**L’Enfant Sarakolle” by Modibo Keita (1936): Construction of a Context**

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Abstract

In 1936 Modibo Keita, a twenty-year-old student at the distinguished Ecole William Ponty in Gorée, Senegal, wrote his “mémoire de fin d'étude” on Soninke childhood. The original manuscript is held in the archives of French West Africa in Dakar, part of the collection of “cahiers de William Ponty.” This paper attempts to situate Keita’s student text in the context of educational goals in French West Africa as administered at the Ecole William Ponty; in terms of other such “cahiers Ponty”; and in terms of his subject. Ambiguities around Keita’s choice of topic are discussed. In a broadly literary rather than ethnological analysis, the themes of his paper are illustrated with his own words. Some tentative indications of the young Keita’s concerns and attitudes as they might relate to his future path as founding president of Mali are suggested.

*Modibo Keita; Cahiers de William Ponty. Ecole William Ponty. French colonial education; Mande childhood; Malian childhood; auto-ethnography*

Abstrait

En 1936 Modibo Keita, un étudiant de vingt ans à l'école distingué William Ponty à Gorée, au Sénégal, a écrit son mémoire de fin d'étude sur l’enfance sarakollé. Le manuscrit original se trouve dans les archives de l'Afrique occidentale française à Dakar, où il fait partie de la collection de “cahiers de William Ponty. ” Cet article tente de situer le texte de l'élève Keita dans le cadre des objectifs d'enseignement français en Afrique de l'Ouest tels qu’ils se sont administrés à l'Ecole Ponty ; en termes d’autres “cahiers Ponty”; et en termes de son sujet. Quelques ambiguïtés autour du choix de sujet par Keita sont discutés. Par une analyse essentiellement littéraire et pas ethnologique, les thèmes de son mémoire sont illustrés avec ses propres mots. Quelques indications tentatives des préoccupations et des attitudes du jeune Keita en tant qu’ils pourraient être liées avec son futur chemin comme président fondateur du Mali sont proposées.

*Modibo Keita; Cahiers de William Ponty; Ecole William Ponty; éducation française coloniale ; enfance mandé; enfance malien; auto-ethnographie*

**L’Enfant Sarakolle” by Modibo Keita (1936): Construction of a Context**

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**Introduction**

Modibo Keita was a twenty-year-old student at the École normale supérieure William Ponty in Gorée, Senegal when he wrote his “mémoire de fin d'étude” on Soninke childhood. The original manuscript, seventy-five handwritten pages in mostly impeccable penmanship with several sketches, is in the archives of French West Africa in Dakar. A photocopy made in 2000 is held at the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University.1

I will situate Keita’s student memoir in the context of educational goals in French West Africa as administered at the École Ponty; in terms of other such *cahiers*; and – to the degree possible for someone who is not a Mande specialist – in terms of his subject. My approach will be broadly literary rather than ethnographic. I will describe prominent themes of Keita’s text, liberally illustrated with his own words. And I will suggest some tentative common ground between the young teacher-to-be who penned this manuscript and the political activist who led Mali to independence as its first president.

As background, I will note that my own exposure to the Mande world occurred thirty years ago, during a one-year stay in a small Dyula enclave near Korhogo in northern Côte d’Ivoire, and is therefore minimal. As a “stranger / guest” (*lolan / dunan*) in the MANSA realm, I have turned to several publications by its members in order to orient myself and frame my topic.2

**École William Ponty and its students**

Much has been written about this school, so I will discuss it fairly briefly. The École William Ponty is often described as the *pépinière* or nursery of a West African elite in the first decades of the twentieth century; and it was consciously so. Beginning in the 1930s, the school also served as a nursery for emerging political leadership in the two decades leading to independence. Governor General Brévié put the goals of the French colonial administration for its top-tier graduates in these terms in 1935:

L’élite indigène, sa formation et sa recherche, restent une de nos préoccupations

les plus sincères. L’exemple a été donné qu’une telle élite n’est enchaîné à aucune barrière, qu’elle peut atteindre les plus hauts sommets de la culture, mais ce que

nous voulons c’est une élite vraie, que distingue un mérite personnel éclatant, que justifie une conscience inflexible, que dirige à nos côtes la reconnaissance de

l’amitié française.3

The few who earned a place at the École William Ponty were known as “Pontins.” Though Senegalese students predominated at first, the classes later included a fair mix of students from across French West Africa. Jézéquel questions the assumption of homogeneity within this group, but does acknowledge that the ‘semi-monastic’ and communal life of the diverse students gathered at the most prestigious school in French West Africa contributed to a sense of group identity, wherein the students saw themselves as called to and actively participating in the ‘civilizing mission.’ Only after leaving the school, he suggests, did they come to see themselves in more limited terms as merely an *élite indigène*.4 Diagouraga describes the ambivalent reputation of the school, as either the most effective school in francophone black Africa, or as a privileged instrument of cultural alienation – “le fer de lance colonial pour la conquête des intelligences.” 5

Enrollment at École Ponty was not large. There was no regular quota; only the very best students, in terms of entrance exam results, were admitted. Modibo Keita’s cohort of 1936 at the teacher school was a mere thirty-three.6 In 1935 the school (which had opened new sections in 1920 from the defunct École Faidherbe) recruited a total of seventy-two new students: forty to the teaching school, thirty-five to the administrative school, and twenty-nine for the schools of medicine and veterinary studies.7 Modibo Keita’s younger brother Moussa, who became a specialist in tropical botany and served as commissioner of youth and sports in Keita’s government, also graduated from the École William Ponty.8 All of the students at the school were male; a separate school to train female teachers was opened in 1938.9

Peggy Sabatier qualifies the “elite” nature of the École Ponty as being in terms of restricted attendance rather than actual quality of education, which was not calibrated as high as its French equivalents. Certificates from the school were not transferrable to a university education in France. She describes the French educational philosophy in regard to French West Africa prior to 1945 as being one of calculated limits, both in the number of teachers and other professionals trained – only as many as there were positions for them to fill – and in the content of their training.10

Education inspector Georges Hardy had proposed to the school in 1913 that educated Africans could explore their own local histories. That same year he initiated the *Bulletin de l’enseignement de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, later renamed *L’Education africaine*. It published articles by former students of the École Ponty,11 and also included the best French compositions by students at the school.12 A prize was offered beginning in 1934 for “indigenous inquiries into geography, ethnography and history.”13

French ethnography ascended in tandem with French colonialism, and by the 1930s there was an expanding appreciation for African cultures. Sherman describes how museums such as the Musée de l’Homme “formed part of a larger ethnographic project of the 1930s to promote a nonracist appreciation of human diversity, a project that viewed colonialism, admittedly an imperfect political system, as more importantly offering an unparalleled forum for scientific research and a particular manner of seeing.”14 There was also an emerging sense of urgency to document cultures in flux under the French presence, and to preserve cultural knowledge. An ethnographic expedition led by Marcel Griaule, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, traversed the Sahel in 1933. Though politically motivated, it yielded a multi-disciplinary trove of artifacts, texts, photographs, and sound recordings, with a contextual emphasis on the communities that were the sources.15

So there were many motives for encouraging “auto-ethnography” by the Pontins in the 1930s: to develop (or take advantage of) their knowledge of their own culture while at the same time documenting it for posterity; to address accusations that the school emphasized mastery of elegant French at the expense of pragmatic training; to reinforce the students’ attachment to an African rather than metropolitan context, in preparation for their role as future teachers “on the ground” in West Africa; and to add to the growing body of information about the colonies, both as an administrative duty and in the spirit of scientific inquiry.

**The “Cahiers William Ponty”**

The records and documents of the École Ponty are housed as part of the archives of French West Africa at Institut fondamental d’Afrique noire Cheikh Anta Diop. IFAN was founded as Institut français d’Afrique noire around the time of Keita’s graduation, in 1936, by direction of Governor General Brévié. IFAN’s purpose was the scientific study of Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular French West Africa, and collecting documentation relevant to that study. Among its goals from the very beginning was to contribute to the cultural renaissance of Africa and to the Africanization of teaching programs.16

Among IFAN’s records are several hundred “mémoires de fin d'études,”known as the “Cahiers William Ponty” or “Cahiers de Ponty.” The requirement to prepare and defend these papers was initiated in 1933, the year before Keita’s arrival at the school. The student authors of these papers came from eleven colonies, with Senegal accounting for over one-quarter of them, Côte d’Ivoire in second place, and Cameroon and Soudan (Mali) tied for third place with 111 papers each.17 The themes suggested to the Pontins for their papers in the 1930s echo IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop’s ongoing domains of interest, or what in collection terms Kane Touré calls “les descripteurs-maison.”18 (**Table** **I**)

There is some confusion in how the creation of these papers is described. Barthélémy and Jézéquel say that they were written before the students entered their third year.19 This would have had the practical advantage of giving the students the opportunity to interview their own communities, which were to be the subjects of these studies, during summer break. Kane Touré says that they were either “devoirs de vacances” or “mémoires de fin d’étude.”20 Afanou and Togbe Pierre state clearly that beginning in 1934 the third-year students drafted their papers during vacation in their region of origin, presented the draft upon return to the school, and submitted a corrected final version before February 1st of the following year.21 Bouche says, without mentioning the *cahiers* specifically, that each student teacher needed to leave for the school archives a monograph about his region of origin, which would contribute to the creation of a museum of French West Africa.22

Requirements for these papers changed as school administrators changed. Choice of topic was generally up to the student, but there was a list of suggested themes, and a questionnaire was provided to help shape their research. The questionnaire had two parts: one on traditional practices, and one on transformations of tradition.23

The description of the Senegal portion of the *cahiers* prepared in 1967 by Afanou and Togbe Pierre classes them into twenty-eight numbered themes, which no doubt correlate with what was suggested to the students to write about. There are no “miscellaneous” papers in this inventory – papers written outside these themes. Sometime between the deposit of the *cahiers* William Ponty at IFAN after World War II and 1958, when librarian Denise Baudot inventoried the collection, all of the texts in the category “Théâtre africain” by all students, not just those from Senegal, had disappeared. There are three other categories with zero holdings in the Senegal inventory which Afanou and Togbe Pierre don’t address specifically, other than to comment on “des ‘pertes’ que nous déplorons” – they are “Littérature africaine,” “Sciences,” and “Marchés africains.” In their inventory, far and away the most popular themes are “Alimentation africaine” (59 cahiers) and “Education de l’enfant africain” (31 cahiers). Other well-represented themes are “Économie africaine,” “Rites funéraires africains,” “Monographies de villages africains,” “Pharmacopée africaine,” and “Religions africains.”24 (**Table** **II**)

The index to the Ivoirian *cahiers* William Ponty held as microfilm at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago generally follows the same numbered subject scheme as that in the Senegal guide, though it is in relative disarray and has many gaps in coverage of the themes; it includes 103 papers. Whereas in the Senegal collection category 24 was titled “Religion,” in the Ivoirian listing it is “Génies des Eaux,” which contains five papers, most dated the same year (1946). The outstanding theme in this group again is “Alimentation” with 33 papers, but here making up fully one-third of all the papers written by Ivoirian students. Many of these papers are undated on the inventory, but the latest date is 1946 (the water genie papers). The overview for the collection notes that all the papers are illustrated, so it seems that illustration was mandatory. 25

Kane Touré gives the current number of these ‘marvelously illustrated’ *cahiers* as 750, rather than 791 as was given in an earlier count. 26 This count appears also on the website of IFAN, Le Service de Documentation. She lists a handful of examples:

* Chrysogone Abel Goumba de l'Oubangui Chari. La circoncision en Oubangui-Chari (AEF). Devoir de vacances. Année 1944-1945
* Phillipe Yacé. Au pays Alladian
* Coulibaly Bakary. Devoir de vacances. La pharmacopée chez les Bambaras. Promotion 1941-44 (Soudan français)
* Thianar N'Doye. L'alimentation indigène au Cap-Vert. Rufisque et Banlieue
* Barry Ibrahima. Tonnage et teinturerie au Fouta Djallon à Pita. 1944
* Amadou Mossi. Les rêves. Devoir de vacances. Colonie du Niger
* Emmanuel Degbeho. Les boissons. Devoir de vacances 1940-1943. Togo
* Aly Bocar Kane. La chasse au Fouta. Devoir de vacances. Année scolaire 1938 -1939

The cahiers are presented there as part of a long list of cultural treasures held by IFAN.

**Modibo Keita at the Ecole William Ponty**

Diagouraga says that little is known of Keita’s relations or private life at the Ecole Ponty, but that his academic success suggested that he focused on his studies. However, there are some impressions of him recorded by his peers. Diagouraga and Keita’s classmate Hamani Diori, future first president of Niger, both comment on Keita’s wide interests, his willingness to engage in all subjects; Diori notes that this included the practical as well as theoretical. And both mention how he jumped into the sea to help save a classmate, Émile-Derlin Zinsou (future president of Dahomey/Benin), who was drowning. Zinsou describes Keita in these terms:

Le jeune homme qu’était alors Modibo Keïta en imposait par sa grande taille et

le port, naturellement altier sans aucune ostentation, qui était le sien.  S’il n’avait

été que grand et bel homme, cela aurait déjà été remarqué. Or, il était plus et mieux : intelligent, travailleur, sérieux et brillant.  Modibo, comme on l’appellera toute sa

vie … inspirait estime, admiration, respect chez tous les élèves de l’École et était apprécié des professeurs. 27

Hamani Diori describes the student Modibo Keita:

Modibo était à l’école un gros travailleur, très sérieux dans ses obligations

(ses devoirs étaient toujours achevés sans retard), ne remettant jamais au

lendemain le travail du jour, ce qui lui permettait de disposer de temps libre

pour nos distractions, notamment la musique (flûte) et l’action (en particulier

le rôle de Bakary Dian qu’il préférait). Il était un camarade foncièrement

honnête et franc. 28

Keita’s role-playing is worth noting. There was an active theatre program at the school, encouraged by Charles Béart, who first became interested in encouraging improvised drama while teaching primary school in Bingerville near Abidjan. He taught at the École Ponty in 1935-1937 (during Keita’s time there), and was later the school’s director, in 1939-1945.29 The program of the school’s annual festival in February 1935 included two dramas – one created and enacted by students from Dahomey, and one by the French Sudan students, titled “Le triomphe du griot, ou la duplicité des courtisans : en 3 actes et 4 tableaux. “ 30 Keita was not one of the five characters, but he must have been a part of its production. Also at this festival, his future comrade in Malian politics, Jean-Marie Koné, delivered a history of the “Chant des vautors” (*dougaou bé yala*), sung by a group of unidentified French Sudanese students.31 Apparently no drama was performed by the French Sudanese contingent at the 1936 festival, Keita’s last year at the school.32  The following year, a segment of the Sunjata epic, “La ruse de Diégué,” was performed at the school’s festival, in which Sunjata’s sister discovers Sumanguru’s secret source of strength; it was said to be written by two students from French Sudan.33

Keita graduated first in his class in July 1936.34 Two months later he began teaching at l’Ecole rurale du Bamako-Coura, founded in 1934 by his former Bamako teacher Mamadou Konaté, and considered a choice position. He taught there, then in Sikasso and Kabala (relocated as sanctions for political involvement), until becoming fully occupied by his political role in 1952. 35

During his teaching years he became active in several emerging associations, including Art et Travail. Imperato and Imperato describe it this as a cultural organization founded in 1938 by a French man named LeGall, intended to encourage graphic arts (drawing, painting, sculpture), but that Keita also encouraged political and historical dramatizations. 36 Bulman says, in contrast, that:

In Bamako a group of Ponty graduates formed a theatre group called *Art et travail*

to perform Ponty plays and new material in the town. … In the late 1940s regional

theatres developed in Bougouni, Sikasso, Mopti and Ségou, inspired by *Art et*

*travail*. In the mid 1950s the French authorities inaugurated a theatrical competition

within each colony of the federation. This competitive tradition survived into

independent Mali where an annual youth festival included a dramatic tourney. 37

Another new organization that Keita joined was the Association des Lettrés (later called Foyer du Soudan), founded by Mamby Sidibé, of which Mamadou Konaté was also a member. Keita and Konaté founded a teachers’ union together around the same time. From these voluntary associations were forged Keita’s political affiliations and orientations that would be critical to his future path.

**How Keita’s paper compares to others**

At seventy-five pages, Modibo Keita’s text is one of the longer *cahiers* Ponty, judging from the Senegalese and Ivoirian inventories. The outstanding student of the class before Keita’s was Émile Badiane, from Casamance, who later served in Léopold Senghor’s government. An article by him on the cultivation of peanuts in Casamance was published in *L’Éducation africaine* just as Keita would have been completing his own paper. The school’s director, Alfred Dirand, commented on the significance of this student article: “Pour la première fois, ce bulletin présente un travail scientifique, bien particulier puisqu’il renseigne sur une culture précise dans une région déterminée.” He goes on to say that this scientific fact-gathering is a good education that prepares their students, intellectually, for the future that awaits them.” 38

I had thought that this article was probably Badiane’s own *cahier*; but it is not included in the list of Senegalese *cahiers,* nor is there anything else listed there by him. At seven pages of published text, Badiane’s paper is concise and of a much more focused nature than Keita’s. But it follows the same general format of heading hierarchy, numbered subcategories, and “remarques” following description. Badiane includes illustrations – two plates illustrating particulars of tools and soil working, which are graphically impressive. (**Figure 1**) And although his subject is technical, he still manages to incorporate some creative imagery. In describing the effect of one of the modes of cultivation, he says,

D’un bout à l’autre du champ on trace ainsi des sillons parallèles. Le champ

qui a subi cette première opération ressemble ainsi à une tête de jeune fille

nouvellement tressée, avec des touffes d’herbe s’échappant d’entre les mottes

de terre comme des mèches de cheveux rebelles.39

Northwestern University Library’s Africana collection fortunately has at least two other photocopies of *cahiers*, written by classmates of Modibo Keita in 1936, and also obtained in 2000. One is “Les animaux de la brousse” by Jean Marie Souman (39 leaves), and is based on the village of Dubréka, Guinea. (**Figure 2**) This is a less apt comparison to Keita’s paper, but illustrates the range of topics addressed by the Pontins. The other, “L’enfant Malinké” by Kéfing Keita (51 pages), based on the community of Djidian, cercle de Kita, provides an excellent comparison. (**Figure 3-4**) Kéfing Keita’s paper echoes and affirms subjects and sentiments that Modibo Keita describes in his. They can be considered together as a largely overlapping continuum of observations about conditions of childhood in the Mande sphere. Some points of comparison with these other *cahiers* will be incorporated in the thematic discussion that follows.

**Choice of topic for Keita’s paper**

Childhood per se does not appear as one of the categories documented in the Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire *cahier* inventories. But there are several themes related to childhood – African games and toys; marriage, family, customs; Qur’anic school; and education of the African child. Modibo Keita’s text touches on all of these but marriage, which he says is beyond the limits of his topic. Education in various spheres occupies a large part of his text.

Keita chooses to describe a Soninke childhood in the village of Guiré – a village located almost 500 km northeast of Bamako, in the Koulikoro region. (**Figures 5-6**) Although he doesn’t explain his connection to it, this is the village where his father, Daba Keita, was born and raised, and where his paternal grandfather had a large family compound. Modibo is said to have taken after his grandfather, Massira Keita: “un homme de grande taille, avare de paroles, prisant la simplicité. Son autorité est certaine et d’un prestige incontestable.” 40 The Keitas are attributed to be the founders of Guiré, settling there from Samabougou, in the Ségou region.

Modibo Keita was born in a new quarter of the rapidly expanding Bamako, Bamako-Coura. I have not found mention as to whether he ever spent time in Guiré; but his descriptions are much more detailed than would seem possible had he relied completely upon his parents as his sources. His father was recruited around age twelve to attend primary school at the Ecole des otages in Kayes; from there he entered a career in the colonial government, beginning in the office of the governor. So the childhood being described by Keita is not strictly speaking his own, except possibly during occasional visits to Guiré; and it is probably not one experienced fully even by his father. (I have not learned where Keita’s mother, Fatouma Camara, was from.)

A further mystery has to do with Keita’s choice of a Sarakolle / Soninke childhood as his topic. He is generally described as being from a Malinké / Mandinka family, and yet he never mentions that ethnicity or language in his essay. In his introduction, Keita describes the residents of Guiré as neighbors of the Bambara and speaking invariably Soninke or Bambara. Diagouraga says that Keita was from a family of largely Malinké and Marka roots (Marka being a Bambara name for Soninke), with ‘few Kassonké roots.’ 41 His cousin’s son Kabouna Keita, in his memoir of childhood in Mali, says that he himself spoke only Bambara as a child. 42 As of about 1950 the Soninke population in Bamako, where Keita was born, made up three percent of the African population there, far behind the predominant Mande populations of Bambara, Dyula, and Mandinka.

Jean-Marie Koné, the fellow Pontin from Sikasso who served as Keita’s minister of state, verified that Keita’s father was Malinké and his mother was Marka; and that he was the grandson (figuratively speaking) of “le chevalier Lamourou de Guiré que les griots chantent encore pour sa bravoure, sa droiture et son sens de l’honneur.” He recounted that Keita’s father provided a home or shelter for many relatives and friends from his birthplace, and that this communal life was formative for Keita. 43

From this, it would appear that Modibo Keita’s essay on Soninke childhood is actually a pastiche of stories and impressions about his father’s Malinké village, assimilated from his family circle in Bamako, perhaps supplemented by information from his Marka / Soninke mother, and gleaned throughout his childhood from the extended community that was his family home in Bamako – with perhaps some first-hand recollections from Guiré. Or, that it is more or less an account of his own childhood in Bamako, with the village thrown in as a rural backdrop.

Keita must have assumed that his teachers at École William Ponty would not actually know whether he was describing the details of a Soninke, Malinké or Bambara childhood. Peggy Sabatier supports this assumption, pointing out “the Ponty teachers’ total lack of knowledge of the specific milieus which students were describing” and their focus instead on what they could address, which was that the students “express this content in exact and even elegant French.” 44 She also indicates that, if Keita did “embroider” any of his narrative, he would not have been alone in that.

And so we are left with some questions: Why did Keita say he was describing a Soninke childhood, if in fact he was not? Are the songs, incantations, and children’s games in his essay in Soninke, or in Malinke, or in Bambara – or a mixture? Is he describing childhood as observed in Guiré at all, or is his paper really based on life and stories as he experienced them through his family and friends in Bamako?

One possibility is that Modibo Keita chose to title his paper as being about Soninke childhood in complicity with his classmate, Kéfing Keita, who was writing about the Malinké child. It is conceivable that the two Keitas agreed to coordinate their topics so as to appear to cover more ethnographic ground. Sow cites several other texts on childhood of various ethnicities written around the same time, by teachers; and one on the Bambara child, written by Fily Dabo Sissoko, Modibo Keita’s later political opponent (and eventual victim of his regime) – also at Ecole William Ponty, though slightly earlier than the period of the *cahiers*, in 1930-1931. 45

Keita includes several samples of oral tradition – an ideal element, in theory, from which to try to pin down just whose childhood he is describing. (**Figure 7**) This linguistic task is beyond my scope. But there is a more narrow vocabulary used by him that provided me with some hope of insight – his description of plants used to treat childhood illnesses, accompanied by sketches. (**Figures 8-11**) I also include Keita’s sketches and terminology for wrestling positions and for a version of mankala. (**Figure 12**)

Based on the plant names, my guess was that Keita was generally using Maninka / Malinké vocabulary, at least in the plant realm, though the appearance of *kamou* (a shrub with compound oval leaflets) suggested that some Soninke might also be present. 46 I was then able to get a more accurate assessment from two Mandé-language experts. Kassim Kone, whose Bambara dictionary includes an extensive list of plant names, identifies Keita’s plant names as being Bambara with some Soninke. He also looked at the four oral tradition samples from Keita’s manuscript which I include at this end of this paper, and identifies three of them as being Soninke and one Bambara. 47 Moussa Traore corroborates this, though describing the non-Soninke text as “Bambara, dioula, malinké.” 48

Keita organizes his text into three main areas: the child in the family, the child in the village, and the education of the child – with a topic outline for each section:

I. **L’enfant dans la famille**

* **Naissance**. La femme enceinte – Accouchement de la femme – Le nouveau-né dans les croyances superstitueuses – L’enfant en grandissant.
* **Les maladies des enfants**. La fièvre – Courbature – Diarrhée – Dysenterie – Jaunisse – Bilharziose – Vers intestinaux.
* **Les cérémonies**. Le baptême – Tatouage – Taroun botoyé – Nongouné botoyé – Siguigna sogohé – Circoncision – Excision.
* **Rapports de l’enfant avec ses parents**. L’enfant avec son père et sa mère – L’enfant avec ses oncles et tantes – Avec ses grands-parents – L’enfant avec ses frères et sœurs – L’enfant dans les familles pauvres.

II. **L’enfant au village**

* **Le savoir-vivre des enfants**.
* **Les jeux des enfants**. Le kaka – [le « crapaud »] – Le n’tola – Le mama salé -- Kofili – Le toun férou [cache-cache / hide and seek] – Le kogo ba kari [circle knock-down game] – Le voli [mankala].
* **Les associations d’enfants**. Sama tori [elephant-toad] – Initiation des jeunes – Diambaré – Yogoro mansa – Le « ton » -- Le « kousson kompé [girls’ house] – Rôle des associations.

III. **L’éducation des enfants**

* **Education morale**.
* **Education intellectuelle**. Initiation religieuse – Initiation aux croyances.
* **Education physique**.
* **Enseignements**. Spéciaux : Sorciers – Divins – Homme-médecine. Professionnels : Musique – Forgeron – Chasse.

Reviewed without the outline in mind, the topics that seem to dominate Keita’s essay are: youth associations (15 pages); children’s education (12 pages); and circumcision (11 pages). I will not describe any of these topics in detail, leaving that to someone better situated to analyze ethnically specific content. Instead I will illustrate some elements that seemed particularly salient, and some themes relevant to the colonial setting in which Keita was writing. Keita’s voice will speak for itself; and some suggestions of an emerging political voice will be noted.

**The Pain of Childhood**

Development of fortitude or toughness – courage in the face of fear and pain – appears frequently in Keita’s text. He describes exposure to pain as beginning very young – for example, pricking the tongue of a crawling child who lets his tongue hang out of his mouth with a needle to break him of the habit – “procédé un peu méchant” (MK p. 70) Young girls in particular are exposed in a culturally systematic way to pain at an early age – facial scarification, gum tattooing, and excision. Toughness is further developed through social interactions. He describes the progressive violence of a girls’ game that devolves into all-out fighting ‘like veritable demons’: “Ici encore apparaissent l’esprit malicieux et la manque de pitié de l’enfant sarakollè.” (MK p. 45)

Keita explains how tales told at night around the fire gradually introduce the child to superstitious beliefs:

Toutes ces histoires travaillent la petite cervelle de l’enfant qui s’alarme au cri

d’une chouette, tremble au moindre bruit, crie devant des monticules que son

imagination transforme en êtres fabuleux : il devient superstitieux, peureux, et

n’ose pas, seul, entrer dans une case obscure. (MK p. 69)

This comes into play later when the child accompanies his father into the bush to hunt, and is left alone to deal with and conquer his fears:

Tous les Saracollès sont chasseurs. Les plus petits enfants peuvent se servir

d’un fusil. En effet tous les enfants [males] accompagnent leur père à la

chasse. La nuit, le père, avant de partir, crache de la salive sur la tête de son

enfant en récitant quelques versets du Coran. L’enfant suit le père à distance.

Celui-ci le laisse seul, dans la brousse et va à la recherche d’un gibier. Il n’est

pas à demander que l’enfant dont l’esprit est perverti par les légendes souvent

macabres tremble de tous ses membres. Il s’affolle au moindre bruit, s’alarme

au cri d’un oiseau nocturne mais n’ose crier car mal lui en prendra. Il peut passer

des heures entières dans cet état d’esprit. L’enfant est obligé de rester calme, à

garder tout son sang-froid. Ces promenades répétées tuent chez l’enfant la peur.

(MK p. 73)

Bell speaks of “the broad… emphasis that Fula and Mande groups place on practicing a code of behavior that requires people to have full command over the way they express their emotions and urges.” 49 Soungalo Samake, who had seen Modibo Keita while he was in the prison in Kidal and was guarding him when he died, tells in his memoir about being asked, while he himself was later imprisoned, whether he was afraid. His response was that during the circumcision rites the Bambara learn a primary lesson, which is how to deal with death without fear, since it is inevitable. 50

The difficult life of a child is also exemplified by his dirty environment and state. Keita pronounces early in his paper that “l’enfant noir est sale”, and he returns to this several times. He describes how a baby is left to crawl on the ground where there is all manner of filth that might end up in his mouth and make him sick. A Pontin classmate, Hamani Diori, who became the first president of Niger, commented of Keita: “il était aussi propre dans son corps que dans son esprit.” 51 Keita explains that “On ne le lave pas [l’enfant] car le bilacori ne doit pas être lavé.” (MK p. 70) Keita’s focus on lack of hygiene is echoed by Kéfing Keita, who also describes (after the washing and care of the vulnerable newborn and younger child) how Malinke boys must not be washed until they undergo circumcision rituals; but he doesn’t express the same opposition: “L’enfant doit vivre dans la malpropreté, c’est-à-dire ne jamais se laver, il sera ainsi fort tout en grandissant rapidement.” (KK p. 32)

Keita offers a terse summary of the childhood experience: “A mon avis l’enfant sarakollè a une enfance malheureuse. A chaque faute commise, tout le monde s’abat sur lui en le sermontant.” (MK p. 64) He describes how this harshness leads to moral ambivalence, since the child who manages to hide his wrongdoing is rewarded: “Si l’enfant parvient à cacher sa faute, il est applaudi et traité d’intelligent.  Naturellement l’enfant, sachant qu’il est préférable de mentir, mentira, deviendra menteur.” (MK p. 63) Kéfing Keita’s *cahier* on Malinké childhood reiterates the presence of frequent physical punishment, sometimes when the child has done nothing wrong. “La désobéisance ne peut prendre racine chez le jeune Malinké car il est permis à tous les membres de la famille et même aux étrangers de le frapper lorsqu’il refuse d’exécuter un ordre. C’est pourquoi le Malinké est souvent d’une soumission parfaite et même stupide.” (KK p. 32)

**References to the colonial setting and to social change**

Keita opens his paper by describing two great subdivisions of the already complex indigenous population, formed as a result of the French occupation: those living in immediate contact with Europeans, who were gradually abandoning ancestral customs for European ones; and those who lived in more remote locations and only saw Europeans rarely and in a formal context, and therefore had kept all of their indigenous customs. “Ce qui importe ici, c’est de renseigner sur l’enfant d’un indigène dont les moeurs sont purement nègres.” (MK, p. 1) He describes his chosen locale of Guiré as a Soninke village with Bambara influence. However, we have already discussed that his father’s family was Malinké; and given that his father was recruited to colonial school from there, clearly Guiré was not “untouched” by the French presence.

Modibo Keita only rarely addresses the French colonial setting directly. Describing children's games, he says, "… au clair de lune, les enfants de tous âges organisent divers jeux et c’est avec raison qu’un auteur colonial a dit 'Quand la lune se lève, l’Afrique danse.'" (MK p. 40) He situates the universal lament about “children of today” in a colonial context, paraphrasing the negative opinions of adults about their youth:

‘Les enfants d’aujourd’hui sont pervertis par la colonisation française. Oh ! ce

sont les enfants "du temps des toubabs." Ils ne seront bons à rien. Nous n’étions

pas comme cela.’ L’enfant rarement profite de ces paroles pour s’améliorer afin

de montrer aux parents le contraire de ce qu’ils pensent. (MK p. 65)

Keita describes the situation of poor families who were threatened with prison for inability to pay taxes, who would “engage” their child at a woman’s home for a certain sum, and the child would stay there until the parents could repay her. If the child was fortunate, this was like an actual adoption; but for some it was a miserable experience akin to slavery. He says that “engaging” children in this way was not widespread among the Soninke, though it was among the Bambara. (In his own family, Keita’s cousin’s son, the youngest of numerous children of one mother, was given by his mother to a childless woman in the extended family as a gesture of admiration and generosity.) 52 Bell says that “the practice of allowing children to be raised (*den lamɔ*) by friends or relatives” was common in the predominantly Mande village where she did her research – in response to a relative’s fondness for a child, to provide a child for childless couples, or to provide help for a young mother. The contexts that she records are benevolent. 53 Samba Traore describes two well-established Soninke relationships that involve giving a child to other parents. It is perhaps pertinent that Modibo Keita does not incorporate kinship terms in his paper, Soninke or otherwise. 54

The economic crash of 1929 and the devaluation of the pound in 1933 hurt the colonial economy, reduced the demand for migrant urban labor (forced or otherwise), stagnated the growth of Bamako until after World War II, and increased French demands on their African resources. Forced labor continued until 1946, the year that French Sudanese (Malians) were redefined as civilians rather than colonial subjects. 55 Keita’s enrollment at the Ecole Ponty was during cuts in educational funding which had begun in 1930 due to the economic crisis. 56

In describing how Soninke boys learn hunting from their fathers, he says that in fact many Soninke youths went into the city for work in the summers instead of hunting. This may have been due to the need to pay taxes in cash, and the dearth of means to earn cash elsewhere. But he does not address forced labor. Nor does he describe the practice of young men going “on adventure” to earn money, as is described by Brand 57 and Grosz-Ngate. 58 This seems an odd omission, given the straitened circumstances of the era, and the prominence that work migration would later assume as an issue during his presidency, as it ran counter to his call for a ‘return to the land’ and his hope (and need) to maximize Mali’s human resources. 59 But these could be seen as also beyond the scope of his paper, beyond childhood.

Keita provides one striking anecdote that illustrates social change in the area of health care. When he was in the third year of E.P.E. (elementary primary school – about age twelve, circa 1927), his mother lost her fifth newborn baby in six years. He had vainly tried to make her understand that the death of infants was due to a lack of proper care. He especially blamed the practice of putting dust on their umbilical wound, which seemed to cause them to die as if from suffocation. (Kéfing Keita mentions the practice of treating the umbilical wound with powder made from crushed pieces of pottery; KK pp. 4-5.)

Quelques jours après le déces de mon jeune frère, je revins à la charge. Je me

heurtais à cet argument massif: "C’est Dieu qui l’a voulu. Pourtant toi, tu n’es

pas mort, ainsi que tes autres frères." Je le combattis: "Si nous ne sommes

pas morts, c’est que nous avons eu la chance. Je ne dis pas qu’avec les soins de

la sage-femme les enfants ne meurent pas, mais combien cela est rare. Laissez-

vous guider par la sage-femme et nous verrons." Fut-elle convaincue, ne le

fut-elle pas ? La suite du récit mettra fin à notre angoisse. (MK p. 5bis)

He goes on to say that his older sister had a baby girl the following year, assisted by a midwife. The year after that, his mother gave birth to a girl, attended by the same midwife. A week, two weeks, a month passed, and the baby lived and thrived. From that moment on, he says, every birth (in the family?) was assisted by a midwife. This passage is interesting on several counts: it is told in the first person; it demonstrates Keita’s adherence to principles of modern hygiene versus “fate”; and it illustrates his will to push for the possible benefits of change, when still a boy. Keita did have an older sister who he was close to. This story appears to be an exceptional bit of autobiography in what is otherwise not clearly identifiable as such.

**Reference to Islamic education**

Modibo Keita explains that the children he is describing are Muslim, but that their religious faith is not yet developed – that they prefer concrete to abstract things. (MK p. 50) He himself attended Qur’anic school until the age of nine, when he entered French primary school in Bamako. From his perspective a decade later at Ecole Ponty, he is quite dismissive of the style and content of Islamic education. Here is his strongly worded passage:

L’enfant a le crâne rempli de mots arabes qu’il se plaît à répéter sans comprendre. … Par des descriptions plus ou moins allégoriques, le maître montre à ses élèves les souffrances horribles que l’on support dans l’enfer quand on a mangé les viandes défendues par Dieu, quand on a bu du vin, en un mot quand on a désobéi à Dieu.

Il leur raconte la vie des saints, la formation de la terre, la création des hommes sur

la terre. On remplit le crâne de l’enfant de plusieurs histoires que se racontent différement. Ainsi, l’enfant est désorienté. Quand il est arrivé aux derniers versets

du courant [i.e. Coran], le maître essaie de lui interprêter les mots qu’il a appris par cœur. Que de choses abominables, monstreux, raconte-t-on à ce petit innocent qui

ne peut s’aperçevoir que son maître n’en est pas plus avancé que lui. Alors l’enfant reçoit un enseignement vague et c’est à peine si après dix ans d’études sait-il écrire

une lettre ou lire quelques livres musulmans. L’enfant est élevé avec la haine des autres religions pour lesquelles il n’a plus de respect. (MK p. 67)

He concludes: “Donc l’enfant noir après un long séjour à l’école coranique a la curiosité morte, le raisonnement éteint, l’intelligence dans un état latent.” (MK p. 68) He adds that only the rare child who follows both forms of education at the lower levels succeeds in getting into ‘the great French schools.’

**Reference to oral tradition**

Oral literature is a recurring element in the *cahiers* William Ponty. Jean Marie Souman’s text does not include indigenous language (which for him is Susu) other than his explanation of each animal’s name and the origin of that name; but for each animal he includes a section on associated legends. Here are two excerpts from his *cahier*:

“Baratai” déformation de “Baritai” veut dire: “né dans le feu.” En effet les

indigènes prétendent que l’ancêtre des panthères est sorti du feu que cracha

un jour Lucifer pour punir les Noirs qui avaient embrassé l’Islamisme. Pour

montrer la véracité de ce fait, ils disent que c’est ce feu qui a roussi les poils

de la panthère, et que les taches noires de son pelage représentent les brûlures

causées par les flammes. Ils racontent que c’est la fureur de Lucifer qui anime

la panthère d’une férocite continuelle. (JMS p. 5)

La légende dit qu’un charognard est immortel. Dès qu’il se sent veillir, il se

rend à Mandé, supposé leur pays d’origine. Et 70 jours après, il revient rajeuni.

Ce voyage se fait par chaque cinquante ans. (JMS pp. 31-32)

As mentioned earlier, Keita includes numerous examples of oral literature, along with French translation. (See appendix at the end of this article.) These can be characterized as minor traditions – incantations to protect a newborn child, children’s game songs, and youth songs. (Kéfing Keita’s text similarly includes incantations and chants around birth and circumcision/excision, but his examples are shorter.) Modibo Keita’s only reference to the Mande epic tradition is a passing one, in the section on special education, for children who are given in apprenticeship to griots:

Un griot qui ne sait pas chanter, qui n’a pas la ‘langue habille’ n’est pas un vrai griot.

Aussi le maître qui sera fier lorsqu’on lui dira qu’il a bien éduqué son élève, passe des

heures entières à lui raconter les aventures des grands guerriers, à lui faire réciter les

paroles qui obligent les personnes à regarder leur poche, à chanter les exploits

chevaleresques des Soundiata, des Gongo Moussa, etc.  (MK p. 72)

**Keita’s literary voice**

Modibo Keita’s account ranges from matter-of-fact description to richly developed prose. He invites the reader to join him in the village with this line: “Arrêtons-nous sous un mur et regardons les jeux organisés par les garçons.” (MK p. 40) Kéfing Keita invites us in a similar way – “Suivons donc l’enfant à travers le petit monde paysan et tâchons de voir l’éducation qu’il reçoit dans la famille” (KK p. 2) – and the often elevated register of his language (at least to these anglophone eyes) is similar, e.g., describing the youths who were ‘in the arms of Morphée’ until awakened by the cock’s crow the morning of their circumcision (KK pp. 9-10). Jean Marie Souman’s style is more straightforward and unadorned.

Modibo Keita points out onomatopoeia in a boys’ game, with the interjections *toki moki, totokili moki* in imitation of the sound of a toad jumping and landing on the ground. Beyond this perfunctory attention to a literary presence, he occasionally creates some truly lyrical passages – as when he describes the grace of dancing youths; *souplesse* or “suppleness” is a word that he employs in this context more than once. Here is a condensed passage from his description of a *ton* (youth society) dance festival, which gives a good sense of his writing abilities:

Les joueurs … tirent les cordes des tam-tams. Pan ! Pan ! Le son cristallin de

la peau tendue se répercute au loin. Le village s’anime et une vague rumeur qui

se rapproche de plus en plus montre l’agitation de ses habitants. Pan ! pan ! pan !

doun ! doun ! Les tam-tams appellent joyeusement les personnes. De toutes les

ruelles serpentantes font irruption des groupes bruyants de garçons et de fillettes,

parés d’habits aux issuances très variées, des files d’hommes et de femmes. Les

sociétaires s’asseyent sur les sièges, les garçons en face des jeunes fillettes. Les

joueurs autrefois pressés font les indifférents … Tout à coup un soupir de

soulagement s’échappe de toutes les poitrines : la danse commence. … La danse

continue, plus fièvreuse. C’est un véritable concours d’agilité et de souplesse. Les

jeunes filles succèdent aux garçons. Semblables à des oiseaux qui prennent leur

élan, elles se poursuivent deux à deux, les bras étendus. (MK p. 59-61)

Another of the more memorable scenes that Keita conjures is of an informal boys’ raiding party. Dumestre has described the “hunger for meat” – *mìyɛn* – as a Mande cultural characteristic: “La consummation de viande grillé, excessivement rare, provoque d’ailleurs une excitation joyeuse, une euphorie qu’on peut comparer à celle que produit, dans d’autres cultures, l’absorbtion modérée de boisson alcoolisée.” 60 Keita describes such a moment during *Diambaré*, at the beginning of the harvest season, when one night a troop of boys “loots” their family households of all the food and small animals they can find, builds a fire in the bush, kills the ‘victims’ on the spot to roast on the fire, devours everything, and then dances. Here Keita adopts an exceptional first-person and highly literary voice, and perhaps seeks to titillate or shock the French teacher who would review his paper, or to mockingly echo something he had read:

Ceci me fait penser à une bande de brigands qui après leurs expéditions se

réunissent dans leur repaire. … A voir ces corps demi nus couverts de sueur,

ces mains grasses, ces faces auxquelles la lumière du feu donnent [i.e. donne] un

aspect farouche, on se croirait devant une bande d’anthropophages qui, après un

repas frugal de chair humaine se livreraient à une de ces danses qui ne manquent

pas de grâce et d’harmonie. Le ciel pur constellé et étoilé la ... [text cut off in copy]

[obs]curité rendue plus profonde autour du brasier encadrent ce spectacle d’une

beauté sauvage. (MK p. 51-52)

**Indications of Keita’s political voice**

The reputation of the Ecole William Ponty as a fount for future West African leadership in the era leading to independence is well-known. Half of Keita’s political inner circle as president of Mali, and several of his peers in neighboring countries, would be graduates of the same school. There are some passages that seem particularly poignant in view of Modibo Keita's future, made in the context of a discussing a youth association or *ton*. He speaks of the potential of Africans, given the resources – “la prodigalité des Indigènes une fois qu’ils sont dans la bombance.” (MK p. 52) And regarding the officers of the *ton*, he says, “Le président ne peut être attaqué et jugé que par le juge : mais il peut être démis de sa fonction par les sociétaires mécontents. N’est-ce pas là une forme grossière de la république?” (MK p. 58)

Keita’s distaste for privilege and lack of discipline appears in his criticism of the children of chiefs as being badly educated by their parents, given every freedom and therefore proud, lazy and ill-willed (MK p. 71). He speaks approvingly of the governing effect of youth associations: “Elles contribuent à faciliter l’éducation des enfants par leurs parents, car, souvent, elles tuent chez eux [les enfants] l’esprit de révolte et de pleine liberté, lequel non combattu devient l’entêtement.”  (MK p. 62) It is tempting to try to link Keita’s description of these organizations to his government’s development of various youth organizations, such as the Service Civique for rural youth as community agricultural trainers. 61

The overall tone adopted in Keita's paper – as to be expected in the context of École William Ponty – is one of an observer, at a slight remove from the culture that he is describing. At times he seems to take on the critical voice of an outsider, or even to assume a stance akin to a French colonial perspective. This impression comes from his use of “le Noir” or “l’indigène” – used also by both Kéfing Keita and Jean Marie Souman, and probably typical, familiar usage for the Pontins. But it is also an impression fueled by some of his actual statements, which appear to reflect his own opinions and not be an attempt to cater to his reviewer. In describing the presence of griots at the *koussou kompé* or “house of the young girls” he makes this acerbic pronouncement:

Dans cette case étroite où la lampe fumeuse contribue à rendre l’atmosphère

lourde, apparait l’orgueil du Noir [sarakollé – inserted later], orgueil qui est

inné chez cette race avide de louanges mais n’en fait jamais pour autrui.

(MK p. 61)

The sharpness of this passage is perhaps an early reflection of Keita’s lack of esteem for certain aspects at the heart of Mande tradition. This divergence of values came to a head decades later during his visit to Kangaba in October 1967 (less than a year before the coup ending his regime and his life as a free man), when he was refused entry to the Kamabolon sanctuary. Two well-known men of caste, the griot Komanwulen Jabaté and the blacksmith Wali Kanté, chastised Keita, and were sent off to prison in Bamako. In describing this event, Seydou Camara remarks that Keita was certainly not reacting in accord with Mande tradition, since people of caste – in particular griots, “hommes de la parole” – were seen to have a certain immunity and should not be sanctioned. 62

**Some Conclusions**

It is doubtful that Modibo Keita gave this essay more than a passing thought in his later life, occupied as he was with his mission to transform Mali into an independent nation, and the many political, economic, and personal challenges of the coming years. Some of the cultural expressions recorded in this essay were apparently seen by him as obstacles to a Mali that could evolve together, under a socialist model and with all speed, toward self-sufficiency. As an example, Lucy Durán states that masked dances such as *sogoninkun* (“little antelope head”) from the Wasulu region, originally associated with *ton* or youth associations, “disappeared during the radical measures of Modibo Keita’s regime” and have been in decline since then. 63

I have found no reference to a memoir by Keita. Captain Soungalo Samake, who oversaw Keita at the parachutist camp in Bamako, commented that Keita was always writing and had two “cantines” full of notebooks, shortly before his sudden death. 64 Presumably they documented his thoughts, observations, and recollections as recorded during nine years isolated in prison in northern Mali. It is unclear what happened to those notebooks. Given the Traore military regime’s sustained interest in suppressing Keita’s influence and memory, epitomized in the description of him merely as a ‘retired teacher’ in the radio announcement of his death, it would be remarkable if those writings should surface.

And so I have found little to compare this paper with, in Keita's own voice, other than his speeches. 65 His views at age twenty had probably not yet been much affected by exposure to socialist or communist ideologies, though he may well have had teachers at École Ponty who adhered to these. We can see threads that hint at his already established beliefs. These threads concern ideas about cleanliness and health; the fortitude of Mande people in the face of pain, fear, and hardship, and the valuing of self-discipline; the importance of social and moral education, by family, peers and community; and the potency of youth organizations. These are generally cultural qualities that are also described by Kéfing Keita. We witness his impatience with Islamic rote education and its potential for generating prejudice, with the caste system, and with the spoiled behaviors of over-indulged children. The advantage of exposure to the French educational system appears as a given. We see as well his masterful use of the French language, and his capacity for eloquence. His strong commitment to pan-African cooperation could well have had its emotional origins in the small shared community at the school in Gorée.

Keita's *cahier* does appear to function as "auto-ethnography" in that his vivid descriptions of events such as the rites around circumcision appear to be based on fact. But how much of it was fact as experienced by him is unclear. As far as being a record of Soninke childhood per se, that appears unlikely. But it certainly is a record of a Mande (male) child’s experience. Modibo Diallo expresses the reality of Keita’s ethnic influences succinctly: “Il faut dire que Modibo est malinké d'origine (et d'identité), soninké d'adoption et bambara de fait.” 66 And so a single-minded pursuit for the “truth” of Keita’s narrative is perhaps misguided. De Jorio notes that ‘rigid’ ethnic categories in Mali are a product of the colonial era: “the classification of local populations into neatly defined ethnic groups is the product of the interaction and misunderstandings between locals and colonial administrators as well as some ethnographers. Indeed, the boundaries between these groups are highly permeable and context-related, and their meanings are subject to renegotiation.” 67

Despite the granular details that Keita provides, many of his passages are embellished well beyond the language of strict observation. In his analysis of the historicity of Wangrin in Hampate Ba’s famous novel, Ralph Austen speaks of the “relationship between historical fact, transformed memory and literary construction.” (Austen 2003, p. 21) (86) Though the facts of Modibo Keita’s life are not as obscure, and he was writing about childhood as an ethnographic student assignment from the perspective of someone not much removed from childhood himself, I find this an apt summation of Keita’s *cahier* William Ponty – both as he wrote it, and as we now read it.

**Notes**

1 A footnote in Abdoul Sow’s 2008 article on colonial education in French West Africa (online) was the initial key that identified for me the origin and date of this manuscript and confirmed the author’s identity. No documentation as to provenance or date was present when I came upon the Keita manuscript in our backlog in early 2012. The “institutional memory” of how it came to be in Northwestern’s collection was provided by David Easterbrook, curator of the Herskovits Library of African Studies (retired June 2014). Mette Shayne, then an Africana librarian at Northwestern, with Easterbrook’s blessing, commissioned graduate student Christopher Hayden – who was doing doctoral research in the Dakar archives – to photocopy items for the Herskovits Library of African Studies in 2000. (Hence, from my cataloger’s perspective, “construction of a context” was a process that began the moment I came across the manuscript copy.) Hayden corroborated his role in an email (Sep. 23, 2014). He said that the *cahiers* Ponty were not accessible in 2000, but that he came across the description of Modibo Keita’s paper in an open card catalogue; and that Northwestern’s version may be a copy-of-a-copy.

I made a poor-quality reference copy of the entire manuscript for preparation of this paper for the MANSA conference in Bobo-Dioulasso, and left that with staff of the Monument Modibo Keita (Modibo Diallo, director, and Moussa Traoré, research assistant) in Bamako in late June 2014, following the conference. They knew that such a manuscript existed but had not seen it.

2 Issue 5 of *Mande Studies* (2003) includes several articles in a special section, “Modibo Keita’s Mali : 1960-1968”; several of those articles are cited here. Two other publications –*Mande – Manding* : background reading for ethnographic research in the region south of Bamako (Mali), assembled by Jan Jansen (Leiden : Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, 2004; and *Mande Mansa* : essays in honor of David C. Conrad, ed. Stephen Belcher, Jan Jansen, and Mohamed N’Daou (Mande worlds, v. 2); Berlin : Lit, 2008 – provided concise sources for an overview both of the Mande sphere and of the Mande Studies Association.

In this context I am also grateful to Robert Launay, MANSA member and anthropology professor at Northwestern University, for his feedback on a preliminary draft of this paper. I first crossed paths with him at dawn at a bus station in Abidjan in 1984; oddly enough I had a copy of his dissertation (and his alone). My stay in Lataha and his stay in Korhogo (his second sojourn there) were of the same duration, and my visits with him and his family during that year were invaluable.

3 Brévié, (Jules). “La vie de l’A.O.F. et l’école. Partie générale: L’enseignement en A.O.F. en 1935. (Extrait du discours de M. le Gouverneur Général Brévié, prononcé à l’ouverture du Conseil de Gouvernement, le 19 décembre 1935.)” *L’Éducation africaine*, no. 93, jan.-mars 1936, p. 5.

4 Jézéquel, Jean-Hervé. “Les enseignants comme élite politique en AOF (1930-1945) : des ‘meneurs de galopins’ dans l’arène politique. » *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 178 (2005), retrieved online (pagination not provided).

5 Diagouraga, Modibo. *Modibo Keïta: un destin*. Paris : Harmattan, 2005, p. 14.

6 Diagouraga, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

7 Brévié, (Jules). “La vie de l’A.O.F. et l’école. Partie générale: L’enseignement en A.O.F. en 1935.” *L’Éducation africaine*, no. 93, jan.-mars 1936, p. 4.

8 Imperato, Pascal James, and Gavin H. Imperato. *Historical dictionary of Mali*. 4th ed. (Historical dictionaries of Africa; no. 107) Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008, p. 172.

9 Barthélémy, Pascale, and Jean-Hervé Jézéquel. “Marier les ‘demoiselles frigidaires’ et les ‘mangeurs de craies’ : l’idéal du ménage lettré et l’administration coloniale en Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF).” *Perspectives historiques sur le genre en Afrique*, coordonné par Odile Goerg. (Cahiers Afrique ; no 23.) Paris : Harmattan, 2007, p. 77.

10 Sabatier, Peggy R. “‘Elite’ education in French West Africa: the era of limits, 1903-1945.” *The international journal of African historical studies*, v. 11, no. 2 (1978), p. 248.

11 Bulman, Stephan. “A school for epic? The école William Ponty and the evolution of the Sunjata epic, 1913-c. 1960.” *Epic adventures* : heroic narratives in the oral performance traditions of four continents. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004, p. 36.

12 Bouche, Denise. *L’enseignement dans les territoires français de l’Afrique Occidentale de 1817 à 1920 : mission civilisatrice ou formation d’une élite?* Thesis, Université de Paris I, 1974. 2 volumes. Lille : Atelier Reproduction des Thèses, Université Lille III ; Paris : Diffusion Librairie Honor, 1975, p. 803.

13 Bulman, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 41. He cites A. Charton, “Role social de l’enseignement en Afrique Occidental Française” (*Outre-Mer* 6, 1934, pages 188-202).

14 Sherman, Daniel. “‘Peoples ethnographic’: objects, museums, and the colonial inheritance of French ethnology.” *French historical studies*, v. 27, no. 3 (summer 2004), p. 670.

15 Fiordimela, Cristina. “Mission Dakar-Djibouti.” *Domus* [website], posted Sep. 6, 2012. “Although the political context was still dominated by colonial interests when the mission departed, its travel accounts were critical of colonialism’s devastating effects and focused, for the first time, on the need to safeguard a vast and as yet still unexplored cultural heritage that was at risk of being eliminated by Western expansionist aims.”

16 Kane Touré, Khady. “Politique d’acquisition des savoirs : l’expérience des patrimoines documentaires de l’IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop, un modèle d’intégration africaine.” Prepared for round table at the *Colloque international "les Bibliothèques nationales en Afrique subsaharienne au XXIème siècle"*, 2003, p. 6. IFAN Service de Documentation also states that a “new” inventory of the Cahiers William Ponty is available. I have not seen the full inventory, only the excerpts for Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire. So I am unable to discuss the range of papers authored by the students from the French Soudan.

17 Diouf, Makhtar. *Sénégal, les ethnies et la nation*. Genève : UNRISD ; Dakar: Forum du Tiers-Monde, 1994, p. 141.

18  Kane Touré, 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

19 Barthélémy and Jézéquel, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

20 Kane Touré, 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

21 Afanou, François, [et] Raymond Togbe Pierre. *Catalogue des* “*Cahiers William Ponty*”:(extrait : Sénégal). Dakar : Département de documentation de l’I.F.A.N., 1967, p. iv.

22 Bouche, 1975, p. 803.

23 Barthélémy and Jézéquel, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

24 Afanou and Togbe Pierre, 1967, *op. cit.*, p. v-vi.

25 Cahiers École William Ponty, [collection of papers on indigenous culture of the Ivory Coast, c. 1938-1944]. [Dakar: Institut fundamental d’Afrique noire, 1989?] Index and reel guide, MF-13226.

26 Kane Touré, 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 6 (Word version); and HTML version, with differing content.

27  Diagouraga, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Also cited in Traoré, Amadou Seydou. *Modibo Kéïta: une référence, un symbole, un patrimoine national*. 2e édition. Bamako: La ruche à livres, 2011, p. 5. Two other anecdotes about Keita at Ecole Ponty are mentioned in the latter. In an interview for his fiftieth birthday, Keita told of speaking out in class to a math teacher there who was being hurtfully sarcastic toward a student who didn’t understand the exercise, and then staring back unblinkingly at the startled teacher; the jeering students were instantly silenced. (p. 20) And in 1959 Keita happened upon the comments by his professors about him in the school’s archives (which are much quoted): “Instituteur d’élite, très intelligent, mais anti-français. Agitateur de haute classe, à surveiller de près.” (p. 21)

28 Traoré, A. S., 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

29 Mouralis, Bernard. “William-Ponty drama.” *European-language writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, volume 1. (A comparative history of literatures in European languages.) Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986, p. 130. Mouralis provides a thorough history of the history and influence of drama at the William Ponty School.

30 *L’Éducation africaine*, no. 89, jan.-mars 1935, pp. 177-178. The transcript for both plays is also included.

31 *L’Éducation africaine*, no. 89, jan.-mars 1935, pp. 194-196.

32 Mouralis, 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

33 Bulman, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 39. He gives the Ecole William Ponty and its graduates credit for disseminating the legend of Sunjata in the first half of the twentieth century, via theater and literature.

34 Traoré, A. S., 2011, *op. cit.,* p. 83.

35 Traoré, A. S., 2011, *op. cit.,* p. 82.

36  Imperato and Imperato, 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

37 Bulman, 2004, op. cit., p. 42 (citing Nicholas S. Hopkins, 1972).

38 Dirand, A. (Alfred). “La vie de l’A.O.F. et l’école. Partie générale: Contribution à l’étude des produits agricoles de l’Afrique occidentale française.” *L’Éducation africaine*, no. 94, avril-juin 1936, p. 111.

39 Badiane, E. (Émile). “La culture de l’arachide en Basse-Casamance.” *L’Éducation africaine*: bulletin de l’enseignement de l’Afrique Occidental Française, no. 94, avril-juin 1936, p. 114.

40 Diagouraga, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

41 Diagouraga, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

42 Keita, Kabouna, en collaboration avec Fred Muller. *L’enfant cadeau*. Paris: Belfond, 2007, pp. 30-33. He describes going with his father to visit Modibo Keita when he was president, at the presidential palace, from the awed perspective of a young child.

43 Traoré, A. S., 2011, op. cit., p. 81.

44 Sabatier, Peggy R. “African culture and colonial education: The William Ponty School *cahiers* and theater.” *Journal of African studies*, spring 1980, p. 4.

45 Sow, Abdoul. “Le profil de l’écolier noir à travers la littérature coloniale,” 2008, p. 4. Fily Dabo Sissoko also attended École William Ponty. Sow states that his “Enquête sur l’enfant Bambara”, written Oct. 1930 and May 1931, was also a *cahier de l'élève*. Tal Tamari disputes this on the basis of Sissoko’s age at that time (personal communication during the Mande Studies Association conference, Bobo-Dioulasso, June 2014).

46 Resources used to work through Keita’s plant names were as follows: Bailleul, Charles. *Petit dictionnaire bambara-français français-bambara*. England : Avebury Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 334-339 (appendix listing plant names); JSTOR *Global plants*, citing Burkill, H.M. 1985. *The useful plants of west tropical Africa*, v. 1 and v. 4 (Combretum crotonoides and Gardenia ternifolia or G. erubescens); and *Plan de sécurité alimentaire, commune rurale de Diéma : 2007-2011*, p. 5 (Gueira senegalensis).

47 Kone, Kassim. Email to the author, September 28, 2014. See also his *Bamanankan daɲɛgafe*. 2nd edition. West Newbury, Mass. : Mother Tongue Editions ; Bamako, République du Mali : An Lamɔkan Gafew, 2010, which has extensive natural history glossaries including the scientific name (pp. 227-245).

48 Diallo, Modibo. Email to the author, September 29, 2014. Diallo is director of the Monument Modibo Keita in Bamako. He cites the conclusions of Moussa Traore, research assistant there.

49 Bell, Diana. *Between prayers: the life of a West African Muslim*. Ph.D. thesis, Florida State University, 2013, p. 169.

50 Samake, Soungalo. *Ma vie de soldat*. Bamako : La Ruche à livres—Librairie Traore, 2007, p. 157.

51  Traoré, A. S., 2011, *op. cit.,* p. 91.

52 Keita, K. avec F. Muller, 2007, op. cit., pp. 11-13.

53 Bell, 2013, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-187.

54 Traore, Samba. *Corpus Soninké*: parenté et mariage. Paris: Laboratoire d’anthropologie juridique de Paris, Université de Paris I, 1985, pp. 38-39.

55 Brand, Saskia. “Social and demographical dimensions of Bamako.” *Mande – Manding: background reading for ethnographic research in the region south of Bamako.* Leiden, The Netherlands: Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, 2004, pp. 63-64.

56 Diawara, Bakary. *La formation d’une élite ivoirienne à l’école William-Ponty, 1930-1950*. Mémoire de maîtrise histoire, Université nationale de Côte d’Ivoire, novembre 1981, leaf 2. “En 1930, les conséquences de la crise économique mondiale sont, pour les colonies, la réduction des crédits disponibles pour l’enseignement. 1930 est donc le début d’une ère d’agonie pour l’enseignement en Afrique, particulièrement en Côte d’Ivoire, où le développement de l’instruction accusait un grand retard par rapport à certaines colonies, comme le Sénégal, le Dahomey. ”

57 Brand, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

58  Grosz-Ngate, Maria Luise. *Bambara men and women and the reproduction of social life in Sana Province, Mali*. Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, 1986, leaves 175-176.

59 Gary-Tounkara, Daouda. “Quand les migrants demandent la route, Modibo Keita rétorque : ‘Retournez à la terre !’ Les *baragnini* et la désertion du ‘Chantier national’ (1958-1968).” *Mande studies*, 5, 2003, pp. 49-64. See also Gregory Mann’s and Catherine Bogosian’s contributions in the same volume, which describe the convergence of the roles of soldier and cultivator from different perspectives during the Keita era.

60 Dumestre, Georges. “De l’alimentation au Mali.” *Mande – Manding* : background reading for ethnographic research in the region south of Bamako. Leiden, The Netherlands: Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, 2004, p. 89.

61 Bogosian, Catherine. “The ‘little farming soldiers’: the evolution of a labor army in post-colonial Mali.” *Mande studies*, 5, 2003, pp. 85-87. Her paper describes the Service Civique Rural for rural youth as a post-colonial equivalent of the French forced labor policy.

62 Camara, Seydou. “Une grande figure de l’histoire du Mali: Modibo Keita, 1915-1977.” *Mande studies*, 5 (2003), pp. 18-22, note p. 26.

63 Durán, Lucy. “Birds of Wasulu : freedom of expression and expressions of freedom in the popular music of southern Mali.” *British journal of ethnomusicology*, v. 4, 1995, pp. 113-115.

64 Samake, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 130. Samake says that he did look at what Modibo Keita had been writing at one point, and that Keita had praised Samake’s treatment of him, and Samake feared that that would get him into trouble. He later mentions that Keita’s wife Fanta Diallo and others asked him what had happened to Keita’s last testament and his other papers, and that he did not know (pp. 161-163).

65 Excerpts from Keita’s speeches and interviews are incorporated into several publications; and the website, *Modibo Keita* : une figure africaine marquante : le mémorial Modibo Keita has a collection of over thirty of his speeches as well as a short live video-clip interview.

66 Diallo, 2014, op. cit. He continues, “Ses ancêtres malinké sont venu du Mandé pour s'installer en pays soninké, dont il a reçu l'éducation. Ses parents se sont installé à Bamako, pays bambara, où lui-même a passé l'essentiel de sa vie.”

67 De Jorio, Rosa. “Culture of Mali.” 2001? *Countries and their cultures* [website].

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**Appendix:** **Mande-language extracts with their French translation as given by Modibo Keita**

(Ambiguities in Keita’s handwriting, e.g. “m”, “n,” and “u” and other vowels, along with some ornate initial capital letters, were an issue here; his accents appear sometimes to be arbitrary; and since I have only a little acquaintance with a Mande language, there may be errors in transcription.)

A woman in labor is given hot water in which an old woman [serving as midwife] has spat while reciting (MK p. 2; the original page from which this is taken is reproduced in Figure 7)

*identified as Soninke*

Tout bissimilahi, hatoumara, guiri bissourané, arono n’lakè

Tout bissimilahi, hatoumara, guiri bissourané, il entre par la bouche

Awo ba ka da halouè, tossimossi – awo sa ka da halla dâ

Il sort par son opposé, va-t-en, pour Dieu

Awo saka kirissé n’dy tornoundà. Diarama soukoukèm en koro

Pour le vieillard et son expérience. Le Diara [le père de tous les maux de ventre] n’a pas tué la chèvre

A na ma ka oulani kari. A siré ma bougadi. … soukougna mou o kinkinné

Qu’il ne tue pas une telle. Qu’il en sorte sain et sauve, les sorciers dorment ;

Ana bougadi djinqué boure o kinkenné, a na bougadi tossi.

Que tu échappes au mauvais esprit qui dort, que tu en sois quitté saine.

Recitation to protect newborn from the *dabi* (malevolent bird), spat in the ear of the newborn – in the form of a dialogue between old woman giving the recitation and Bemba (MK p. 4)

*identified as Bambara*

Tout bissimilahi, kilikala safo, safo kalatan, gnama mbèba

Tout bissimilahi, le safo tordu, le safo souple, gnama m’Béba

Codi, co mignafo, mignafo yèlèla soka ka bèta Bemba

Comment s’appelle-t-il – il s’appelle mignafo. Migna fo est monté sur un cheval pour m’attaquer

Kelè, so gnorignori, kèlèma bo, n’fa dabi, m’ba dabi, m’bolofoula mbèko iyè dabi, gnama m’Beba kè m’bè.

Il est retourné honteusement, il n’y a pas eu combat. – père dabi, mère dabi, j’ai mes mains derrière mon dos pour te supplier ; que Bemba te terrasse !

Said while making knots in a cotton cord (*safo*) to be tied around neck of baby to help with teething (MK p. 6)

*identified as Soninke*

Tout bissimilahi, guidé golé, guidé gondamé, gondamé, gondamé

Tout bissimilahi, mortier, pilon si le pilon

Kana sagou, ta gamaga outou, kité na out…

Tombe et que le pied ne le preuve pas, la main relèvera.

(allegory : mortier = gencive, pilon = dent)

Sung by girls to the already-married female peers of their youth association, the night of a feast celebration (while the boys are engaged in *yogoro mansa*) (MK p. 57)

*identified as Soninke*

Sahèli yo ylen karé, Sahèli yo ylen karé

Il fait jour au Sahel, il fait jour au Sahel

Oukou n’to sougou gnana salé maké

Nous ne sacrifions pas une chèvre à la fête

Oukou n’to diagné gnana salé maké

Nous ne sacrifions pas un mouton à la fête

Oukou na sèré gnana salé maké

Nous sacrifions une personne à la fête

Sèré oulé gnana salé maké

Une personne qui ne vaut qu’un chien, à la fête

Adama lémé oulé gnana salé maké

Le fils d’Adam, fils qui se vaut qu’un chien, à la fête

Tonto goumé o

Qu’elle ait pour coiffure un « tonto » (= façon de coiffure des femmes)

Ma béréto goumé

Qu’elle ait pour coiffure un « bérétou » (= façon de coiffure des femmes, tresses plus nombreuses)