

REVIEW ESSAY

Authentic Rendition of Kelefa Saane or Same Old Thing?

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Sirifo Camara. 2010. *The Epic of Kelefaa Saane*. Trans. Sana Camara. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. xxxiii, 178 pp.

In 1970, Ruth Finnegan claimed that “epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa apart from forms like the (written) Swahili *Utenzi* which are directly attributable to Arabic influence”¹. Epic as a literary form in Africa is now well established. Prominent scholars in the fields of oral literature in Africa, both the natives of the continent (like Isidore Okpewho) and non-African specialists like John William Johnson and David Conrad, among others) have disproven Ruth Finnegan and others who deemed the epic as a solely Western form of literature. The epic of Sundiata, which was first brought to the outside world’s attention in 1960 by Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane, shows that West Africa’s Mandinka people have epic poetry. Other versions of the Sundiata’s story have been collected after Niane’s Guinean version in French. For instance, Camara Laye published in French *Le Maître de la Parole: Kouma Lafôlô Kouma* in 1978; in 1974, Gordon Innes published *Sunjata: Gambian Versions of the Mande Epic by Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute*; John Johnson collected a Malian version of the Sunjata story told by Fa-Digi Sisókó and translated as *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* in 1992. David Conrad collected the same story in Guinea through a narration by Djanka Tassej Conde, which he published in 2004 as *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*. The story Kelefa Saane adds to this wealth of African epics in general and Mandinka epics in particular.

Like most West African epics, Kelefa Saane’s story has once been translated. Even more, like any other translated work it is material for retranslation. In 2010, a Mandinka scholar sets out to retranslate the story. Is this retranslation an attempt to serve something utterly new or is it a reshuffled material that leaves to be desired?

To retranslate has a great deal of implications. Antoine Berman observes that “La retraduction surgit de la nécessité non certes de supprimer, mais au moins de réduire la défaillance originelle ” [retranslation comes out of the need, not to suppress, but to reduce the original limitation”². This raises the two fundamental approaches to translation: domestication and foreignization. The first approach, according to the American translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti, “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values”³, and the second is rather “an ethnodeviant pressure on those [cultural]

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values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad"⁴. In other words, to use domestication in translation amounts to remodeling a language/culture in order for it to fit the cultural and linguistic values of the target language/culture whereas to foreignize submits the target culture to the strangeness of the source language/culture. Venuti believes that foreignizing translation "send[s] the reader abroad"⁵ to meet the other abroad.

The story of Kelefa Saane has been translated by Gordon Innes. The story already exists in the English language because in 1978 Gordon Innes recorded two versions earlier, one by Bamba Suso (780 lines) and another by Shirifo Jibate (553 lines). What has prompted the retranslation of the epic in 2010? Is it because the first translation was an "ethnocentric reduction" of this West African epic for Western readers to understand its cultural relevance both for themselves and the people from whom it originates?

If there is retranslation, there must have been the need for it. Yves Gambier writes, "[...] Une première traduction a toujours tendance à être plutôt assimilatrice, à réduire l'altérité au nom d'impératifs culturels, éditoriaux.[...] La retraduction dans ces conditions consisterait en un retour au texte-source" [A first translation tends to assimilate more often than not; it tends to obliterate the original text's otherness in the name of cultural and editorial requirements. Thus, a retranslation operates on the basis of a return to the source-text]⁶.

No doubt, Sana Camara's version of Kelefa's story is a retranslation. He acknowledges the fact and advances some reasons for it. Camara observes in his introduction that Innes's translation is shorter; however, he recognizes that it is no less inclusive of a Mandinka version of the story. Sana Camara adds to the length of the story. Secondly, and more importantly, Camara posits himself as a bearer of an authentic material because of his Mandinkaness. He states in the preface that "the goal of this edition [...] is to make available to a wider audience, in this case many readers in diverse field, a distinctive example of the African oral *from an authentic source*" [Emphasis is mine]⁷. In fact, Sana Camara is a native Mandinka-speaking scholar, which reveals that he certainly has detected some need to reopen the meaning box of the oral/written text as regards Kelefa Saane. In other words, one may deduce from Camara's decision of retranslation that Gordon Innes' 1978 translation of the Kelefa Saane story was flawed, and conversely this new translation obeys the necessity to cast a fresh and more interioristic look at such an important text as this one regrouping the exploits and life story of Kelefa Saane. The new translation of this oral performance attempts to address some culture-related problem in the first translation. Here, Sana Camara seems to "bring the author back home" to borrow from Venuti when speaking about domestication. As well, like any West African epic, the story of Kelefa Saane is told by griots and griottes (jeliw in Mandinka; and jalool in the Gambian variant of the language) each adding his/her personal touch to the story as must be expected. Sana Camara chooses Sirifo Camara's rendition of the story from among this wide gamut of existing versions for reasons only known to him. The least one can surmise is that Sirifo Camara's telling of this major Gambian story must have had some impact on its translator. Sana Camara, by his retranslation of this work, brings Kelefa Saane home and prepares it to fare in foreign culture.

What is the structure of the new translation? First, the book comes in two parts. The first half deals with pre-texts (preface, acknowledgements, spelling and pronunciation). This part proves necessary because the author shares with the reader a wealth of background information that is prerequisite to a better comprehension of the story. For instance, the

introduction has a good deal of interesting pieces of information. It comprises photographs of the contemporary bards involved in the telling of Kelefa Saane's story both in Senegal and Gambia (Sirifo Camara, Ibrahima Sisocho and Solo Kutujo, Morikeba Kouyate, and Laalo Keeba Draame). It also provides some maps to locate the Kaabu kingdom in present-day Gambia, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, where the story is believed to have taken place. Ultimately, Sana Camara voices his opinions about the hero, the role of the griots and the different variants of the word in Manding language, on Sirifo Camara the storyteller, and the aesthetic/poetic presentation of the Mandinka epic. Here, Camara's translation of the longer version of the Kelefa story is deemed an epic poem, which "proceeds from language so elaborate in forms and thought that it differs by far from casual conversation. The narrative structure emerged from the association of three compositional modes of expression: the narrative mode interspersed with the praise-proverb mode [...] and the song mode [...]"⁸. Although Sana Camara announces three compositional modes, he only makes the case for two of them. As well, the translator of the story offers a few words on the narrative style and structure of the long poem, not without giving his thought on the heroic content of the story of Kelefa Saane. Of major importance is also the "Résumé of the Plot" in the introduction because this provides a foretaste to the story as much as it leads some readers to making no efforts of critical thinking.

The second half of the book is a bilingual (Mandinka and English) presentation of the story proper. Sana Camara seeks to disprove the axiom that follows: "traduttore, traditore" (the translator is a traitor). The version of Mandinka language bears witness to its originality and oral authorship, though this seems problematic to some readers who, because of their lack of proficiency in the African language, believes its inclusion in the book to be useless. Also, Sana Camara includes some "Annotations to the Mandinka Text" (165-178), which are useful to both non-Mandinka readers as well as those Manding speakers who happen to be only proficient in a different variant of language. Understanding the Senegambian and Bissau variant of the Mandinka language is not even obvious for those who are referred to as Malinké/Dyula in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and northern Cote d'Ivoire. In that regard, Camara's work sides with other great works in African oral tradition like Okabou Ojobolo and John Pepper Clark Bekederemo's 1977 epic story translated as *The Ozidi Saga*, and John William Johnson's 1992 *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition*. According to Sana Camara, John William Johnson has been of a great avail to him. Such a support is visible in the rendition of the epic of Kelefa Saane. It is worth noting that the African language here has previously been used in parallel with English translations in translating oral works in West Africa. Bekederemo does it with the *Ozidi Saga*. So does Gordon Innes when he first collects and translates the epic of Kelefa in 1978 as *Kelefa Saane: His Career Recounted by Two Mandinka Bards*. Gordon did the same experience four years earlier with the story of Sunjata when he published *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (with Bamba Suso, Banna Kanute and Dembo Kanute). That Sana Camara is a Mandinka scholar does not warrant a single language publication. Had he come with his version without a Mandinka text, scholars with interest in translation and fluent in Mandinka language would find fault with him. Now the question that still arises is how much does Sana Camara improve not only the English version, but also the Mandinka version? Difference in this focal point is a defining moment because it shows how native and truly authentic the new translation is. The question is not as much about the length of the old or the new translation; rather, it lies with the accuracy and/or originality of the translation against the backdrop of the original "oral text" which is the Mandinka rendition of the story.

Notwithstanding the laudable efforts deployed by Sana Camara in retranslating Kelefa Saane, his new translation raises some questions that this author could have addressed in his introduction in guise of justifying the work he sets out to do. As early as 1978 in his review of Gordon Innes' translation of two versions of the Kelefa story, John William Johnson asks this question: "[...] but why should Kelefa be so popular with Mandinka bards if he were thought to have been a Jola?"⁹ And yet, some students of Mandinka history believe that although "[he] lived in a world dominated by Mandinka mores and customs, traditionalists identify Kelefa as Jola rather than as a Mandinka."¹⁰

According to Cornelia Gieseng and Valentin Vydrin whose book on the "Ta:rich Mandinka" of Bijini (Guinea-Bissau) show that Kelefa Saane is considered as a member of the Soninke community who, without regard to their original ethnic identity, as it seemed to be the norm, had conformed politically and culturally to the Mandinka political order of the time. That Kelefa Saane is deemed a Jola, or a Soninke, or a Mandinka partakes of the politics of national preference and/or the propensity of one branch of the Mandinka group to think of itself as being more important than others. Otherwise, as far as we know, the larger group is inclusive of the Soninke, the Jola, the Dyula/Malinke, the Bambara, Bissa and Boso. The reason for this seeming controversy is that the Mandinka are believed to be in majority Muslims; the Soninke in the past were to the original Mandinka of the Gambian-Bissau areas of the former Kaabu kingdom what the Bambara were/are to the Malinke/ Mandinka in present-day Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Cote d'Ivoire: the former sub-group considers itself Muslim while viewing the latter as a pagan group.

Added to the question as to whether or not Kelefa is a Mandinka, his heroism seems to be put into question by those who are accustomed to enduring and prevailing heroes, not to those who die. Sana Camara answers this question as much as he could.

As is the case in most epic heroes around the world (*Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, etc.), Kelefa Saane was visited upon by supernatural beings during his formative years as well as during his career as a warrior. The reader learns that Kelefa Saane loses his father on the third day after his birth, which coincides with a genie who advises the father to name the new-born baby after him. As must be expected the genie becomes Kelefa Saane's guardian and eventually imposes the wearing of a silver bracelet to his protégé. The strangeness of Saane's life, like in most heroic stories, is that he weds a jinn woman while still a *bilakoro*, i.e. an uncircumcised male in the Bambara variant of the Mandinka language; this is indeed unusual in Mandinka society of old. Saane grows up overturning the existing order because injustice becomes a problem to address. Even though he did not sit on a throne of his own like Sunjata and was killed (perhaps unlike Sunjata) in one of the violent battles he used to wage, Saane is remembered by the same deeds as other Mandinka heroes.

Donald Wright writes, "As a youth Kelefa was tough, sometimes ruthless. [...] Once of age, Kelefa proved himself capable and equally ruthless in battle [...]. Though many admired the way he conducted his life by the traditional Mandinka warrior ethic, *more feared him*" [Emphasis is mine]¹¹. Whether that was the case or not, the hero still impressed the people of his day by his deeds of manhood and his courage during war as expected of a Mandinka man. Besides, Cornelia Gieseng and Valentin Vydrin write, "les anciens groupes guerriers et dirigeants du Kaabu nommés *Mándinka Sóoninke* [...] sont liés à une époque définitivement révolue. Selon les traditions orales mettant en scène cette époque, c'est Kansalaa, la dernière capitale des *Mándinka Sóoninke*, qui constitue le symbole accompli de la *Sóoninkeeyaa*. *Jaankee Waali, le dernier roi de Kaabu, [...] et Kelefa Saane de Badoora* sont des personnages extraordinaires et des héros épiques de cette époque" [the old communities of

warriors and leaders in the kingdom of Kaabu called Mandinka Soonikee are related to a time long gone by now. According to oral sources about this period, Kansalaa, the last capital of the Kaabu Mandinka people, is a well accomplished symbol of the Soonikee identity. The last king of Kaabu, Jaankee Waali [...] and Kelefa Saane from Badoora are extraordinary figures and epic heroes of this portion of history]¹². No wonder, the griots of Senegambia did not fail to celebrate him, therefore imposing new elements to definition of heroism. According to Stephen Belcher, author of *Epic Traditions of Africa*, “[...] Heroism is a culture-bound concept. Heroes are act within value-systems and narrative conventions [...]”¹³.

Every culture has its heroes and each culture decides the details of its acts of heroism. Therefore, this epic account must be construed as an African traditionalist’s call for stretching the bounds of heroism; the concept seems to be captive of purist definitions that foreclose free and active meaning-making.

Ultimately, by retranslating this story Sana Camara could have addressed some questions related to music in epics. In fact, Mandinka epic storytelling is a performance with musical accompaniment. John William Johnson has observed that “Sub-Saharan African prosodic systems [...] are not easy for the Western-trained scholar to decipher because they are not based on any model that European languages employ in their poetry”¹⁴. Johnson is making a plea; he invites African scholars fluent and competent in their native language-culture to help decipher the interaction between word and music in Africa poetry. It is needless to say that music and words are not separated from one another in Mandinka poetry. For example, the Guinean band (Bembeya Jazz National) renders the epic of Samory Toure (*Regard sur le passé*) in 1969 with balafone, flutes and cora literally uttering Mandinka words. As a Mandinka scholar, the introduction to the new translation could enlighten the reader on the musical accompaniment and its effect on the bard’s rendering of the story.

For instance, Gordon Innes’ translation of Kelefa Saane includes an introduction written by Lucy Doran who stresses some ethnomusicological aspects of the epic. Even so, Roderic Knight found that Innes’ translation did not fully quench his musicologist’s thirst: “The music chapter [...] lacks enthusiasm. We seek some communication of the style and excitement of the performance: the vibrancy and the pace of the narration, the intensity level of the Kora part, the importance of the occasional song or instrumental interlude (might make) the performance more alive”¹⁵. Perhaps, rendition of such details in Sana Camara’s translation could as well add more musical flavor to the story. Is the translator’s lack of proficiency in ethnomusicology or a choice? This is a question for Sana Camara and eventual translators of African oral texts to answer.

This retranslation shows that Sana Camara has a message to drive home: Kelefa Saane and many African works are better when translated by natives, an approach that may be dubbed interioristic. However, the *nativeness* of the new translation is hard to be found. It can even be submitted that it is the same water in a new bottle the reader has been served.

All in all, Sana Camara’s book is one to be reckoned with in the years to come because it is by a “fils du terroir” (a son of the land). It is a welcome addition to the existing resources on African oral literature in general, and Mandinka epics in particular. The book must definitely be read by any student of African oral culture and traditions.

Notes

- 1 Finnegan, 1970, p. 108.
- 2 Berman, 1995, p.5.
- 3 Venuti, 1995, p. 20
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gambier, 1994 p. 414.
- 7 Camara, 2010 p. x.
- 8 Camara, Introduction, 2010 p. xxiii.
- 9 Johnson, 1980 p. 393.
- 10 Wright, 1987 pp. 288-90.
- 11 Wright, 1987 p. 290.
- 12 Gieseng and Vydrin, 2007 p. 7.
- 13 Belcher, Introduction 1999p. xiv.
- 14 John William Johnson, Introduction to *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition*, 1992, p.7.
- 15 Knight, 1982 pp. 160-70.

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