



# Folklore genre designation among the Manden peoples

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In this article I deal with the problem of division into genres and genre designation in the oral tradition of the Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula. These people belong to the Manden or Mandinka, Mandingo peoples (Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso). For comparison, the names of similar genres among the Dogon are also given, as the Dogon consider themselves a Manden people, even though their languages do not belong to the Mandé language family. Both expeditionary materials and written sources were used. Almost all the words related to genre formation were recorded, and a description of the genres themselves was given. It was interesting to understand what features are important for choosing genres for Manden peoples. Due to cultural characteristics and historical development, the generally accepted division into genres is not entirely suitable for the Manden peoples and forms a “Procrustean bed” for their subdivision. First of all, the degree of ‘seriousness’ of the genre is important, that is, its significance for tradition: ‘true’ texts are opposed to fictional ones. The degree of rituality of the folklore text is also significant. Restrictions on the performance of texts are associated with the ability to control the occult power of *nyama* energy. An important role in this is played by the presence of the griot tradition. Also, a formal feature plays a role in defining various folklore genres. **Keywords:** oral tradition, Manden, genres, folklore.

## Introduction

The Manden peoples (the Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula) living in West Africa have a rich oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> Folklore is still a very important part of their life, as well as the institution of caste storytellers, or griots. In many parts of Africa, it is still one of the main mechanisms of culture, and one can analyse the living texts of classical folklore such as epics, fairy tales, and legends. Moreover, the institution of caste storytellers, or griots, is still alive. However, progress is relentless, and modern researchers have almost the last chance to see the traditional functioning of Manden folklore.


In this article I will analyse the definition of the genres of the Manden oral tradition. To achieve this, it is necessary to understand what features of the texts and their performance stand out when referring the text to a particular genre among the Manden people. As a result, a classification of genres and a genre repertoire of Manden folklore will be obtained.

In my study, I relied on both oral and written sources and examined the genres of peoples inhabiting Mali, Guinea, and Cote d’Ivoire—the Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula. The dissertation of Jean Derive on the oral tradition of Dyula Kong was used as the most complete study of the Dyula oral genres. I gathered most of the information about the genres of the oral tradition of this people from there. As sources of genre terminology in Bamana and Maninka languages I used some dictionaries (Bailleu; Bamadaba; Dumestre; Vydrin) as well as the results of my own research carried out during expeditions to Guinea in 1999 and 2014.

It is important to study which concepts are used in the Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula language to designate genres of oral tradition or correlate with them. Such linguistic analysis can help reveal the culturally significant features of the oral tradition of these peoples. All the genre designations of the Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula are outlined below, as well as each term’s origin, a description of the functioning of each genre, its connection with the ritual sphere of life, possible restrictions on narratives, the place of each genre in the Manden culture.

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It must be said that a certain syncretism is characteristic of Manden folklore even today. The Manden people themselves do not clearly divide folklore texts into separate genres: songs and prose folklore are closely related and Manden song and non-song folklore are interconnected. In fairy tales, for example, narrative passages are interspersed with songs. It is difficult to say where the myth ends and the fairy tale begins, whether the text should be classified as a riddle or fairy tale, and so on.

Another difficulty in studying the oral tradition of other peoples is that one often cannot notice, let alone understand, this or that phenomenon in someone else's oral tradition because one has never encountered it before. When analysing oral tradition, one may miss some important things because they are absent in one's native literature or language, or because one does not have mechanisms to describe them. The absence of some components to which one, in turn, is accustomed, is also important. For example, due to the construction of the language, for example, in Bamana and Maninka, it is impossible to find either a description of nature or a description of the image of a hero, because there are very few adjectives in these languages. The hero is described by his behaviour or actions.

### Genres of the Manden oral tradition

According to Derive's research, Dyula people divide speech into *kumakɔɔ* (old speech, or speech with significance) and *kumagbe* (pure speech). *Kumakɔɔ* is a historical narrative, synonymous with oral tradition, and *kumagbe* is ordinary speech, not symbolic, with the literal meaning only. *Foli* (greetings) and *duga* (blessings), for example, refer to pure speech, since they do not need explanation, while *kumakɔɔ* uses symbolism, i.e., it has a 'second meaning' or additional functions. Thus, oral folklore refers specifically to *kumakɔɔ*. The Manden people believe that only they can understand the meaning of proverbs, legends, and other traditional texts that refer to speech with additional meaning. The Bamana and Maninka surely understand the meaning of these words (*kumagbe* and *kumakɔɔ*), but they do not use them as the special terms.

### Significant (serious) genres

#### *Lasirikuma*

*Lasirikuma* (genealogical storytelling) is the noblest form of Dyula oral tradition and is divided into genealogical songs and historical stories. Among the Bamana and Maninka peoples, serious narratives about the origins of societies and families are also the most prestigious and significant. Their only difference is that these stories are performed only by griots.

#### *Fasa*

One of the most important genres of Bamana and Maninka tradition is *fasa*. *Fasa* (*pàsa*) refers to praise, a motto, or laudatory melody (a melody dedicated to a family, *dyaamu*, or a person, performed both with and without verses).<sup>2</sup> *Ka mɔ̀gɔ̀ fàsa dà* means "to praise somebody, to sing a song of praise to somebody".<sup>3</sup> As a rule, every person (in the villages for sure) knows the melody of the *fasa* of his *dyaamu*, which can be played in honour of the guest. In epic legends, you can also hear the *fasa* melody of the main characters, which indicates its origin; this melody may precede the appearance of a particular character in the narrative. However, it is worth noting that for representatives of this culture, it does not matter whether there is a text in *fasa* or not. In Guinea, griots played melodies for each *dyaamu* on the balafon (Kuyate griots from Niagassola) or kore (Diabate griots from Siguiriri).<sup>4,5</sup> All members of the family, even little children, immediately recognized their melody. However, many people say that *fasa* is just a small motto in several lines, which is sung in honour of the family. In particular, the national hymn is translated as *jamana fasa* (the *fasa* of the country). *Ka fasa fo* means "to play *fasa*" and *fasa da* means "to sing *fasa*". During my trip to northern Guinea in 2014 I heard only *fasa* melodies without words performed by various griots, whereas on a trip to Mali in 2022 the Kuyate griots from the village of Kela sang to me, as to a representative of Keita *dyaamu*, a *fasa* praising the exploits of Sundryata, Keita's ancestor and great hero. So, different griots in different localities prefer to play only a melody or a melody with a laudatory text. It may also depend on the situation. In particular, the main task of the griots of Kuyate is to praise the Keita and tell their story. It is a very important genre related to the *dyaamu* institute and to their history.

Also, the epic itself can be called *fasa*. Thus, it can be said with confidence that the Manden epic is, first of all, a laudatory song for certain families, and only in the second place is it a story about the history of the people and traditions. *Fasa* performance, like the performance of the Maninka and Bamana epic, is the prerogative of the

griots. In general, oral tradition is their professional field. It is necessary to say a few words about the Manden institute of griots. *Jeli* refers to a griot, a storyteller among the Maninka and Bamana and a professional caste of storytellers called “masters of words”. It is believed that they control the energy of *nyama* (nàma), which is contained not only in living objects, but also in words. *Nyama* energy is the basic concept of Manden culture; it is an occult force (more or less harmful which is contained in certain living or dead beings—people, spirits, some animals, and some inanimate objects). Some knowledgeable people know how to manipulate it.

Griots are keepers of history and traditions, are mentors of rulers, play musical instruments, and perform epic stories. They can also tell fairy tales, but those tales are heroic or epic-like. Griot women are professional potters, but they also tell stories and sing songs at events. Griots carry out all social activities in the village. They are negotiators and solve problems. Griots belong to *ḡamakala* (people of *nyama*), who are sometimes called “castes”. The great griots are called *nwana*, or *ngara* (master griots) (Durán 570). Their power is great, and they are allowed to use words that have *nyama* energy in their stories. Anyone born into a griot family is a griot, but not everyone becomes *nwana*. As in any other metier, a griot cannot become a master until he reaches the age of 40, when all the secrets and fetishes of the family and *dyamu* will be revealed to him.

The Dyula have no real griots; their griots (*jeli*) are of the leatherworking caste and considered to be *woloso* (a third-generation slave, born in the house) and not *nyamakala* (those who belong to the professional castes). They are staff-bearers—they carry the staff as a symbol of power behind the leader—and they loudly announce the leader’s words (i.e., they play the role of herald).

Among the Dogon, who consider themselves a Manden people, griots also belong to the caste of leatherworkers, but they are not slaves.

Among the Bamana and Maninka, griots are considered to be those who manipulate the energy of *nyama*. In particular, griots can use it to influence a person’s life. Previously, only griots were called *nyamakala* (the *nyama* people), and later this name began to be applied to all professional castes.

### *Lasiri dɔnkili*

The most similar genre to *fasa* in the Dyula oral tradition is *lasiri dɔnkili* (song of origin). *Lasiri dɔnkili* is a genealogical song, a song of praise, a motto, a song with musical accompaniment. These are very short songs about ancestors which are sung in public. One family sings it to another one. There is a person in the family/clan who knows the whole repertoire, but he cannot perform it for his family, only for others. There are two cases of its performance: at funerals (where it is sung by men) and at weddings (where it is sung by women). Historical stories often resemble genealogical stories.

### *Kokɔrɔ*

Among the Dyula people *Kokɔrɔ* is a historical story (without music); it is the most prestigious genre. These are historical legends about the main families, childbirth, their ancestors, etc. They are told in archaic language and differ from the epic in the absence of music and prosodic organization. This is a closed genre: stories belong to families and are told by people over 50 years old in the circle of their extended family. If a young man tells *kokɔrɔ*, the days of his life are shortened (10–20 years for each untimely story, depending on the length). Children are forbidden from listening to such stories before they acquire social status. Texts are passed from one elder to another. A male narrator is preferable, but women may also tell them. Sometimes *kokɔrɔ* telling is initiated by the elders. These stories belong to the sphere of *dyamu* (*jamu*, clan names). To insult a person, one can say that he has no history. These stories are told during significant events such as family confrontations, wars, big holidays, or the funeral of an important person.

In the Bamana and Maninka language the word *kokɔrɔ* means “tradition”, or “history”. Stories about the origin of the family or *dyamu* were called *kokɔrɔ* (translated as old deeds, history). Such stories are also called *kuma kɔrɔma* (old speech, historical narrative). Despite the fact that *kokɔrɔ* is not a genre in Bamana; the Bamana say so about everything that belongs to the past: traditions, history, etc. but the logic of such stories and their structure were common, as well as the language of all such narratives; narrators tried to imitate the speech of griots. Such stories about the origin of clans, families, and villages are accepted by all Manden and neighbouring peoples; the Dogon in their villages even began to write them down.

In Guinea, practically all such ‘histories of villages’ were similar and could be defined as a genre. These stories told that the founder of the village, the head of the clan, having come to this place, met the spirit (*jina/jine*) the

owner of the land, fell in love with her, and they began to live together. Later they entered into an agreement, and she promised him that she would take care of all his descendants on this earth if they regularly offered sacrifices to her. Apparently, the spirits, both water spirits (*faro*) and the spirits of the earth (*jina*), were originally considered androgynes, but later they began to be represented more “realistically” and a man and woman spirit appeared. As a rule, the names of these *jina* were known and in the villages regular sacrifices were made to them. In general, in Manden, each place has its own spirit, an owner of the land, and, accordingly, a legend about it. Such legends would also be called *kokoro*.

It should be noted that the idea of the agreement is basic in tradition and is reflected in folklore. The legends about the origin of villages, settlements, traditions, marionette costumes, and so on tend to involve the important role of spirits. It was the spirits that either allowed people to settle in certain lands—and subsequently helped them—or gave magical objects, fetishes, or taught them certain traditions (puppets, theatre). The spirits were not something supernatural for the Manden peoples, but quite natural. The spirits are the owners of the land, on which people are only tenants.

In the Guinean villages in 1999, every head of the family was very happy and proud to tell such a story; all the storytellers of the *kokoro* (they were among the elders in the family) tried to make it an archaic language, similar to an epic narration. In the absence of written history, all historical memory is preserved and formed orally. This is reminiscent of an observation made in a different context by Yuri Lotman: “The presence of a single national memory was a sign of the existence of a national collective in the form of a single organism. Common memory was a fact of conscious unity of existence” (398, my translation). Not only has the collective unity depended on its history, but also the self-determination of the people. Thus, in the process of building the Mali Empire, the people who took part in it and created a common history, the connecting link of which was the epic of Sundyata. The peoples who later joined this system began to link their history with the history of the formation of the Mali Empire. For example, according to the history of the origin of the Dogon people, they came from the Manden during the formation of the Empire, and now they consider all Keita to be their elder brothers in dyamu.

### *Maana*

This type of culture requires a strict separation between texts that preserve history, the basic norms of society, and entertaining texts: the division into truth-oriented and fiction-oriented texts is fundamental. Texts that are classified as truthful have a higher status and many restrictions on their performance. The most significant genre in Bamana and Maninka oral tradition is epic legend, but the Dyula do not have it. However, the Dyula *lasiri kuma* performance and the epics of the Bamana and Maninka have a lot in common. The Bamana epic is most often called *maana*.

*Maana* (Arabic: *ma`nan*, the meaning of the narration) means “narration”, or “story”, and refers to epic legends. The epic is performed only by male griots; women are not allowed to perform it. During my trip to Guinea in 1999, I was told that a griot woman once sang an epic story despite warnings of other griots and lost her voice (it became hoarse as the voice of a man).

Epic legends differ in structure and plot in accordance with the time of their appearance: one, the classical epic about the creation of the Mali empire (legends about Sundyata, Fa Koli, etc.); two, cycles of the legends about Segu (Biton, Buakaridyan, Da Monson); three, historical songs of the pre-colonial and early colonial period. There are epic legends about the rulers (*mansaw*, *mansare*) and about warriors (*ton-tigi*) and epic songs. The Manden themselves do not subdivide them in this manner, however, as a rule, legends about Sundyata are in Maninka and Mandinka, and legends about Segu are in Bamana (later stories).

The Manden epic tales consist of different types of verses: plot verses are those passages in which the narration takes place and griots pronounce them or sing them to music. But there are also steady verses, those that do not carry plot information and are pronounced by griots in a patter. These are verses of the motto, *fasa*, verses containing a magical meaning. It is their sound that is important, not the meaning, and the task is to pronounce them. Listeners will immediately recognize them, but the interesting thing is that listeners cannot reproduce them verbatim. It is in such verses that *nyama* will be contained.

It can be assumed that the epic was initially born as small panegyric songs dedicated to one or two events (small plots). Over time they were combined into separate cycles formed around one hero or place. These sets of small plots can be called the griots’ fund, which they all use in one way or another. Moreover, each griot tradition and locality has its own part of this fund. The epic legends themselves are built on a stable structure (skeleton)

that all griots know, but they all use different sets of plots. Over the centuries, griots have formed long narratives from their sets of micro-plots, varying them according to historical necessity, locality, and audience. Previously, when the griots clan belonged to a certain clan of rulers, their sets of plots were limited to stories related to this clan (Kuyate were the griots of Keita). *Fasa* is part of such epic stories: griots may include laudatory songs to heroes and even the ancestors of the listeners in the narrative, but as was already mentioned, the epic itself is a laudatory song for heroes and ancestors, so sometimes the epic is also called *fasa*.

### *Ngalen kuma*

*Ngalen kuma* in Dyula means “etiological stories”, perhaps “myths”. This is not a term for a genre, as there is no common word and it is translated as ‘old speech’, from the word *ngalen/galen* (bygone days, first, before) and *kuma* (speech). In Bamana *gale* means “first”, “in the past”. Some of these texts are sacred and may consist of verses from the Koran. *Ngalen kuma* is performed without any musical accompaniment and songs. These can be tales that are associated by Dyula with other *ntalen* tales, with riddles and riddle tales (*ntalenkɔrɔbɔ*). The informants often group them into one class and the meaning and symbolism in them are the most important. Such a text is recited by heart. As with other narrative genres, the preferred time for storytelling is at night.

*Ngalen kuma* is narrated only by adult men; young people are not allowed to tell it, but they can listen to it like everyone else. The narration takes place in small groups when they want to explain any natural phenomena, the structure of the world, the cultural characteristics of society, etc. In everyday life, stories are told spontaneously, accidentally, not on specific dates. *Ngalen kuma* is more serious and dangerous than a fairy tale. Such texts do not contain musical parts, but there is a special beginning: “*ngalen, ngalen ...*” (sometime...).

In my experience the Maninka know these words, but it does not refer to myth as a genre. My informants could not remember a single suitable text; in fact, tales about spirits (*jina*) or the origin of the stars’ names (the tale about three brothers) were something as close as possible to the myth. All such texts were called *nsirin* or *ntalen* by informants. When I asked about the legends of the hunters, they said that these are not fairy tales (*nsirin te, ntalen tɛ*); this is the speech of old (former) people, or old speech—*kuma kɔrɔ*. As I’ve mentioned, the legends about spirits are very popular, but they are also called *kuma kɔrɔ* (old narration), *kokɔrɔ* (history), or *ntalen* (story). In Bamako and among intellectuals, you can hear myths of the Bamana, Maninka, or Dogon peoples but this will be a retelling of the myths published by Germaine Dieterlen or Marcel Griaule. There are no restrictions for such a story: it can be told during the day or at night, and at any time of the year, but preferably in old age.

### *Symbolic genres*

*Lamara* in Dyula refers to a proverb, perhaps derived from the word *mara* (to save). Proverbs are preferred by elderly persons—young people or children do not use proverbs in their speech. *Lamara* are used in everyday communication, often as evidence in disputes: proverbs in speech indicate a well-mannered and ‘educated person’.

*Nsana* (*nzana*) in Bamana and *sanda* in Maninka means “proverb”, “story”, or “story-tale”. Proverbs have traditionally assumed a response. For example, the Bamana proverb “No matter how much a piece of wood floats in the water, it will never become a crocodile” customarily has an answer: “But even a piece of wood can scare a person”. If a proverb has an answer, its meaning can also be changed. In the epic story about Da Monson, the leader called his slaves-warriors using a proverb instead of a name, and they responded to him with an answer to the proverb. Proverbs are often used in fairy tales, while some etiological tales play the role of the proverbs’ explanation.

*Ntnten* (*nteentèn, nteenmàsa*) in Bamana means “a riddle”. In Dyula, the riddle, like the fairy tale, is called *ntalenkɔrɔbɔ*. Riddles can be different in form and structural organization. Initially, they belonged to ritual folklore: after the circumcision rite, there was a competition organized for young men in which they were divided into teams and young men of the older age group acted as arbiters. Like fairy tales, riddles are usually told at nightfall. *Fɔlɔ, maakɔrɔ tun be nsiirinw, nsanaw ni ntentɛnw da, ka kɔle laɲɛnaje* (before, old people told stories, proverbs, and riddles to entertain the family).

### *Fiction genres*

*Ntaàlen* (Bamana) means is a proverb, riddle, introductory words in proverbs and fairy tales, or a short story; *tali* (Maninka) means a tale or short story. This term refers to a small text, a little story. Sometimes in one storybook fairy tales can be called both *ntalen* and *nsiirin* in Bamana. This is a special term for short stories, while the long

fairy tales (more often about the interaction of the world of people and the world of non-human beings) are called *ntalenjan* (the long *ntalen*). The class of *ntalen* includes fairy tales, sayings, and stories in the form of riddles. The word is said to be derived from “speech of the spider”, as *ntalon/ntalen* means “a spider”. The spider does not often take part in Bamana tales, but in many African traditions it is the main trickster. But as can be seen in Maninka, a spider is *talontalon*, so the relative to *ntalen* (Bamana), *tali/toli* in Maninka did not come from the word ‘spider’ and one can suppose that in Bamanait also derived from another word.

Anyone can tell such *ntalen* stories, but only in the evening or at night. Violation of this tradition can lead to the destruction of the society. They cannot be told during fasting, like other entertainment genres. As a rule, these stories are told in the circle of family or friends, and most often such parties take place during the dry season. During the rainy season, children can also have such evenings during their work on the Islam teachers’ fields. The tale-riddle can be an intermediate genre between fairy tales and riddles, the narrative of which is similar to a short fairy tale, more often about animals, but at the end there is certainly a question: “Who is right?”, “What do you think the hero will do?”, etc. Tale-riddles, most likely, will be called *ntalen* in Bamana. They are told more often together with riddles during the competition of groups of teenagers.

*Ntalenjan* (Bamana, Maninka) is a long tale (a term not often used). It is a narrative with some little refrains, without music. The refrain is repeated several times throughout the story. Sometimes the storyteller’s assistant sings it. These narratives have all the features common to fairy tale. The use of different words concerning a fairy tale can also be determined by dialectal features, sometimes they prefer to call it *nsiirin*, and sometimes *ntalen*. Fairy tales and riddles are often introduced with the phrase “*n ta ye, n ta ye*” (here is mine). Adults and children usually tell stories and riddles separately.

In Dyula “*N tɔ n tɔ*” (wait for me wait for me) are words that introduce a fairy tale or a proverb; the proverb itself may be also called *ntɔntɔ*.

*Ntalenkɔɔɔ* is a riddle in Dyula which can be translated as “to discover a tale (meaning)”. In Maninka the term “a riddle” is formed in the same way as *sàndakɔɔɔ* from the word *sanda* (a tale) and *kɔɔɔ* (to discover).

*Nsiirin* is a “fairy tale”, “fable”, or “story” in Bamana and *sirin* in Maninka means “myth”. Fairy tales are usually told during the dry season, in the evenings. Anyone can tell it, but men consider fairy tales to be a “low” genre intended for women and children. A fairy tale is often told in prose, but prose passages are interspersed with short refrains (according to the plot).

When the storyteller narrates, one of the listeners plays the role of *kumalaminelikela* (the one who supports the speech). He demonstrates his agreement with the narrator’s speech, assenting to him, and thereby sets the pace for the narration. Thus, the narrator’s monologue turns into a dialogue with the audience, which helps the perception of speech. This is the specificity of Manden narratives in which the dialogue absolutely dominates in speech. Today this manner of ‘supporting of the speech’ by the speaker’s assistant can be heard during speeches of public figures.

Really long tales can sometimes be sung by a griot to accompaniment because it is similar to epic narration. The following phrase: “*Maakɔɔ y’a fɔ ne ɲe na cogo min, ntalen te, nsiirin te, a bɔlen be tije fe*” (As the old men told me, this is not a fairy tale, not a tale, it looks like the truth) suggests that *ntalen* and *nsiirin* are marked as fiction.

A rare word, *ntelu* means “an anecdote”, “story”, “a story to the accompaniment of water drum playing”. It may also refer to a fairy tale.

*Yeɛleko, yeɛlekofen* means “something funny”, “a joke”; the Bamana and Maninka call anecdotes by this word also. In the Manden languages there is no specific term for “anecdote”. The significance of the Bamana funny stories is precisely that this is the formatting, the beginning of the form of anecdote. But so far, among such stories, one can find full-fledged anecdotes and a large number of stories. From the point of view of the structure and logic of the story, these stories are often completely similar to fairy tales about animals or fools.

### *Hunting folklore*

Each folklore genre’s features depend on the type of language, the presence of rhyme, tones, and on the type of culture. For example, the Manden folklore is more characterized by stability of texts due to the presence of the griot institution.

An important feature of the Manden oral tradition is that these peoples have a separate hunting oral tradition. As for the Bamana and Maninka peoples, they also have their own hunting griots, however, unlike ordinary griots, they are not from their caste. Any talented hunter can play the role of hunting griot. Hunters have their own stories,

legends, and myths. For hunters and for the entire Manden tradition, the Manden Hunters' Oath (*Manden Donsolu Kalikan*) and the legends about the founders of the hunter's union Kondolon and Saane are the most important. These legends are unmatched in their function in the Manden culture. If the Manden peoples had confirmed the existence of other myths, such as those recorded by Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlain, and others, then it would be possible to draw analogies, since in many ways they are also genealogical myths. However, unlike hunters' myths, classical myths are not confirmed today.<sup>6</sup> It can be assumed that they were forgotten, having lost their functions, while the hunters' legends are still alive. Along with myths, less sacred texts about Kondolon and Fakombe, the first leaders of hunters, can be distinguished (let us call them legends), where Kondolon is the hunters' fetish. These texts have no narrative limitation, they can be told by all hunters or hunters' griots, while the myth about the origin of hunter's union (the legend about Kondolon and Saane) can only be told by the head of the hunter's union.

Hunters also have their own epic stories and fairy tales. Among all Manden tales the hunters' tales are numerous: as a rule, they are about the confrontation of a great hunter with animals or a certain animal, which can turn into a human being. This motif is very popular among the Maninka and Bamana. In fairy tales one can see how animals, or even inanimate objects, can take on the appearance of people. For example, the python or grave turns into a man in some fairy tales. According to Manden, all men also know how to transform into their dyamu totems (*tana*), changing their appearance. So, any man from the Keita family can turn into a lion, the Kulibali can turn into a hippopotamus, etc. The mother of Sundryata had a second hypostasis as a buffalo. If the Bamana and Maninka hunting epic differs from the ordinary epic not only in characters and plot, but also in performance, then only hunting griots sing it, but essentially hunting tales differ from ordinary ones only in plot about the interaction of hunters with animals. In hunting folklore, the heroes are not rulers, warriors, or just people, but only hunters, and their antagonists are animals. The main idea is the rules of interaction between the world of people and the world of nature, maintaining a balance between the two worlds.

### *Song folklore*

As in many countries of West Africa, songs are the most popular genre in the oral tradition.

*Dɔnkili* means "the song". The majority of the songs are *dodɔnkili* (ritual songs of sacred societies or songs of masks). It is a small, short song of a phrase or two that is repeated many times. They are performed on the occasion of the ritual mask performances showing on certain calendar days, day or night, or during rituals and important events. *Dodɔnkili* are accompanied by mask dances. Most of the songs of secret unions, being part of the ritual, are hidden from the uninitiated, and women do not have the right to hear them. Women can only sometimes participate in the affairs of secret unions ten years after the end of menopause. Performing women's duties, they can hear some of the songs from the rituals of men. Currently, traditional holidays are often timed to coincide with Muslim ones, and mask songs are performed on the same holidays. Women, in turn, participate in the performance of wedding songs, many dance songs, songs for female circumcision (*kenekene dɔnkili*), naming, etc., as well as *kurubi* songs that they sing when they have a grudge against their loved ones (Derive 123).

*Jajon/janjo* in Bamana is a hymn to bravery (*Mali jɔnjɔn*—the hymn of Mali), also "a great military battle". There are also many variants of war songs such as *cukuri cukuri* in Dyula. All these songs consist of one or two repeated couplets.

In the Manden tradition there are performances of traditional jesters (*kɔreduga*), as well as puppet performances (*merenkun, sogobɔ*; the Bozo call it *dobɔ*). They have their own songs also. *Kɔreduga* (jesters) are rather characterized by statements of a paradoxical type, more like proverbs.

I do not cover different types of songs and their names in this article, although there are many of them, all of them significant and part of separate subgenres (military songs, wedding songs, etc.). It is song folklore that is most widely represented and most popular in the Manden territory. Both fairy tales and epics also contain song excerpts. A complete list of currently existing folklore genres does not exist, as some new genres are formed occasionally, and if we have not encountered any of them, this does not mean that they do not exist.

### *Jokes and prayers*

In general, one can also talk about a huge layer of ritual jokes as a separate, small folklore genre (*tulon, tulonkekuma*) in the tradition of *sinankuya* (joking relationship). The jokes (bantering) used by *sinankuya* partners are quite traditional. As a rule, they indicate some peculiarities of food or behaviour of representatives of different ethnic

communities or dyamu clans; jokes used by *sinankunya* are based on stereotypes related to food, clothing, customs, behaviour, and lifestyle: everything that is unusual and incomprehensible is ridiculed. Bamana or Maninka *sinankunya* partners call the Fulbes “bean eaters” and the Bozos “land fishes”. The Bamana can tell a Fulbe that “he is useless without a master”. Similar jokes and banter are used between certain dyamu; however, such jokes are less based on differences in food, tradition, or lifestyle, and more on social status and professional characteristics. Keita (rulers) shame Kuyate (griots) by saying that they are all liars and chatterboxes. Kuyate respond by saying that Keita are not able to work at all. The same system of bantering exists between peers, people of the same age class, and between certain groups of relatives who need to communicate on equal terms, which is what this banter system helps with.

Prayers to spirits have not been practically studied, and I still cannot say whether it is possible to speak of them as a separate genre. It is only clear that the logic of construction of such prayers is always the same, but the content is not limited by anything. For example, in Niagassola a prayer was offered to the patron spirit so that I could conduct my research and understand the world of Manden successfully. Prayers to patron spirits take place on various occasions and correlate with the type of spirit to which they are dedicated: it can be the patron of a clan or a village, a deceased ancestor, the owner of the territory, etc. The prayer is said by the chief or the eldest of his adherents.

### *Traditional theatre*

*Kòteba* is the name of the traditional theatre, from *kòtetulon* (theatrical performance and dances that precede it). *Kòte*, or *kwòte*, is the special word for dancing accompanied by performance in traditional Bamana theatre. *Kòteba* is a satirical comedy. Its name is derived from the word *kòteba* (*kete*) (big snail). The snail is the mascot of the Segou city. “[...] no one knows the exact origin of *Kòteba*. But what we are sure of is that it has existed for more than two centuries since history tells us that villagers played the *Kòteba* at the time of King Da Mouzon” (Puren). The Manden peoples are highly valued for humour in their culture and theatrical performances can be found everywhere where Bamana live. In the *Kòteba* tradition, the first part of the evening is devoted to dancing, after which the actors play a series of brief sketches. This dramatization is a satire over social evils and propensities in the life of the village. The actors, demonstrating violations of norms and rules in the life of the village community, ridicule the guilty persons and make them to be ashamed of their acts so as to never repeat them. The *Kòteba* Union itself pays great attention to moral values not only within its group, but also supports them in society.

In their performance, the actors improvise in the form of dialogue. Actors and the audience can offer an opinion on the problems discussed in the spectacle of *Kòteba*. There are several stereotypical characters of *Kòteba* who are well known to the general public. They are: a lazy peasant, the marabout-charlatan, the merchant-thief, and the village rooster—a seducer of women (Meillassoux 54). Additionally, there are other characters as well. Thus, the performance uncovers reprehensible behaviour, but nobody is designated by name so as to not humiliate anyone, but people can recognize themselves and correct their behaviour: “The themes of the *kòteba* are turned towards demystification and criticism: behind the appearances that certain individuals give themselves lies their real behaviour. Criticisms, however, are not all equal in scope and they are exercised only within an imitated and normative framework” (Meillassoux 56).

*Kòteba* performance may be associated with certain events in village life such as theft, adultery, etc. It can also be timed to some important events, such as a wedding. The wedding *Kòteba* is played for the bride: two variants of family life are played out, as always in a humorous way, with a good wife and a lazy wife. The bride is offered to choose the best option for her future behaviour. In addition, there is a certain date (after harvesting), which is selected every year by the *Kòteba* Union, and is called *Kòteba* Day. That day, many theatre troupes play performances based on *Kòteba* Day traditions. Originally, “the *kòteba* is a form of traditional Malian theatrical expression with a socializing function” (Bagayoko 19). All folk theatre’s performances are prohibited during fasting.

Dyula, like many other peoples of Africa (and not only the Manden), also has its own folk theatre, *Bara*, or *Bala* (a musical performance, a play). The word comes from *bàra* (dance, place to dance). *Bara* includes both songs and narration. The main role is played by an actor, who is accompanied by two musicians. *Bara* is mainly performed for family and friends, or in honour of the important guest. Musa Watara is considered to be the founder of the genre; he was taught it by spirits (*jinaw*). The performance lasts two to three hours, usually in the



evening with illumination: there are two to three people on the square, who have assistants who play rattles and bells to accompanying this performance and who also 'confirm' the speech of the main artist.

### **Manden and Dogon folklore**

In the article "Manden Literature", the following definitions of terms are given (La bibliothèque numérique des littératures en langues): fairy tale: *nsiirin* (Bamana), *ntalen* (Dyula), *tali* (Maninka); proverb: *nsana* (or *nsanan*) (Bamana), *nsana* (Dyula Bobo), *lamara* (Dyula Kongo), *talen* (Maninka); epic and song of praise: *fasa* (Bamana and Maninka), *lasiri donkiri* (Dyula); riddle: *ntalenmtalen* (or *ntente*) (Bamana), *ntalenkərɔɔ* (Dyula), *talen* (Maninka); myths: *galen kuma* (Bamana), *ngalen kuma* (Dyula); eulogy, song of praise: *fasa* (Bamana), *lasiri donkili* (Dyula); historical stories, chronicles: *maana kərɔ* (Bamana), *ko kərɔ* (Bamana), *kuma kərɔ* (Maninka).

*Kokərɔ* (old story), *galen kuma* (ancient speech), *yéleko* (funny thing), and some others are not terms for denoting genres. Rather, they are descriptive words for specific texts (although other words and phrases are difficult to classify as full-fledged terms from the point of view of the modern philology). Only *maana* is a borrowed word since, as far as I can imagine, the Manden peoples did not need a special word for it before, neither did they for historical genealogical stories, of which they said: "so the old people told". Most likely, separate words were needed to designate symbolic and fiction genres, thereby denoting their lack of connection with reality.

To understand these Manden terms better I have used information collected by Peter Kutsenkov during his expedition to Dogon lands in January 2019.<sup>7</sup> I present Dogon terms sequentially in the Bamana language and in the Tengu language: *Ntalen*, *tale/talen*, *pari* is specialized, "professional" tales told by griot specialists. There are very few of them, and they do not exist in the Kani-Bonzon district, which includes the village of Ende. *Nsiirin/ini* is an ordinary fairy-tale that can be told by everyone. *Ntalenjan* is the same as *ini*. The Dogons make no distinction between long and short tales. *Nsana* (*nzàna*) *tale/talen* is the same as *ntalen*. *Jajon/janjo/logû* (*logou*) is a generalized name for all texts, which, in turn, are divided into two genres: *anran logû* (*logou*), texts intended for everyone, publicly available; and *ôgo logû*, esoteric narratives intended exclusively for the leaders, *ogons*, who each have a special griot. In some villages *ôgo logû* are performed by the *ogons* themselves. For the terms *ngalengkuma/benikajé* no explanation was given; it was only mentioned that the terms are identical to those in Bamana.<sup>8</sup>

The division of folklore into genres, accepted in modern science now, like the generally accepted classifications of fairy tales, is not quite suitable for African cultures, since the peculiarities of the historical and cultural development of African countries, are not taken into account. For many years there was a discussion about whether there is an epic in West Africa, ignoring the fact that the specificity of the language determined the specificity of the epic genre. The oral tradition of West Africa is still active today, and its functions in culture are very different from the functions of European folklore, which, of course, determines its specificity.

It should be noted that the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought the next wave of Islamic influence. In addition to it, one can observe the rapid development of public and individual literature and the strengthening of the influence of cinema, television, the media, and the internet on people's lives. The oral tradition is also undergoing changes, losing its position, and changing functions. The system of genre formation and the folklore repertoire are currently being transformed.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I examined the question of what the Manden themselves pay attention to in their folklore. I found that, first of all, the degree of "seriousness" of the genre is important—that is, its significance for the tradition, which is associated with the functionality and rituality of the genre. According to Manden philosophy, these texts carry a large amount of *nyama* magical energy. Bamana and Maninka people have the institution of griots, "masters of the word", who know how to control this power. As such, the most significant texts include those that can only be narrated by griots (*epic, fasa*).

In addition, I found that limitations regarding age and status of the performer is an indicator of the significance of the text. More important genres are not allowed to be performed by young people. For example, the myth about the origin of hunters' union can only be told by the head of the of hunters (while more private legends are told by the hunting griots) and the mythological stories about the origin of fetishes of the family and the family history have to be told by the oldest of the family (and only a person who has reached 40 years of age). Proverbs are not forbidden for young people but correlate with older age and wisdom.

Finally, I found that the degree of rituality of the folklore text is important. Restrictions on the performance of texts are related precisely with the ability to control the power of *nyama*. It is also important whether the texts are fictitious or considered to be true (from the point of view of Manden people themselves) as the degree of their correspondence to reality is significant. With regard to fairy tales a formal feature is important in defining various folklore genres. Fairy tales are divided into long and short tales: the long tales, like epics, can be told by griots. The presence of humour will also define the text as *yéleko* and form a certain attitude towards it, so it can be both an anecdote and a fairy tale. Thus, the ritual significance, the presence of humour, the degree of reliability, the identity of the performer and his audience, as well as formal characteristics (long text or short) are significant in determining genres in Manden oral literature.

#### Notes

1. Manden (Mandingo) is a group of peoples of West Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Gambia), whose languages belong to the western branch of the Mandé language family.
2. Dyamu (*jamu*) is a social group adopted by some peoples of West Africa, based on the idea of a common ancestor and origin, having professional and marital restrictions, and a certain system of interaction with other similar groups.
3. Note that with folklore genres, the verb *da* (to put, add) is used, which in this context means "to perform".
4. Balafon is a large xylophone having hollow gourds as resonators, used in West African music.
5. A kora is a stringed instrument used extensively in West Africa which typically has 7–21 strings.
6. During neither my expeditions, nor the expeditions of my colleagues, was there any confirmation of the reliability of the information recorded by French ethnologists about any Manden or Dogon myths.
7. The Dogon consider themselves to be a Manden people, however, their languages do not belong to the Mandé language family, but almost everyone can speak Bamana.
8. Informant Malik Gindo, leatherworker and griot, Ende village, Mopti region, the Republic of Mali.

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