one supernatural explanation to another. Sundiata, the small child who grew like the silk-cotton tree into a great king, may provide a reference point for us to talk about Jesus, the small child who grew into Savior of the world.

In addition to mystery and magic, themes of loyalty and generosity play a major role in the epic of Sundiata. Again, the Buffalo Woman demonstrates this well. Before accompanying them to meet Sundiata's father, she appears to two hunters as an old woman. Moved by pity, they give her food. This act of kindness proves pivotal to the story. She tells the hunters:

I know that you are going to try your luck against the Buffalo of Do, but you should know that many others before you have met their death through their foolhardiness, for arrows are useless against the buffalo; but, young hunter, your heart is generous and it is you who will be the buffalo's vanquisher. I am the buffalo you are

looking for, and your generosity has vanquished me.¹⁹ The value of generosity demands attention in this passage, particularly the way it in turn promoted loyalty. Sundiata's alliances with past friends constantly affirm this value of loyalty. Again, this framework of generosity and loyalty proves vital in understanding how the clustered cities revealed by archeology would function. McIntosh wondered about the role of kinship ties, but confirmation of his suspicion lay beyond the scope of archeology.²⁰ Oral history steps in to affirm the necessity of kinship and generosity among neighbors. Hospitality and patronage would have facilitated relationships between groups, drawing them together in this way through mutual dependence in trade.

Again, the value of oral tradition extends beyond functionally explaining kinship networks. Christians can recognize and learn from the emphasis on generosity and hospitality in kinship-based societies. Awareness of this pre-existing cultural framework equips us to go out and present a gospel that demands hospitality and love for neighbor. Moreover, communication with kinship-based societies helps us make sense of such gospel messages, in the context of the kinship-based cultures of 1st c. Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds.

The Sundiata epic additionally emphasizes freedom, independence, and autonomy. Although oral tradition credits him as the founder and ruler of the Mali empire, his consolidated cities really formed more of a confederation or network with Sundiata at the head. That is, each remained largely autonomous. McIntosh described this phenomenon as "resistance to centralization;"²¹ yet this presupposed centralization as normative and failed to represent how the Mande would have understood their own situation.

The Sundiata epic gives the inside perspective. While addressing his men before going into battle, Sundiata invokes the glory of their ancestors, telling them, "I salute you all, sons of Mali, and I salute you, Kamandjan. I have come back, and as long as I breathe Mali will never be in thrall—rather death than slavery. We will live free because our ancestors lived free."²² He draws upon language of kinship, calling them "sons" and invoking praise of the ancestors. Oral tradition nostalgically remembers the period in which Sundiata took power, as people looked back to the peace and independence of their ancestors before the Almoravid movement. Much of Sundiata's actions strive to recreate these glory days. None within his confederation found themselves subject to anyone else. All were free,

¹⁹ Diane, 8

²⁰ Anderson, 28.

²¹ Anderson, 21.

²² Diane, 56

¹⁷ Anderson, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

“sons of Mali,” valued in the role they played within the greater entity, yet independent and secure in their individual identities as well.

This description certainly recalls Jenne Jenou, the clustered city where autonomous groups lived and traded peacefully alongside each other. It also recalls the language of Galatians, as Paul celebrates our freedom from slavery, resulting in adoption as children and heirs of the kingdom of God.²³ To reiterate, knowing diverse cultural frameworks equips us to understand the context of the gospel and present it to other cultures in more meaningful, personal ways.

CONCLUSION

Archeology and oral tradition each contribute something unique to a discussion of the history of the Middle Niger. Yet archeology could not describe the magic and mystery behind settlement patterns. It could not explain the kinship ties binding identity groups in trade networks. It could not introduce the overarching atmosphere of identity and pride. Oral tradition shows continuity against the change shown by archeology. It offers history from an emic perspective as well as from an etic perspective.

Furthermore, oral tradition joins together with archeology to challenge presuppositions of “normative” civilization, even challenging the word “normative” itself. The cities of the ancient Middle Niger suggest that it is normative to have no norms. Societies across time and space develop in diverse ways, and to force them all into a single, Eurasian-dominant pattern is to deny the reality of diversity in the progress of civilizations all over the world. The research of anthropologists, sociologists, archeologists, historians, and Christians ought to aim at validating this diversity, celebrating it. Indeed, the modern city of Djenné celebrates their past as uncovered by the McIntoshes and remembered by their oral tradition. They honor a collective past of peace and security—an alternative to society dominated by powerful elites and violence.

Just as all narratives should contribute to the general knowledge of the past, historians—Christian historians—should also incorporate different *ways* of knowing the past, especially working to include the worldviews of their historical subjects. Sometimes this means not denying the supernatural but taking these beliefs and assumptions at face value. Christian scholars especially must take the lead in initiating this kind of inclusivity. Indeed, they must see it as concomitant within their Biblical calling. The gospel

²³ Galatians 4:7. I opted for a gender-neutral translation, but the traditional translation does better emphasize the commonality with Sundiata’s language of sonship.

message invites a deontological conception of knowledge, with the synoptic gospel accounts offering a foundational example. That is, they compel us to see the truth inherent in the different ways people come to knowledge, present knowledge, remember knowledge.²⁴ The inclusion of different ways of knowing the past is akin to the inclusion of different ways of knowing the gospel.

Some things will always remain a mystery—after all, the world is mystery. Only griots are privy to all the secrets and hidden knowledge.²⁵ However, we can learn some things. We start small: with some broken pottery, some words passed around a town. And then the great comes from the small—the silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed. One must approach oral tradition with careful consideration for its strengths and limitations; but ultimately, it contributes to historical study in ways that powerfully challenge modern theories and—more importantly—tell an inclusive, diverse story of the past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, David M., and Richard Rathbone, eds. *Africa’s Urban Past*. Oxford: James Currey, 2000.
- Brizuela-Garcia, Esperanza, and Trevor R. Getz. *African Histories: New Sources for Studying African Pasts*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2012.
- Brooks, George E. *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630*. African States and Societies in History. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
- Childe, V. Gordon. “The Urban Revolution,” in *Foundations of Social Archaeology: Selected Writings of V. Gordon Childe*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004.
- Conrad, David C. “Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic: The Case of Fakoli.” *History in Africa*, vol. 19 (1992): 147-200. Accessed February 27, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3171998.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4a13c512e2a0d4d9084599a560337d99>
- Diane, N.T. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Edinburgh: Longman African Writers, 2001.
- Durkheim, Émile, and W. D. Halls. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press, 1984.
- Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Hopkins, Nicholas M. “Memories of Griots.” *Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, no. 17 (1997): 43-72. Accessed

²⁴ Indeed, Hays says we must “ask what conceptions of time and history and human possibility are woven into the texture of the narrative [of any gospel]”. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 74.

²⁵ Hopkins, 47.

- February 27, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/521607.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:c7cdd8a76e167b8e396b53497061d140>.
- Human Planet*. Produced by Brian Leith and Dale Templar: BBC, 2011.
- Kradin, Nikolay N. "Archaeological Criteria of Civilization." *Social Evolution & History* 5 (1), 2006. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/archaeological-criteria-of-civilization>.
- Levtzion, Nehemia. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. Studies in African History, 7. London: Methuen, 1973.
- Levtzion, N., and J.F.P. Hopkins. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Princeton: First Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000.
- McIntosh, Robert J. *Ancient Middle Niger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- McIntosh, Roderick J. and Susan Keech McIntosh. "The Inland Niger Delta before the Empire of Mali: Evidence from Jenne-Jeno." *The Journal of African History*, 22:1 (1981): 1-22. Accessed February 27, 2018.
- Munson, Patrick J. "Archaeology and the Prehistoric Origins of the Ghana Empire." *The Journal of African History* 21, no. 4 (1980): 457-66.
- Philips, John Edward. *Writing African History*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005.
- Reader, John. *Africa: A Biography of a Continent*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.