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**“In Memory of Djibril Tamsir Niane:
A Visionary for This World—and Worlds Yet to Come”**

A Tribute to Professor Niane by: Joseph Hellweg, Past President, Mande Studies Association & Associate Professor of Religion and Anthropology, Florida State University.

Djibril Tamsir Niane passed away on March 8, 2021, having bequeathed a profound, enduring legacy of teaching, activism, and scholarship to Africa and the world (Freland 2021). Born in Conakry on January 9, 1932, he completed secondary school in Dakar (Herzberger-Fofana 1989, 94-102). By 1959, he had earned his undergraduate degree and *diplôme d'études supérieures* in medieval history at the University of Bordeaux. That same year he returned to Conakry to teach history at the Lycée Classique de Donka (*Le Rappel* 2021).

In 1960, while still teaching high school, his most famous work, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, appeared. He had transcribed, in prose, the epic as performed by griot Mamadou Kouyaté (Niane 1960). In the following year, with Jean Suret-Canale (Niane and Suret-Canale 1965), he published the first of eight school textbooks that he—and, in one case, his collaborators, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, Jean Devisse, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo—penned, in history, geography, and civic education (*Le Rappel* 2021).

Despite these early accomplishments, Niane quickly ran afoul of the regime of President Sékou Touré. In 1961, Touré “cut all teachers’ salaries and appropriated the funds.” As a member of the Guinean teachers’ union, Niane protested in writing. “Consequently, along with eleven other union leaders, he was accused of criminal activities and sent to the infamous Camp Boiro,” a French colonial military base in Conakry turned concentration camp where he was condemned to death. But, in a surprising reversal of fortunes, Touré released Niane in 1964, to allow him “to participate in the Polish-Guinean archeological expedition to Niani (1965-1967)” (Conrad 2010). In the meantime, Niane taught and played various administrative roles at the Polytechnical Institute of Conakry (today’s Gamal Abdel Nasser University of Conakry) and directed the Division of Social Sciences in Guinea’s Department of Scientific Research (*Le Rappel* 2021).

In 1972, under another intensification of political repression, Niane and his family fled to Dakar, where they lived until after Sékou Touré’s death in 1984 (Conrad 2010). President Léopold Sédar Senghor welcomed them to Dakar, where Niane worked in various capacities associated with the Senegalese state. Back in Conakry in 1990, he founded the Société Africaine d’Edition et de Communication (SAEC), “the first private publisher in Guinea” (*Le Rappel* 2021).

Niane’s many other distinctions include several collaborations with UNESCO, including in its Slave Route Project; his memberships in Senegal’s National Order of the Lion and France’s Legion of Honor; and honorary professorships at Howard University and Meiji University (*Le Rappel* 2021).

Chief among his publications are his *General History of Africa IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, which he edited with Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Ki-Zerbo and Niane 1997); *Le Soudan occidental au temps des grands empires* (Niane 1975a); *Histoire des Mandingues de*

l'Ouest (Niane 1989); several studies of Guinean culture and history published by SAEC (*Le Rappel* 2021); the historical plays, *Sikasso* and *Chaka* (Niane 1971); two collections of short stories (Niane 1975b; Niane 1985); and *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Niane 1965).

Many know Niane's work primarily through his transcription of the Sunjata epic. The book's publication alone amounted to a literary experiment: the transposition of an "oral" text into writing, and prose, no less—as Laye Camara (1978) and Conrad and Condé (2016) would also later do—in contrast to the numerous poetic versions that followed (e.g. Cissé and Kamissoko 2000; Cissé and Kamissoko 2009; Conrad and Condé 2004; Sisòkò and Johnson 2003; Suso and Kanute 1999).

While poetic versions remind us of the epic's origins in live performance, revealing the "lines and groups of lines" that reflect how its authors composed it (Hymes 2003, 81, 95-99), Niane made the epic more accessible to contemporary readers, as a novel. While his decision may displease purists, it was anything but "inauthentic" (Austen 1999, 59). Like Malian novelist Massa Makan Diabaté, a griot himself (Keïta 1995), Niane transposed a griot's voice, in this case that of Mamoudou Kouyaté, into a parallel genre, that of the book, and within a West African tradition as informed by literacy as by orality, given the region's longstanding tradition of Arabic and 'Ajami writing (Ngom 2016; Vydrin 1998).

Djibril Tamsir Niane's vision of political courage, decolonized education, and diverse cultural expressions are, and will remain, as luminous now to our world, and to new worlds of the future, as ever before.

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