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***The Mande Creation Myth*, by Germaine Dieterlen – A Story of Marcel Griaule’s Laboratory Boat and Kangaba’s Intellectual Elite**

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Abstract: In 1957 Germaine Dieterlen published “The Mande Creation Myth” in *Africa*. We argue that Dieterlen’s narrative was not only strongly moulded by where, when, and with whom she worked, but, also by how she worked – on a boat. The launch of Marcel Griaule’s *le Mannogo* laboratory-boat project in conjuncture with his unexpected death in February 1956, we suggest, catalysed Dieterlen’s integration of disparate narrations by Kangaba’s political and intellectual elite in 1953-1954 into a coherent “Mande Creation Myth” that focused on fish, water, and gods. Her creation myth actually presented a political charter that voiced the military concerns and territorial claims of Kangaba’s elite that date back to precolonial times. This argument is supported by a rediscovered report of the 1961 Kamabolon ceremony in Kangaba and by oral creation myths documented others and even by Dieterlen that conceptualises creation through an assemblage of termite mounds, earth and blacksmiths – not fish, water, and gods.

Introduction: “The Mande Creation Myth” is a-typical for a creation myth

Germaine Dieterlen’s 1957 “The Mande Creation Myth” focuses, as we will outline, on fish, water, and gods but this is strikingly a-typical of creation narration in the region, including even her own earlier work among the Dogon, and we find it curious that she did not remark on this. Indeed, this contrast requires explanation. To begin, we will briefly recall a central motif in creation and fertility discourses in Mande West Africa that is entirely absent in Dieterlen’s Mande Creation Myth,

which focuses on termites, blacksmiths, and the earth they work with, and which offers us a mirror for subsequent analysis of Dieterlen's 1957 synthesis.

When Amadou Hampâté Bâ, the celebrated West African historian (and initiation society authority) opened his contribution to 'The living tradition' in the landmark UNESCO History of Africa, he was enigmatic:

If an old teacher comes upon a termite mound¹ during a walk in the bush, this gives him an opportunity for dispensing various kinds of knowledge according to the kind of listeners he has at hand. Either he will speak of the creature itself, the laws governing its life and the class of being it belongs to, or he will give children a lesson in morality by showing them how community life depends on solidarity and forgetfulness of self, or again he may go on to higher things if he feels that his audience can attain to them (Bâ 1981: 179).

Bâ (who famously remarked, "When an old man dies in Africa, a library burns") would thus probably not have been puzzled to hear the following story told to Jansen by an elderly Maninka (Malinké) hunter (Jansen 2002: 29, translated from Maninkakan):

Man, all creatures that have blood, the animals in the bush, the domestic animals, the devil, the snakes, the humans, the birds issue from two termite mounds. The humans, the domestic animals, the animals of the bush, all those that have ears, were issued from the same termite mound, and [later] they dispersed, they dispersed over the earth. The birds, those who resemble snakes,² those who turn their head to the sky, the lizards, the simple-minded animals, note this well, don't have ears and issue from a different termite mound.

All the beings with ears, note this well, give birth to living offspring. The snake, the water iguana, the lizard, the crocodile, the birds that fly, have no ears, they lay eggs. Those who give birth to living offspring have ears, those who lay eggs don't have ears. These differences exist between us and them. When you haven't reached a certain age for [knowing] certain things, you'd better leave them. It isn't good to tell everything that you know. That evokes an evil force. We, the adults, we restrict ourselves in certain cases.³

This creation myth has many emphases. One is the central importance of sound and hearing, and by extension of orally-transmitted knowledge and the high esteem that Maninka attribute to the spoken word (*kuma*), which has been the subject of a great deal of analysis, not least in Bâ's own text (1981).⁴ Less reflected upon, however, is the choice for the termite mound as the cradle of life, which is far from accidental, and hints to a discourse on creation that can be found across large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Iroko 1996).

The choice of the termite mound is logical, perhaps almost inevitable, for a people who live by agriculture, since the termite mound derives much of its cosmological value from the [knowledge of] fertility it brings. Farmers in Mande and beyond have long worked with termites' soil engineering:⁵ their channelling of water, humidity, and air through the earth to crops or wells;⁶ their enrichment of topsoil with subsurface clays and minerals, and their recycling of dead wood and animal remains. For such reasons, farmers across West African and beyond have long learnt to deliberately encourage certain termite activity and seek out land with large termite mounds.⁷⁸ Termites mark the seasons, too, as the annual flight of the winged reproductive individuals (alates) of different species occurs predictably – almost miraculously – providing a precise annual timekeeping. These social insects regulate, the growth of certain flora, most notably the germination of baobabs,⁹ and

the growth of specific plants (most notably Ficus species) and edible and medicinal fungi.

The mythological significance of termites builds on such agro-ecological appreciation. These plants themselves often feature prominently in African creation myths and power associations.¹⁰ It is to trees infused by termites that those who carve masks turn for their wood (Brett-Smith 1994), and it is to shrines of termite mounds that those of varied initiation societies turn to address productive, reproductive and hunting concerns.¹¹ That termites work in a disciplined manner in large highly organised groups, naturalises the values strongly upheld within these initiation societies.¹²

Termites bring knowledge of the ‘Underneath of things’ to the surface. This includes, practically, the gold flecks that termites raise from the deep into their mounds and that assists mining prospectors. But at a more esoteric level termites provided access to many other secrets that the earth conceals. This knowledge is quintessentially the domain of ‘blacksmiths’, that refers not only to men who produce iron from earth that they work, but to those who sculpt masks, and to women who fire clay pots from earth and who dye cloth from its mud (Brett-Smith 2014). Such men and women are, effectively, ‘earth experts’ who are able to use air, fire and water to transform it. Yet they are also ‘termite’ experts: blast furnaces are constructed partially with clay from termite mounds, masks are sculpted from termite-infused trees, termite manipulated clays are used in the production of pots.¹³ Earths and the termites that work it provide a conceptual “link” between male and female blacksmiths, since both genders need what the termites produce for their work as earth experts.

That ‘blacksmithing’ is about the earth as much as it is about iron helps explain the logics that associate the making of iron as a production process similar to the process of human reproduction, with the furnace as the female body and the bellows as the copulative organ of the male (see many examples in Herbert 1993;

see also O'Neill et al. 1988). And the termite mound's pivotal roles explain the blacksmiths'/potters' skills as social brokers at life events like births, marriages, funerals, and, last but not least, circumcision/excision – circumcision likened to the removal of dirt from pure iron after production in the furnace.¹⁴ By recognizing blacksmiths as earth experts we can discern their activities in a more integrated way and better explain why their powers are so convincing and indispensable, in particular for societies that live by agriculture which has integrated knowledge about termites.

Germaine Dieterlen had a keen eye for termite mounds. For instance, she reported a Dogon classification of plants into twenty-four categories each drawing comparisons with particular animals (Dieterlen 1952). Termites (and ants) are classified together, and correspond to a particular group of trees known as *tégnzū*. They are of the fig family (*Ficus*),¹⁵ but more importantly they have a special quality of *kunyo*, meaning that they give fruits without previously having had visible flowers. The same concept is applied in Dogon thought to a woman having successive children without menstruating between conceiving them. Menstruation is thus likened to a flower; the Dogon consider such children to be twins, and the fruits produced by such trees are seen as representing twins. Within the classification - the Dogon order of things - twins are therefore explicitly and directly linked under a natural classification with termites and their evidently limitless fecundity.¹⁶

Dieterlen's Research *in* Kangaba Revisited: A Paradigm-Building Trip

Having outlined this repertoire of ways that Mande farmers can live and think with earth, termites, and blacksmiths and indicated how this can infuse creation accounts such as the one told to Jansen, above, we now turn to Dieterlen's famous text of "The Mande Creation Myth," and to historiographical analysis of it. Given Dieterlen's prior scholarly attention to what we might call the termite complex, and

given the place of it in much Mande thinking about creation that we are familiar with, we find it curious that termite mounds are never referred to in “*The Mande Creation Myth*”. Indeed, Dieterlen pays no attention at all to the subterranean world; there is no discussion of earth nor of earth experts – blacksmiths – who hardly feature - with the single exception of a nameless ancestral smith who produces water from a rock (Dieterlen 1957: 127).

So what concepts and themes *did* Dieterlen deal with in her 1957 publication?? We shall now review 1) the spatial setting, 2) the main characters, and 3) the main products of creation.

- *Setting*

The setting is the river Niger, but imagined as a mythical landscape. The space in which the myth develops consists of 1) heaven (a celestial placenta), 2) the River Niger, 3) land flooded by the River Niger, 4) twenty-two sacred places along it called *Faro tyn* (which means “Faro’s sand”), and, by no means least, 5) Kangaba (“Kaba” in the local language) where the first maize (*kaba*) was cultivated and where the ancestor Faro as well as a number of arks – resembling Noah’s ark from the Old Testament – came to earth, descended from heaven. In its entirety the River Niger from its source to Lac Debo represents the body of Faro, his head lying at Lac Debo and his genitals upriver, west of Ségou.

- *Main characters*

The main characters are either related to the water – for instance, Faro, the main protagonist – or to land that is cultivated in conjunction with flooding, for instance, Pemba, Faro’s evil oldest brother, who fails as a farmer, and Pemba’s twin sister the trickster-like Mousso Koroni Koundye [‘White Headed Old Lady’], who steals seeds. Her land is ruined by floods, and after many attempts at treachery she disappears to the east (Dieterlen 1957: 135).

It is interesting to note the recurrent references to forty-four ancestors, among them twenty-two males each of whom created a ritual place for Faro along the Niger. The number twenty-two seems odd, but is the basis of a unique system

of Maninka sand divination (*kènyèda*, geomancy) and mathematic education¹⁷ – it should be remembered that the sacred places devoted to Faro were called “Faro’s *sand*”.¹⁸ There is therefore a deep cultural logic in Dieterlen’s informants’ use of that number as well the link to sand.

There are many characters in the Mande Creation Myth whose names we know from the numerous versions of the Sunjata epic that have been published since 1960 (for an overview of these versions, see Bulman 1997): Sourakata is Faro’s spokesman in Dieterlen’s narrative (1957: 134), but in present-day oral tradition is the griot of the Prophet Mohamed. Faro’s four children have names that are currently known as grandchildren of Bilal (three or four of them), the servant who is baptised by the Prophet Mohamed.¹⁹ The youngest of the grandchildren is an ancestor of Sunjata. The lists of the clans living along the Niger and formulas to categorise them into groups are nowadays integrated into Sunjata’s history.²⁰

- *The objects of creation*

The main objects of creation - the means of existence – are seeds and fish: initially two “eleusine” seeds²¹ that were created in the west, followed by three other twin seeds, for instance rice (*malo*) and maize (*kaba*) in the South (the Kangaba area in Dieterlen’s analytical space). According to Dieterlen (1955: 49) rice and maize – the latter the “graine fondamentale des Keita” (meaning the people in the Kangaba area) – are the staple crops in the Kangaba area, which explains why they were placed to the south in the creation process. By definition, the incorporation of maize in the discourse on creation is of relatively recent date, because maize was introduced to the African continent only after European colonisation of the American continent. Some types of rice are indigenous to Africa, and it is historically relevant to note that after the First World War the French colonial administration developed huge fields of paddy, for instance south of Bancoumana, 35 km downriver from Kangaba. Rice cultivation thus was a topic of societal debate in the mid-twentieth century.

The fish that features in the myth is called the *mannogo* (the name eventually given to Marcel Griaule's boat) and represents Faro. Dieterlen gives an etymology for *mannogo* as meaning "(son of a) person". She presents two sorts of *mannogo*, but both are types of air breathing catfish: *mannogo blê* ("white mannogo," *heterobranchus bidorsalis* - see image), which represents Faro, and representing Faro's son is *mannogo fin* ("black mannogo," *clarias senegalensis*, known as the mudfish in English, a species that reproduces in flooded savannas).

It was, we will argue, all kind of "mannogo" that inspired Dieterlen to her paradigm-building trip in search of a water-centred Mande creation myth.



Images of two types of “mannogo”, one a catfish on a stamp issued in 1974, the other a “bateau-laboratoire”.

Dieterlen and Griaule – Running a Tight Ship

Any analysis of the Mande Creation Myth requires some exploration of its link to Marcel Griaule’s famous and much-debated ethnographic work. Griaule had a great impact on the formation of anthropology as a discipline in France, and Dieterlen was probably his closest and most dedicated colleague (see, for instance, Jolly 2001, Van Beek 1991). It is noteworthy that Dieterlen published her work on Mande (Kangaba) after 1950, the year when Griaule took charge of a semi-permanent “mission” in the Niger Inner-Delta, thus starting an era in which he and his research group published their most controversial works. In particular, the mission attended the 1954 Kamabolon ceremony during which it was believed the Mande Creation Myth was performed, and two of the team members published works about it (Dieterlen 1955; De Ganay 1995). Yet by 1957, when Dieterlen published *The Mande Creation Myth*, the mission along the Niger had taken on special historical importance following Griaule’s sudden death in February 1956.



The Kamabolon sanctuary in Kangaba (photo by Jan Jansen, 1992).

Thankfully Solange de Ganay's published a detailed report of the 1954 ceremony (more than four decades later in 1995) and this shows us a sketchier narrative than Dieterlen's article on the ceremony and, remarkably, no hints to an indigenous Mande discourse on creation (Dieterlen 1955; De Ganay 1995). The text Dieterlen published in 1955 reads like something in-between of De Ganay's report and the rather abstract text of the cosmology that Dieterlen published two years later, in 1957, as "The Mande Creation Myth."

The changes in the narrative cannot be explained by additional research in Kangaba and Bamako after her 1955 publication, because she refers in both publications to 1953-1955 as the period of her fieldwork research (1955: first page; 1957: 127). Instead, we want to suggest, these changes can be considered in relation to the clues and connections that Dieterlen "discovered" in the process of analysing her fieldwork data in this period.

Dieterlen followed Griaule's fieldwork methods and style closely and, as others have noticed, Griaule's approach had certain characteristics of a military expedition, with explorer-researchers developing strategies to hunt down a culture's secrets.²² The Kamabolon ceremony was a particular object of conquest, since the French researchers had come to believe that the secrets of West African history were hidden in the sanctuary (cf. Mauny 1973), and that these secrets were well protected by the griots of Kela, who were in service of Kangaba's political elite.²³ The Kela griots had refused, for instance, for Marcel Griaule to make recordings of the Kamabolon ceremony (De Ganay 1995: 149).

In her 1957 text Dieterlen also followed Griaule's example by writing a narrative that instead of giving voices to individuals or sub-groups, attempted to construct a complete and integrated cosmology. Probably not surprisingly, Dieterlen included a number of ideas and insights derived from Griaule's transmission of Dogon cosmology, the most striking example being the belief that Sirius is a triple star and is, according to Keita informants, Faro or Faro's placenta (Dieterlen 1957: 128, 128 n6).²⁴ This inclusion may have come to her as a logical process: "Nous vivions dans une r ve" ("We lived in a dream"), Dieterlen would confess to Walter van Beek during an interview, referring to the period she worked with Griaule on "Le Renard P le".²⁵

In *The Mande Creation Myth* Dieterlen's achieved a higher level of integration of disparate narrations from her 1953-1955 fieldwork data than Griaule did for his Dogon material in his *Conversations with Ogotemmel *, since she presents the geographical reality of the Upper and Middle Niger as the mythical landscape of her narrative, and related the Myth to a genuine ceremony performance that she herself had attended. Moreover, while Griaule has been criticised for working with only one informant, Ogotemmel , who had a marginal position in society, Dieterlen definitely talked with highly respected persons: the powerful, widely respected Keita rulers of Kangaba and their illustrious bards, the griots of Kela. She did not

give their names, but she clearly talked to the same people that De Ganay mentions.

Whatever their relationship with the performance of the Kamabolon ceremony, the mythical landscape that Dieterlen relates actually follows the *political* map of the division of fishing rights on the River Niger: between Kangaba and Koulikoro rights were for the Somono fishermen from Kangaba; between Koulikoro and Mopti for the Somono from Ségou, and from Mopti to Lac Debo for the Bozo (cf. Dieterlen 1957: 135). However, Dieterlen apparently overlooked the importance of this political dimension in the texts she collected, and this, we consider, is the result of an agenda to recover *the* Mande Creation Myth as part of Griaule's wider research ambition.

A Boat to Operationalise a Research Agenda

Building on preliminary research by Ralph Austen (2008), Dieterlen's attribution of a starring role to the water god Faro as the *mannogo*-fish is in particular need of analytical attention. Dieterlen's text was not only published shortly after Griaule's death, but also shortly after the first expedition of the "bateau-laboratoire" *le Mannogo*, a project financed for Griaule's team by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Griaule received the boat in 1955, although in the end he personally would never use it. Dieterlen mentions (1957: 125 n5) the first journey of *le Mannogo*, an expedition that confirmed the team's hypotheses about a unified system of place names along the Niger. We are interested in the way that the *mannogo*-fish and the boat *le Mannogo* became key driving and integrating forces in Dieterlen's research agenda; both operationalised and proved the team's research agenda of searching for a unified system of meaning in the Niger Inner-Delta, and beyond.

Dieterlen's text of 1957 is more water-centred and is a more literary narrative when compared with her 1955 account. The earlier account was written in a sober style, including a number of lists for example, and it presents empirical data absent

from the 1957 text, such as a comparison of the behaviour of the two catfish species *mannogo ble* and *mannogo fi*. The 1955 text covers certain themes that might be expected in a creation myth of farmers: there is a place for a blacksmith in the creation process (Dieterlen 1955: 46), even in the prestigious position of youngest brother (cf. Jansen 2015 on younger brother logics), and a Ficus – a tree associated with termite mounds – grows near the Kamabolon sanctuary in Kangaba (Dieterlen 1955: 65).

The single most remarkable detail of the 1955 report is Dieterlen's claim that she went into the Kamabolon. De Ganay (1995) too suggests that the team had access to the sanctuary, although both authors write elsewhere that strangers were not allowed to enter the sanctuary, and nowadays the very idea of strangers in the sanctuary is unacceptable and would lead to extremely violent sanctions. Dieterlen gives a short description of the wall paintings and notes two balls of earth in the interior of the Kamabolon, in sacks hanging from the roof. According to Dieterlen the balls represent the millet star and the water (*dji/ji*) star. These symbols make sense for the Keita who cultivate fields that are flooded every year. Indeed millet and water are objects of veneration among agriculturalists in much of the region. The agricultural themes to be found in this 1955 report, however, are absent from the 1957 text, and the themes so central to this later text, such as Faro, Sirius, or catfish did not feature in the earlier report.

New means of transport seem to have fascinated Griaule and his team, for they describe in detail the cars and trucks (French Citroëns, naturally) used to carry the enormous amount of equipment they had with them (including a mobile dark room) and to bring back the objects they collected for museums (Jansen 2000).²⁶ The new laboratory boat, that was invested in to become a technological tool that would facilitate a great leap forward in the study of the Sudanic peoples and their philosophy, was named after a pivotal cosmological notion (*mannogo-Faro-Sirius*) that was central to Griaule's research. And Dieterlen's 1957 work, written under the influential presence of this boat that represented Marcel Griaule's intellectual

heritage, foregrounded these themes. She found deeper meaning in the stories about flooded agriculture that she had noted in 1955, through the research agenda that was materialised by the laboratory boat and the experience it provided. This coincided with the production of coherence in *the Myth*, that incorporated a shift in emphasis in the analysis of the fieldwork data that she had collected, or even a wishful selection of this data.

The Mande Creation Myth as a Political Claim by Kangaba's Intellectual Elite

While Dieterlen was in search of a unified cosmology, her informants' agenda was to sketch a political map to legitimate Kangaba's political position. The medieval history of Kangaba is unknown, but in the sixteenth century the town became the (new?) political centre of a Mali Empire that was already in decline. The Empire's territorial borders were being drawn back from Koulikoro to the area called Sendugu,²⁷ located immediately north of Mali's famous gold fields (and 40 kilometers from Kangaba down the river Niger), so that such a withdrawal had an obvious economic and regional-political rationale (Jansen 2015). Although Kangaba then suffered much in the Western Sudanese wars during the mid-nineteenth century, it was still powerful enough in the 1880s to become one of Samori Touré's most important allies in the creation of his Empire (see also note 22).

Kangaba's power was based on its unique military resources. In pre-colonial times, in the absence of heavy artillery the physical layout of the landscape determined what sort of military expertise was the most suitable. In flat areas horses could be used, but in that part of Africa they often fell victim to trypanosome infection transmitted by tsetse flies. Moreover, horses demand a great deal of care. Simply to keep horses alive requires enormous effort, the more so in a tropical climate (Harris 1982). In areas with cliffs and creeks, rifle-equipped infantry were superior to cavalry, while in forest zones, for centuries the bow-and-arrow remained the best weapon (Thornton 1999). However, completely different

practical skills and strategy were called for when the landscape was dominated by a great river. The group who specialised in riverine warfare on the River Niger were the Somono and the Bozo. They were expert fishermen too, just as the Mande peoples who specialised in land warfare excelled in agriculture. As warfare was endemic in the Sudan from the sixteenth century and a constructive part of the economy until the beginning of the nineteenth century (Roberts 1987), military expertise was a requirement of everyday life alongside the ability to produce food, a reality often overlooked by later ethnographers and historians. Kangaba's military resources consisted of a combination of cavalry *and* marines, and probably artillery.

The military power of the Somono and the Bozo are the key to substantiating Dieterlen's Mande Creation Myth as related by the Keita of Kangaba. The Somono's fishing rights exactly mark zones that were once the frontiers of large empires. For example, Koulikoro is the territory from which the Mali Empire withdrew around 1600 – although the rulers of Kangaba kept certain titles and privileges in the area. Meillassoux (1963: XX) notes that in the nineteenth century the rulers of Kangaba travelled more or less weekly to Bamako – by boat of course – to dispense justice. Koulikoro and Mopti define well the limits of the Segou Bamana State, at least from the point of view of Kangaba (for contesting of these lines and historical skirmishes, see Meillassoux 1963, Jansen 2015).

Dieterlen repeatedly emphasised that her informants were the Keita of Kangaba, who had inherited the throne of the Mali Empire and were the owners of the Kamabolon sanctuary. The Keita were supported by their griots, the Diabate from Kela. This then was the intellectual elite who must have put together a more or less coherent narrative for Dieterlen's benefit. It would certainly have been a *political* story (cf. Jansen 2018 on how the Sunjata epic reveals deep politics). The myth published by Dieterlen indeed shows a number of definitive characteristics of Mande representation of political claims. First, for example, Faro is the younger brother and his rival Pemba the older brother – the younger brother is the one who will acquire military leadership (cf. Jansen 2015). Second, and crucially, the struggles

are about matters *above* soil level (water even comes from a rock), the realm therefore of political leaders, not of the earth chiefs (*dugukolotigin*) or landlords (*jatigin*).

There is no reason to doubt that Dieterlen talked to the intellectual elite, and especially given other texts documented from them since the 1920s²⁸ it is most probable that Dieterlen's text *also* contains a political claim, to Kangaba's long-gone imperial power dating from when it ruled the sweep of the River Niger. The recitation the political elite performed answered Dieterlen's agenda, but also meticulously remained within the elite Keita's political realm. Satisfied with the rich imagery of "nature" and "celestial origin" in the narrative, Dieterlen overlooked the usual ingredients needed for creation – which she well knew – and which were not mentioned.

The text that De Ganay (1995) has reported for the 1954 Kamabolon ceremony is in line with the data that Vidal collected in the 1920 among the Haidara of Kela, who performed (Islamic) religious services for the Keita from Kangaba. It is also in line with later reports on the Kamabolon ceremony, although these more strongly feature Sunjata's life which can be explained with the help of a recently discovered report on the 1961 ceremony, by Malian intellectual Mamby Sidibé who describes the great nationalistic fever of the era, just after independence, when Soudan Français had become Mali thus linking the nation to Sunjata, the founder of medieval Mali.²⁹

All these performances are rather dissimilar to Dieterlen's creation myth, which isn't a story for a nation but a narrative with claims in terms of military leadership and Mecca origins – preceded by a Niger-centric narrative that featured Kangaba's marine military power. Indeed Dieterlen explicitly states that Faro's story precedes Mohamet's story. The 1961 ceremony certainly supported the Sunjata epic then being newly institutionalised as the account of Mali's glorious medieval history. That narrative attributed to the Keita of Kangaba a prestige far

beyond the banks of the River Niger. They now enjoyed renown throughout all of Mali.

When some French researchers from the crew of *le Mannogo* returned to the ceremony in 1968 in Independent Mali, they heard only the Sunjata-centric account (Dieterlen 1968; Meillassoux 1968). They didn't wonder where the previously recorded information was gone. Any reference to an absence of Dieterlen's data is itself absent. This does not mean that Dieterlen invented it. On the contrary,³⁰ we see even more clearly that Dieterlen had given us an insight in the ideological framework of the Mali Empire in precolonial times – a framework originally celebrating Kangaba's earlier military marine power. This was reframed dramatically with the 1960 introduction of the republic/nation-state called Mali that transformed Kangaba into a place of great historical importance for all Malians.

Conclusion

Dieterlen's 1957 article "The Mande Creation Myth" is commonly considered an idiosyncratic and esoteric text. The reason for this, we argue, is that it does not present a creation myth. The article was a product of the very same research mission that produced Dieterlen (1955) and De Ganay (1995). The 1957 text was enhanced and changed, in comparison with Dieterlen (1955) and De Ganay (1995), by the impact of the laboratory boat *le Mannogo* that represented the research agenda of the then recently passed away Marcel Griaule. This is in line with observations others have made about the military and rigorously organised character of Griaule's approach to fieldwork research. Recent research on the history of Kangaba and recent insights in the conceptualisation of creation in Sub-Saharan Africa provide the background to understand that "The Mande Creation Myth" was, as a narrative hybrid with a coherence conjured on the River Niger, meaningful to an elite that mourned its loss of power over this river as well as to a powerful group of researchers that mourned the loss of its iconic leader of the mission on the river.

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¹ The original says ant-hill, the older name in English for termite mound.

² Our translation; the original text gives several options.

³ Translated from the French, Jansen 2002: 29-30.

⁴ To mention a few studies, among many: Camara 1976; Diawara 2003; Traoré 2000.

⁵ Iroko 1982, 1996; Fairhead and Leach 2003; Fairhead 2016.

⁶ Fairhead and Leach (2003) write: "In savannas, trees tend to be grouped on and immediately around inhabited or abandoned termite mounds, whether because of the higher fertility, improved water access, or reduced fire intensity as grasses fare worse on these mounds. Tree clumps come to form islands of dense vegetation - almost forest - surrounded by savanna." In their work these authors explore the relationship between the presence of termite mounds and sacred forests.

⁷ The same authors note that Kuranko-speaking farmers in Kissi (Guinea) identify the mounds of two varieties of termites as important for bringing soil to the surface. In the dry season, soil around one type of mound (distinguished by the Kissi) remains damp, and those mounds are singled out as good sites for the intensive cultivation of peppers, tobacco, squashes and other crops. By contrast, the other type, called cubitermes mounds, although themselves associated with dry soils, nevertheless indicate the presence of mature fallows.

⁸ See also Jansen and Fairhead (under review). Fairhead and Leach (2003) heard claims of specialists who could influence termite activity. People do not always welcome termites. Kissia and Kuranko told Fairhead and Leach of a range of ways to evict termites from their mounds.

They channel surface water into them, or dig out the queen. Mounds in fields can be destroyed by inserting into them the scales of a pangolin - an animal which eats termites - or a chameleon. A major negative aspect of termite activity, as Hauser (1978) notes, is losing 20% of the land to inhabited mounds.

⁹ Baobab seeds have a hard and thick peel that needs an external impetus to be opened, thus giving space for the inner pit to develop. This external impetus can vary from a bio-chemical process such as rotting to being crushed by an elephant pad.

¹⁰ Ficus trees are venerated in many religions all over the world. Dieterlen gives another example of the germinating power of termite mounds: “The seed of creation (fonio) is the double of the plant *mangana*, a tree which grows ‘by preference’ on termite mounds, and is symbolically at the origin of the world.” We have not been able to properly identify this tree species. It is possibly *Capparis corymbosa* (Hauser 1978: XX); possibly *Hypocratea africana* (cf. “the plant Mangara” in Anderson and Sow 1992: XX).

¹¹ Throughout the Mande-speaking regions of West Africa the powers of the termite are central to the initiation of men to Komo societies, and that is nowhere better elucidated than in the extraordinary work of Sarah Brett-Smith (1994, 1997, 2001, 2014, but see also Dieterlen and Cissé 1972, McNaughton 1979). Brett-Smith shows how the trees used to sculpt the Komo mask are not chosen simply for their species, but that individuals are selected that have grown in association with termites, which are held to have infused them with their powers. Blacksmiths choose to sculpt wood “riddled with termite damage” (Brett-Smith 1994). It is not therefore not surprising that Komo shrines may be given the form of a termite mound. Note that the Dogon (Mali) compare a termite mound to a clitoris, which also emphasizes a link to fertility (Jacky Boujus, personal communication to Jan Jansen, Aix-en-Provence, 24 March 2016).

We limit ourselves here to the material invaded by termites. One notes, however, that creatures using termite mounds also have been integrated in complex ideological constructions that explain society. The aardvark, for instance, is an animal that lives uniquely of termites and women with aardvark characteristics or life style often feature as mothers of founders of political dynasties in agriculture-based societies, such as Sunjata’s mother Sogolon the Ugly (see analysis in Jansen 2018 who uses material from a study by Giesing and Vydrin).

¹² Van Huis 2017 gives abundant data and references for a) large scale consumption of termites all over sub-Saharan Africa, and b) widely shared ideas about parallels between termite society and (ideal) human society all over sub-Saharan Africa.

¹³ See for details Jansen 2018.

¹⁴ Cf. O’Neill et al. 1988. One notes a similar relationship with earth as a substance holds for artisanal miners in large parts of Sub-Sahara Africa. For them gold is not a mere resource, a simple material and productive factor or economic asset to be used to generate an income. Rather it is a *substance* – that can grow and can make itself disappear – that miners must give account to by establishing and manipulating personal relationships, not only with the human owners of the pits but with the spirit world – a more dangerous thing. Regardless of such protection however, the revenues procured from gold are considered to be so dangerous (in large parts of Sub-Sahara Africa) that they are used for quick and conspicuous consumption, and cannot be used for long-term investments.

¹⁵ These tree are *Ficus capensis*, *Ficus lecardii*, *Ficus glumosa*, *Ficus patyphylla*, *Ficus umbellata*, *gegudu*, and *ga*. Within Dogon, apart from the properties examined in the text, these trees cannot be used as fuel (Calame-Griaule 1965).

¹⁶ A common idea in Sub-Sahara Africa. Since iron production is conceptualised as a life giving activity, menstruating women are forbidden to approach the furnace when the male blacksmiths work on it.

¹⁷ Described in detail in Jansen 2011.

¹⁸ Dieterlen says that sometimes forty-eight and twenty-four are used. The logic of those numbers is difficult to fathom. She (1957: 131) states that twenty-two is the number of a person’s body parts, but there is an alternative numerological explanation. Since three is the male number and four the female number, we see a major difference between twelve (3*4, perfect) and eleven (not [yet] perfect). Multiplication by two or twins is along the Niger and beyond a common principle in establishing relationships with the gods.

¹⁹ Dieterlen’s etymology of the children’s names is very particular and certainly unique. For the etymology following the present-day griots from Kela [Kangaba], see Jansen et al. 1995: 45-46.

²⁰ The most recent trend is to integrate these lists of clans into an alleged charter that either Sunjata or Mande hunters established centuries ago and which attributes a sort of universal Mande-variety of human rights to the clans of Mande. See discussion in Jansen 2018.

²¹ The seeds are of the species *Digitaria* (1957: 126 n. 2), which are probably white and black fonio. Dieterlen (1955: 52) speaks of “les deux fonio primitifs.”

²² See De Ganay 1995, analysed in Van Beek and Jansen 2000 that is in line with the much debated Van Beek 1991. However, see also Amselle 2000 for a critique on Van Beek and Jansen 2000..

²³ In the first decades of the twentieth century Maurice Delafosse labelled Kangaba as the capital of the Mali empire, but his reconstruction was soon refuted, and it was agreed upon by his

contemporary critics that Kangaba was the last in a series of capitals of Mali. For a reconstruction of the debate see Green 1991, Jansen 2015. As a result, Kangaba disappeared from studies on the Mali Empire, leaving its pivotal position in the oral tradition not further explored until the Mission Griaule turned its attention to Kangaba.

²⁴ The “Sirius complex,” in the sense of the belief that the Dogon received knowledge from extra-terrestrial beings (Van Beek 1991), is the most contested element of Griaule’s work.

²⁵ See also Van Beek 1991. Confirmed by Walter van Beek to Jan Jansen, 1 October 2018.

²⁶ The impact of planes on Griaule’s team should also be further explored. The idea of seeing the Niger as Faro’s body may be imagined only by people who know the area from the air, for instance Marcel Griaule, who was an experienced pilot and an innovative cartographer (Van Beek 1991). We suggest that the presence of an air strip at Kangaba – on the illustrious plain of Kourouanfougan (cf. Jansen 2018) – may have increased this town’s importance in the scholars’ imagination of Faro through the landscape.

²⁷ *Sendugu* means literally “Leg-Land” – although people have no etiological legends for the name of this long stretch of land between Bancoumana and the Mande Mountains (and which continues, according some old maps, on the right bank of the River Niger). On *Sendugu*, see Jansen 2015. Dieterlen might have interpreted it as part of Faro’s body.

²⁸ In the 1920s Jules Vidal reported of his interviews with the Haidara in Kela on the issue of the Sunjata epic. For an analysis of these accounts as well as for a reconstruction of Kela’s history, see Jansen 2002.

²⁹ Hopkins and Sidibé 2013. For an historiographic analysis of this text, see Jansen and Muurling 2013, Jansen 2018.

³⁰ The current analysis proves that Van Beek and Jansen’s 2000 analysis is too rude.