The Political Career of Simbon Keita of Kita (1900-1985)

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Bio-sketch

Nicholas S. Hopkins (American University in Cairo) has conducted research in Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, and India on issues of development broadly understood. He is the author of *Popular Government in an African town: Kita, Mali* (1972) and has published extensively on Mali, Tunisia and Egypt. He is most recently is the translator of *Ghost Riders of Upper Egypt* (H.A. Winkler, 1936; AUC Press, 2009), and the co-editor of *Nubian Encounters: The story of the Nubian Ethnological Survey 1961-1964* (AUC Press, 2010).

Abstract

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The dynamics of political leadership in Mali are seen through the life history of a man who was prominent in local politics. After a career as a colonial-era schoolteacher, Keita became a canton chief during World War II, and was active in electoral politics in the decade before Malian independence. After a brief eclipse he returned to influence if not power under the socialist regime of Modibo Keita. His last political act in the 1980s re-immersed him in the traditional politics of family rivalries. The paper traces the interaction of a man and his times.

Résumé français : La carrière politique de Simbon Keita de Kita

Né en 1900, décédé en 1985, Simbon Keita fut pendant plusieurs décennies une des personnalités respectées de Kita (Mali occidental). D'abord enseignant, à partir de 1942 et jusqu'en 1958 chef de canton (jamanatigi) de Kita, puis après une période de retraite il a fait sa rentrée à la vie politique en tant que membre du bureau politique local sous le régime de Modibo Keita (choisi pour ses capacités administratifs et sa probité). Il s'est intéressé toujours au bien être économique et intellectuel de son pays. Cette étude biographique est basée d'abord sur une série d'interviews menés en 1962, ensuite sur mes propres observations jusqu'en 1965, et aussi sur l'examen de certains documents d'archives ou sur d'autres études de Kita à différentes époques. Elle donne des informations sur son enfance, sa carrière d'enseignant, d'administrateur, et d'entrepreneur, et d'homme politique versé dans la réconciliation, pendant la période coloniale et depuis l'indépendance. Ainsi on peut reconstruire le dynamique de leadership politique du Mali, et on peut analyser l'intersection d'un homme de valeur et de son temps.

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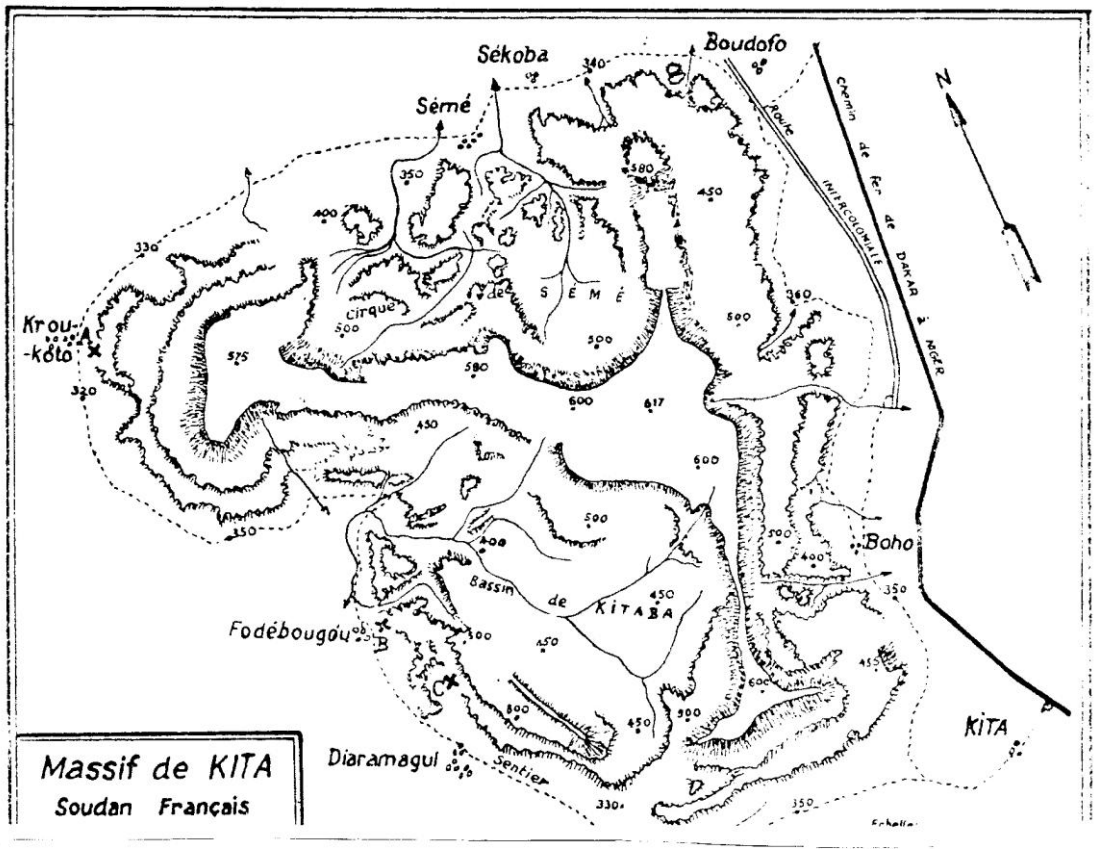

Figure 1: Paul Jaeger, "Légendes et coutumes du pays de Kita" Notes Africaines 1951, no.52, pp. 103-106.

Introduction

This paper examines the political career of Simbon Keita (1900-1985) who was a leading figure for many years in the political life of the town of Kita in western Mali. It does so in the context of the changes in Kita and in Mali during this period. Thus the life of an individual is situated in social and cultural context, and it raises reflections about the importance of mid-range leaders (neither national nor village) in ensuring social integration in Mali, and its predecessor the French Sudan.

In some recent articles (2008a, 2008b, but see also 1972) I have reflected on the implications of a cultural analysis of politics in Mali (specifically Kita). Among the features I have noted are the centrality of open debate in a public meeting, where eloquence rather than wealth or position plays a key role and persuasion is the preferred strategy, and the naturalness of ambition for men who try to win the support of others in order to advance their personal reputation and cause. Competition is seen as normal and continuing, so political figures are always seeking new allies and supporters while trying to retain the ones they have. Would-be leaders had to demonstrate “people” skills, to handle

relations with supporters and others, but also be ready to settle disputes among supporters, devise strategies against opponents. They had to manage information flow – to know how much to tell, when to hide information, how to evade inquiry and thus limit interference. Competitors internalize certain key rules and understandings to the game of politics. The fact that actors generally agree on all this and so understand the language of political move and countermove provides a broad cultural base for political action in Mali, and thus helps to hold the country together. It is also important to note that by and large political actors have agree to agree, so there have been no moments when everything was overturned – apart from the two main shifts at the national level in 1968 and 1991 when the government was replaced. The cultural model often cited for this is the Kurukan Fougan supposedly under the patronage of Soundiata Keita in the 13th century, but this is probably an ex post facto argument (Belcher 2008).

I continue this investigation here, taking a somewhat different approach. The role of one leading political figure in Kita over nearly half a century embodies these cultural dimensions of Malian politics. This figure was Simbon Keita (1900-1985), who was active in Kita politics, and peripherally in national politics, during this period. Keita was a canton chief from 1942 to 1958 and then held a technical (i.e., treasurer) leadership position. Both during his chiefship and afterwards, he took initiatives such as founding cooperatives which were intended to benefit a broad range of the population. Simbon's intermediate position in the colonial system required him to accommodate both the higher and lower levels in the system.

In Mali in the first generation after independence in 1960 the links between periphery and center worked through certain key individuals with the intellectual ability and the experience to relate both to life in the small towns and villages and to the ideological level of the national leadership, itself influenced by ideas of socialism and other international currents (Snyder 1967). Moreover, a certain effort of translation was necessary because of the need to switch back and forth between French, the language of administration, and the various African languages. The French was usually written but political speech was often in the local African language, Maninkakan. The absence of direct means of two-way communication (telephone, for instance) during these years meant that people had to invest heavily in face to face contact, traveling from one place to another and organizing meetings, in order to pass messages up and down the system. This was not only a linguistic matter but assumed knowledge of the etiquette of speaking and interacting. Speakers had to know when they could be direct and when roundabout speech or even silence was more effective.

Here I draw on several sources of information. Firstly I make use of a series of conversations I had with Simbon in 1962 when I was a young teacher in Kita, in which he recounted his childhood and adult life. Then I bring in some observations from two French colonial officers who served in Kita in the 1930s and 1940s and who knew Simbon and the Kita setting. This is amplified by my observations of his political role in the mid-1960s, and by contemporary interviews with other Kitans. Furthermore, I present some information from archival sources and contemporary newspapers, and from historians of the

period. And finally I draw on a lengthy and circumstantial account of Simbon's role in a major dispute that roiled Kita in the year or so before his death, perhaps his final political act (Hoffman 2000). Throughout we can see the interstitial and conciliatory role that Simbon played, and his importance in knitting the personal and local levels together with the national one. I bring all this together in a narrative account of his life, contextualized in terms of the political and social setting in which he operated and which his actions also helped construct. In the phrase of C. Wright Mills, he "contributed to the shaping of his society, even as he was made by society and by its historical push and shove" (1959:6).

Simbon's life

Simbon's life covered several distinct periods in Malian and Kita history, from the different phases of the colonial period when the country was known as the "Soudan Français" to the succession of regimes in independent Mali. For at least forty years, from the 1940s to the 1980s, he was a well-known and often successful leader in local politics, though he was never active at the national level. He was involved in local administration, lineage politics, economic activity as a trader and manager, and pre-independence party politics as well as the emerging political structures of socialist and post-socialist Mali. During most of his life, Simbon was a respected political leader, both encouraging and assisting others and pursuing his own goals.

Kita during the 20th century was a medium-sized town. Situated on the Dakar-Niger railroad, it grew up as a trading and administrative center in the early days of the French colony. It was the seat of the administrative division known as the "cercle" headed by a "Commandant de Cercle"; one could say a District Officer. Its population grew from several thousand in the colonial period to nearly 20,000 by the 1980s. When I first encountered Kita in the early 1960s, just after independence, it was a sprawling agglomeration of distinct neighborhoods with neither a piped water supply nor electricity, though by around 1990 both were available.

Simbon's Youth

In an interview in April 1962, Simbon outlined his early life, showing how he took advantage of the opportunities that came his way. The following is a paraphrase of the notes I took at the time.

He was born in 1900. His father was a soldier who was away from Kita at the time. He had an older sister, and later a younger brother. They resided in Makandiambougou, the traditional quarter of the Keita in Kita. His mother would go down to a stream on the other side of town, near the Catholic Mission to work (washing clothes or gardening), accompanied by her children. Simbon was then about 9 years old. There was then a boarding school at the Mission and Simbon began playing with the children from this school, and going to work in the gardens with them. He used to bring home mangoes and once his mother even

whipped him, thinking he had pilfered them. Nonetheless his visits became more and more frequent. He befriended one of the priests, who came to visit his mother, making her proud.

One day Simbon went down to the Mission with the intention of staying. The fathers let him remain. His mother got worried and looked all over Makandiambougou for him, until finally she heard that he was down at the Mission. The next morning she went down and found him in class at the school. The priest Simbon had befriended took mother and son into his office and tried to persuade her to let him stay. Simbon wanted to learn French, and so, as he was the oldest child with the father absent, an education would be good for them. He said Simbon could come home every Sunday and even sometimes during the week could see her at the stream where she worked. So finally she was talked into letting him stay. Simbon attended school in this way for three years from 1909 to 1911, learning French as he had wanted. He sometimes served as an altar boy wearing a cross, but was never baptized. He would go home every Sunday, and sometimes the priest would accompany him.

Then, in 1911, a new French Deputy Commandant came to Kita. The village of Makandiambougou was told to furnish him a "wife" (this was apparently customary at the time, see Bâ 1999:33). Inasmuch as Simbon's father was absent, there was no one to protect the family, and so the village elders selected Simbon's older sister. His mother could put up no effective protest, so the girl went off to live with the French administrator. When Simbon came home to visit, he found that the family's material condition was much improved (new clothing and rice) and so Simbon reflected that this was a good thing. He went to visit his sister. The administrator was anti-Catholic and when he saw the emblem around Simbon's neck, he began to ask questions. Finally he simply took charge of the situation and said, "All right, you'll move in here and wait on table and otherwise help out. You and my daughter will be my children, and I'll send you both to the public school." So he gave him clothes and food, and he spent three more years in the public school (1911-1914).[1] He attended the Ecole Primaire Supérieure in Bamako from 1914 to 1916, and then continued at the Ecole Normale in Gorée (1916-1920), which he left to become an *instituteur* himself shortly before he turned twenty. This was the classic route for boys' education at that time.

As a teacher

Simbon always identified himself as a teacher. I do not know the details of Simbon's teaching career. Schools were scarce during the 1930s and even into the 1940s. The Ecole Régionale de Kita had five coeducational classes with a total of around 200 to 250 pupils in 1942, while the smaller Catholic school had about 60 pupils (Barlet, letter, July 27, 1966). Four other schools were created in the circle during Barlet's period (1942-44), and they were avidly sought after.[2]

Paul Delmond (letter, October 11, 1966) reports that Simbon was the Assistant Director of the Ecole Régionale de Kita in 1933-4. Perhaps he then left Kita to take up the job as Director of the primary school in Sitakili, near Kenieba, where he taught for a number of years. This is where he was in 1942 when the post of canton chief became vacant (Barlet, letter, July 27, 1966). During this

time he began to nurture the ambition to become the *jamanatigi* (canton chief) of Kita. According to one Kita informant, he had manifested a desire for prestige as early as 1925 when he was the first African in Kita to build a house with a metal roof.

Simbon becomes canton chief (*jamanatigi*) of Kita

As part of their structure for administering West Africa, and especially the French Sudan, the French had created local subdivisions known as "cantons" or in Maninkakan *jamana*. In most cases, and certainly here, the canton had its roots in the precolonial social structure. It consisted of the villages whose traditional sites encircle the Kita mountain (Kitakourou, an inselberg). At the time of the establishment of colonial rule there was then empty space until the next clusters of villages appeared. The canton of Kita was thus a well-defined geographical and social entity. Depending on who was doing the counting, and perhaps when, there were between 15 and 18 of these villages. The dominant clan was the Keita, and the allied clans included the Tounkara and the Kamara among the *horon* (nobles) and numerous *nyamakala* or people of caste - Kouyaté, Diabaté, Sissoko, and Tounkara among the *jeli* (griots); Kanté and others among the *numu* (blacksmiths). There was also a Muslim community of proselytizers and merchants, the *mori*, led by the Cissé clan.

In the logic of things, the canton of Kita had a chief (*jamanatigi)* ostensibly chosen according to traditional criteria – in brief, the senior member of the Kasumasi lineage of the Keita, the first settlers among the Keita. Senior in turn meant the oldest male of the oldest surviving generation. The application of this rule would have meant that the recognized chief would normally be a very old man, and thus a somewhat nominal chief. However, during the colonial period the rule was flexibly applied. Local theory as explained by Simbon held that although the chief had to come from the most ancient Keita lineages, it was the allied Tounkara and Kamara together who designated the actual chief and performed the installation ceremonies. (The Tounkara and the Kamara were considered to have settled in Kita before the Keita and thus controlled the relations with the spirits of the land. [see Hopkins 1972])

When the French army occupied Kita in 1881, the key figure from the Keita clan was known as Tokantan, although the recognized chief was Kankouba Mady. Tokontan was key because of his role in the commercial networks that stretched north and south from Kita. Kankouba Mady was succeeded by Niadougou Guimbala, who held the post until 1925. In that year there was a sharp conflict over the succession; the strongest candidate in terms of personality, Nama Keita, was unacceptable on lineage grounds to many of the other Keita,[3] but he had cultivated good relations with the leading Tounkara who thus saw to it that he was designated (allegedly in exchange for a bribe). Thinking they were following custom, the French authorities accepted this and began to plan for his installation. But other Keita, claiming greater legitimacy, protested to higher levels in the French administration and the decision was reversed. Then a relatively weak candidate but with good lineage credentials was chosen. This was Mahatigué.[4] However, both he and the French administration relied on NFaly, a son of Tokontan, to provide the links between

them and carry out much of the administration. When Mahatigué died in 1939, NFaly became *jamanatigi* in his own right. This transition was the first moment when Simbon showed an interest in the post himself, but he could not compete with NFaly, who had age, lineage, and experience on his side.[5]

The remembered event of NFaly's tenure as chief was the creation of new villages.[6] In effect, the people had moved away from the vicinity of the mountain, no longer needing the security, and had established satellite villages up to 30 km away. It was decided that these satellite villages should have their own chiefs. So the number of villages in the canton expanded from about eighteen to about sixty (the number varied from year to year).

NFaly died in 1942, and then Simbon made his move. Of course this was during World War II, the Vichy period. By this time the French preferred an educated man who could help them more decisively in their administration, and there were several candidates. One was the eldest son of Nama, Douga, a veteran and a merchant who spoke French. Other potential candidates included the younger brother of NFaly, Samba, and NFaly's eldest son, Mamadou, who having helped his father, was experienced.[7] He was a clerk in the district office, and also served as liaison between his father and the French administrator. Another French army veteran, who had risen to the rank of lieutenant, Fadiala Keita, also put himself forward.[8] And by now Simbon, the school director from Sitakili, was a formal candidate.

In the end, however, only Simbon and Fadiala ran. According to some stories, Samba felt that as a sincere Muslim he did not want to jeopardize his chances for heaven by taking on a job that might require him to harm people. But it was also said, notably by the French administrator at the time, that he was a regular consumer of *dolo* (millet beer) ["sous l'empire du dolo," according to Barlet, letter, July 27, 1966] and so unfit for the office. Mamadou was of course somewhat younger, and had alienated many people as assistant to his father. He had the reputation of being domineering and tyrannical. He was also not even the oldest of his generation in the lineage. His cousin, Mamadou Samba, was older, but in 1942 he was working as a merchant in Guinea. According to another story, Simbon compiled a list of all of Mamadou NFaly's misdeeds, and threatened to expose him if he ran.

Fadiala may have had the right personal qualities but he came from the ineligible Bandiougousi Keita, a lineage distinct from the Kasumasi Keita, which may have arrived in Kita as latecomers or perhaps had broken a customary rule concerning marriage: in other words there was a blemish on their record. However, in an earlier generation a man of this lineage had been a big man in Kita, and this had left certain expectations behind. Fadiala may have hoped to gain support from the influential group of veterans of the French army ("les anciens tirailleurs"), who formed a section of the Association des Anciens Combattants (Mann 2006).[9]

Simbon was then school director at Sitakili, in the Kenieba gold field area.[10] He quickly traveled to Kita and according to gossip brought with him a kilo of gold to win the support of the French commandant. He also had the support of the merchants and the Muslim community in Moribougou. One of the

leaders of the merchant community told me that he had supported Simbon because he represented progress and relative freedom. Simbon's own story suggests that though he was from the right lineage, he was from a marginal background, and in this case his own ambition to be a teacher may have facilitated his upward mobility.

In the end, the chiefs of the sixty-one villages had to vote for Simbon or for Fadiala, and the vote was fifty-five to six in favor of Simbon. Only Fadiala's own kin in the Bandiougousi voted for him. Of course Simbon had the advantage of a stronger claim in the traditional system since he was from the Kasumasi, and perhaps his background in the colonial administration was more germane than Fadiala's in the military, although both were literate and experienced. Having explored the possibility in 1939, Simbon had learned how to appeal to the relevant constituencies, notably the prominent merchant class, the key lineages, and the colonial hierarchy. By this time the nominating role of the Tounkara had become symbolic, limited to a role in the installation ceremony.

Simbon as chief

Simbon settled in quickly to the role, attempting early to win over the supporters of Fadiala, and visiting all the villages in the canton. In the 1960s I heard that some rivals had contested his authority in the early days, so that at one point Simbon jailed some of the malcontents. According to Barlet, he was very attentive to all his chiefly tasks, visiting his villages or holding court with his entourage in a small office which Barlet had built for him. "Intelligent, parfaitement au courant des questions économiques de son canton, il faisait néanmoins figure de grand fama, ne se déplaçant jamais sans son épouse préférée et sans ses griots" (letter, 27 July 1966). He had less contact with traders, officials, and others from the modern sector. However, we should remember that World War II was still on. At the beginning of 1944 the colonial government organized a major drive to collect money and goods to promote the liberation of France, and as Barlet (letter, 27 July 1966) notes it was but a short step from seeking the liberation of France to seeking the liberation of Africa. This political process began a year later.

In retrospect Simbon presented his role as one of pushing for the improvement of the system by educating the people and the leaders of the canton. He tried to be both the modern chief that the colonial administration desired and at the same time to work within tradition.[1] He used to consult the senior men, especially those who were recognized as lineage heads. He preferred to consult them individually in their villages, but sometimes convened them all in Kita, and then his strategy would be to get them talking among themselves and to play a very discrete part in the discussion. After a while, he said, he would point out that what was feasible before had to be changed in the modern world, and so he would try to educate them at the same time. If he had not been interrupted by the change in politics (i.e., independence and related changes) he would have

[1] This is what Fallers, writing of colonial Uganda, called the predicament of the chief (1955).

continued to work with them in this way, slowly nudging them to a different set of conceptions. I have no independent evidence on the success of this educational approach, but it suggests more agency than Crowder allowed (1968:188-194).

Simbon had an office built out of stone where his clerks worked, although he himself usually received people in his courtyard. He had a secretary who took care of the paper work and was his intermediary with the French commandant de cercle. He tried to encourage people to deal with him directly rather than through *nyamakala* whom he thought had a tendency to exaggerate, to set people off against each other, making matters worse. But of course the engrained use of intermediaries could not be discarded easily.

According to Simbon, the political situation of the chief was that there was always a party of the chief, and a party opposed, including rival claimants and others. But it was also easy for some rivals to put it about that they had the power to protect people from the chief, and thus to gain support.

One of Simbon's main tasks was to collect the head tax, and he was entitled to a share of this. He mentioned 3 percent or a total of 150,000 to 200,000 francs. He would put part of this aside and then distribute the rest to the old men, arguing that he didn't need all the money and that before he could use any of it he had to give the men their share of the tax money. He would give them amounts varying from 2000 to 5000 francs. The head tax was based on a census that was normally updated every four or five years; Simbon remembered that he tried to update the tax rolls more frequently in the interests of fairness. This updating was one of the tasks that required him to visit the villages.[11]

Simbon was on paid leave from his teaching post for the salary of a *jamanatigi* was too low, and he said he wouldn't have given up his government job for the post of canton chief if it meant a loss of income. He also had income from his commercial ventures.

During this period, Simbon was active in the peanut trade ("la traite", see Hopkins 1972:40-43). This consisted of buying the peanuts grown by scattered African farmers and transporting them to spots along the rail line for sale. There were a number of African traders based in Kita who were involved in this trade, which was dominated by European and Lebanese traders. One of the former Lebanese traders, Lamine, noted that Simbon had been a successful trader because he claimed that the farmers should sell to an African rather than a European; Lamine however thought that African traders treated the farmers as badly as anyone else. In the days of "la traite," Simbon noted to me, each farming family had a connection with a merchant in Kita and he would sell his crop to him preferentially.

About 1949 Simbon Keita and a fellow chief, Djigui Diallo of the neighboring Birgo, established a cooperative to buy peanuts. At the time cooperatives had certain administrative advantages that individual traders did not. Simbon noted that the cooperative attempted to cover the whole circle of Kita. It prospered in the first couple of years when they were able to give a rebate to the producers. The practical problem was to collect peanuts from

widely scattered farms in areas without roads and transport them to a central point near the railroad. But they got overambitious and bought two trucks on credit, as well as many other things. They also extended advance payment to the producers, but had a hard time recovering their money. Although they overextended themselves, and never got their momentum back again, they limped along until 1960. They had an arrangement with a French businessman in Marseille, representing a soap manufacturer there, who came every year and provided the funds for this. Simbon acknowledged that the catchment area was too large, the field agents were not honest enough, and they were too much in debt. Another effort to establish a cooperative for retail merchants during this period also collapsed.

Electoral politics in the 1950s

Politically speaking, a two-party system predominated in the French Sudan from 1946 through 1959 (Morgenthau 1964). There was first of all a party, the Parti Progressiste Soudanais, known under the initials of "PSP", which was created by traditional canton chiefs led by Fily Dabo Sissoko from the Bafoulabé area, and including Simbon Keita from Kita, Djigui Diallo from the Birgo, and many others. Other elements of the population, such as the merchants and the intellectual and administrative elite, eventually joined the Union Soudanaise which became a section of the pan West-African Rassemblement Démocratique Africain ("RDA"). During this period voters were called upon to elect representatives to the French national assembly and also to a local assembly, the Conseil Général. From 1951-56 the vote in Kita was about evenly balanced between the two parties. The early successes went to the PSP, and the later ones to the RDA, which eventually absorbed the other parties and brought the Sudan to independence as Mali.

During this entire period, Simbon had to manage a network of shifting alliances, both with various Keita rivals and allies, then with the merchant community, and with other members of the PSP, notably his ally and rival Djigui Diallo. The ability to maintain his position in these alliances was key to his long-term political role – both before and after independence. Of course he also had to satisfy his superiors in the hierarchical colonial administration.

Simbon Keita twice presented himself in elections for the Conseil General of the French Sudan on behalf of the PSP. He was unsuccessful, and it seems he did not tempt fate a third time. One of the early elections was in May 1948 for a representative to the Conseil General for a constituency that included both Bamako and Kita. Each party had a candidate from Bamako, and Simbon Keita contested the elections as the only Kita candidate, garnering about seven percent of the votes. The successful RDA candidate was Modibo Keita from Bamako.

In March 1952 there was another election for the Conseil General, for a representative from Kita circle. In this election Simbon was the candidate of the PSP, and Mamby Sidibé represented the RDA.[12] In addition the canton chief from the Birgo, a dynastic rival of Mamby Sidibé's, ran as a "progressive", and Douga Keita from Kita, the son of the Nama Keita who nearly became canton chief in 1925, ran as an independent progressive. And there was a minor independent candidate, Mamadou Sy. Sidibé was the winner with a plurality of forty percent of the vote, followed by Diallo with thirty-two percent while Simbon lagged

behind with twenty percent. Douga Keita and Mamadou Sy split the remaining eight percent. The RDA newspaper, *L'Essor*, noted on 11 April 1952, that the RDA's opponents had been divided by ambition: "A qui la faute si à Kita, l'ambition, le désir du lucre ont poussé les progressistes à présenter cinq candidats (sic) contre celui du RDA."

Meanwhile at the level of the French Sudan the RDA gradually outdistanced the PSP, and the French administration at least partly accepted this. Barlet noted (letter, July 27, 1966) that on a visit to Kita in 1957 he found that the French administrator was harassing Simbon Keita in Kita and Djigui Diallo in the Birgo, considered as the two "modern" canton chiefs, but linked to the PSP.

In 1958, with internal autonomy, the RDA abolished the post of canton chief throughout the country. In Kita the rivals of Simbon celebrated "for ten days" in front of his concession, sacrificing an animal and organizing dances. These rivals included the RDA chapter in Kita and members of opposing Keita lineages. Simbon's family members were ridiculed in the streets. For the next several years, Simbon withdrew from the political scene, and he was sitting on the sidelines when I first met him in late 1961.

After independence, Simbon as elder statesman

However, Simbon had qualities that made him valuable to Kita's new leaders. He had a reputation for financial integrity, he could articulate the new concepts of an independent Mali in Maninkakan, and he retained the respect of many individuals, particularly in the countryside. Thus for instance in May 1962 he was included in a delegation that traveled to Bamako and met with national leaders including Modibo Keita to protest successfully a decision to transfer a peanut processing plant from the circle of Kita to Kayes. He also maintained kinship connections with the new leaders: three of his daughters were married to high officials. Moreover, one of the leading ideologues of the RDA, Madeira Keita, had once been his pupil (see Madeira Keita 1960).

In May-June 1962 people in Kita were preparing for the conference of the local section of the RDA. From the point of view of the people of Kita the main point of this was to choose a new political bureau, a group of seventeen people who would be the highest local political body (the 'bureau politique local' or BPL). The previous one had been held several years before and had resulted in such quarrelling that the national level stepped in and imposed a local political bureau. Delegates now would come from the different subdivisions of the circle, but local opinion regarded them as simply bystanders for the real action was the political rivalry among Kitans. Each of the neighborhoods of Kita sent delegates, and Simbon was chosen as one of the delegates of Makandiambougou. (From the point of view of the national leadership, this conference was one of a series that led into the 6th national congress, held on September 10-12, 1962. The resolutions of this congress are translated in Snyder 1965:134-152. This was also the last such conference [Sanankoua 1990:127])

The conference convened on June 30 in the old market shed in the center of the town. The conveners of the conference had been delegated from the national party organization in Bamako. They gave the opening speeches while

several hundred people listened. Simbon gathered his supporters in one corner of the space; these included some merchant allies from Moribougou but also members of the Kouyaté family who were his traditional *jeli*.[14] As the meeting proceeded, Simbon made a speech criticizing the outgoing secretary general for poor organization, and for his inability to recruit people into the party. He also criticized teachers who neglected their teaching to pursue politics: This point won the approval of the head of the national delegation who was also a former teacher.

The next day the process of choosing the new bureau began in earnest. The Bamako conveners asked each subdivision to choose its representatives. They would then meet to consider nominations. This committee met in the afternoon and proposed a slate which the conference duly approved. Simbon was chosen as the treasurer. People explained that Simbon was selected because of his experience and well-known honesty; also his presence on the BPL served to reassure the people in the bush. Overall 17 members, many of them new, were chosen for the BPL, including one woman, while the Commandant de cercle was named an ex officio member. Several had been affiliated to the PSP. In lineage terms, members included three Keita brothers descended from Tokontan NFaly who considered that any one of them had had a better claim on the post of *jamanatigi* than Simbon.

Simbon's role is indicated by the range of tasks he undertook, some of which are described here. The tasks were more essential than glorious, and collectively give a flavor to the nitty-gritty of Kita politics in 1962-65. They required financial probity and mediation skills. Simbon appeared content to perform these roles rather than seek political office through the RDA.

Simbon along with much of the rest of the BPL attended a prize ceremony at the local primary school in July 1962, and Simbon and some others traveled outside Kita to mediate a quarrel between farmers and herders over the passage of animals. He continued to take on these tasks in the ensuing period. In November 1964 Simbon led a delegation of condolences to the village of Fodébougou when a very senior Keita chief died, and also he traveled around the villages to sell party cards and to collect the small monthly fee that parents of pupils were required to pay. People trusted him with money. One should also note that Simbon functioned as a resource on the history of Kita for the youth and others trying to comprehend the history of the area, in this context in which knowledge of history often functioned as a political resource.

As treasurer of the BPL, Simbon noted to me that he conceived his job as simply accepting the money and then disbursing it when someone came with the proper papers (i.e., the actual choices to collect or to spend were taken by others). He was also careful to give receipts so that people could see he was not playing politics with the money. He took care of this business largely from his home since the party did not have a proper office for him.

Also in 1964-65 Simbon was involved in the planning for a fair to be held in Kita in March 1965. Simbon gave a speech in Maninkakan at the opening. At about the same time he was involved in a committee to allocate building lots in

Kita. In September 1965 when the secretary general of the BPL made a speech in French, Simbon was asked to translate it into Maninkakan.

In 1964-65 the Malian government decided to establish a network of consumer cooperatives around the country to replace the private merchants (Hopkins 1969b). In Kita each of the quarters had one. Simbon was the president of the Makandiambougou cooperative. By August 1965 he seemed to think these new cooperatives had gotten off to a good start. They would buy from the Somiex (government supplier) on credit and pay within a month, keeping a small profit margin. This required a certain amount of commercial agility. Simbon exhorted the cooperative officials to devote themselves to the tasks, though this was sometimes an uphill task. He kept track of the people who had done small tasks to make sure that they got some reward (extra grain or cigarettes). He was conscious of the need to keep good records in case of disputes. But on the whole Simbon complained of the lack of cooperative spirit. He was clearly taking seriously the task of making this new institution work.

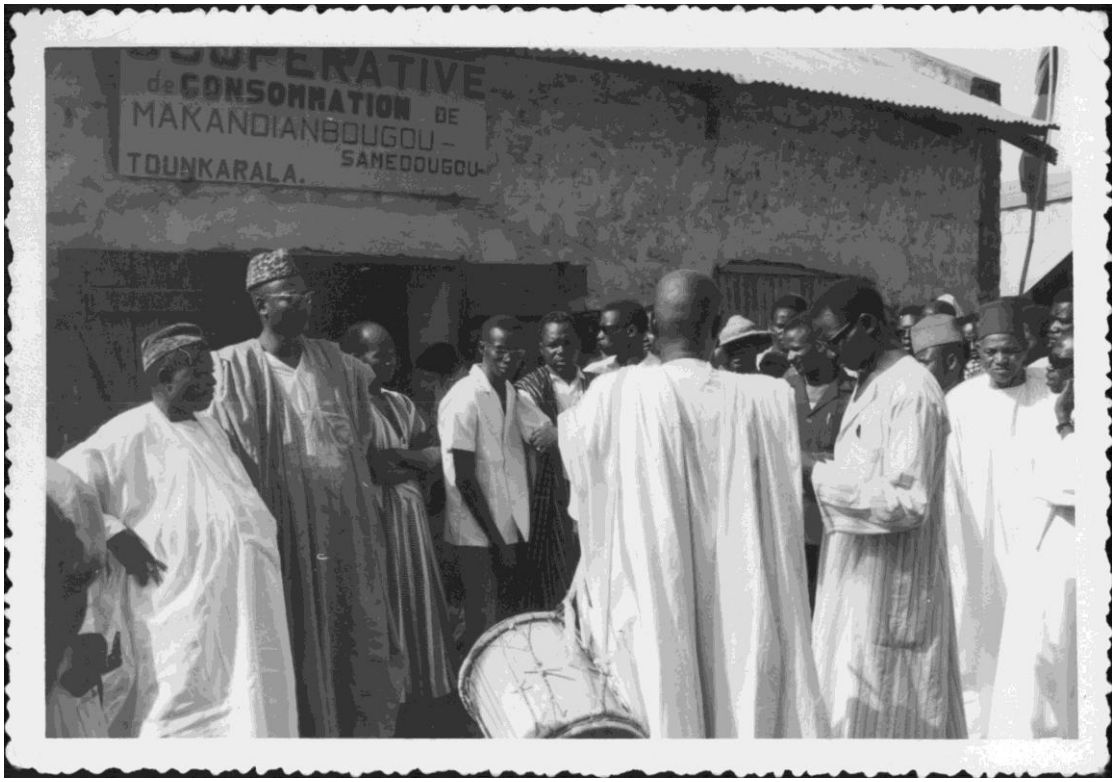

Figure 2. Simbon Keita at the opening of the Makandiambougou consumers' cooperative (1965). Simbon is on the left. Author's photograph.

In 1965, Simbon Keita was recorded in the official records as having four wives and a total household of twenty-seven people, twelve male and fifteen female. His birth date was given as 1900. His four wives were Marie Souko, Fily Damba (also known as Fily Taliba, still alive in 2011), Diouga Damba and Mbamakan Tounkara. Many of his children, especially his daughters were already married.

The final act

The so-called Active Revolution from 1966 to 1968 was a turbulent period in Mali, as a factional struggle with ideological overtones played itself out in Bamako. On the whole the ideological debates in Bamako did not have much effect in Kita (Hopkins 1969a). The Active Revolution had more impact. There was first of all a radicalization of politics known as the "Active Revolution"; one effect in Kita was an instruction to sideline all the older men from political positions as they were regarded as too conservative. On 22 August 1966 the National Political Bureau dissolved itself, followed by the local political bureaux and the National Assembly. As a member of the BPL Simbon was affected by this as perhaps also by the elimination of older men in general. Then the RDA regime was overthrown by the military in November 1968 (Sanankoua 1990, Camara 2003).

Until 1979 when a new single party was instituted there were no elected representatives at all. The man the government appointed as mayor was a respected retired interpreter from the colonial period who had not been active in politics during the 1960s; he was older than Simbon. Of course people still needed favors and still appealed to others to help, so the then current slogan of "no more politics" should be considered in that light. But it seems that the leaders of the previous period withdrew. Simbon was absent when I visited Kita and I suspect he had relocated to Bamako.

Dispute resolution

Under the military dictatorship of Moussa Traoré, in 1985, a dispute over the position of *jelikuntigi* (honorary chief of the griots in Kita; it seems to involve mostly 'bragging rights') came to a head (see Hoffman 2000 for a masterful account). This traditional position was not a recognized part of the modern political system. Kita is known for the number and variety of its *jelilu* (Hopkins 1997), and the senior *jeli* is the symbolic head of this population with the right to appear in certain ceremonies. He may also collect and distribute the "gift" to the *jelilu*. As with the canton chief, the senior *jeli* is qualified as the oldest male of the oldest surviving generation, but this succinct designation allows for argument about who is really older, and how the generations in different lineages correspond. After the death of the previous holder, there were two claimants, one a Diabaté and the other a Tounkara. The struggle between them was lengthy and vicious, and eventually they appealed to Simbon, as the former canton chief, to help resolve the issue. He announced that he had accepted this role because the hostility between the two families was so severe that marriages and households were being disrupted. Simbon opted for the Diabaté candidate, although he certainly had relations with both families.

In an effort to publicize a consensus, a major celebration was organized around the installation of the Diabaté candidate in April 1985. *Jeli* from elsewhere in Mali and from Guinea were invited in effect to endorse this choice. The ceremony began with the formal procession of the out-of-town *jelilu* from the train station to Simbon's house where an elaborate greeting took place. Simbon was the designated *jatigi* (host) of the affair, both in particular for the moment and also in the sense that he was the patron of the *jeli* of Kita. The role of *jatigi* could not be held by another *jeli*, but only by a *horon*. At the end of the

celebration – a celebration with intricate negotiations among the competing families, so there was considerable tension – there was a final meeting between Simbon and the different *jeli* leaders, in which the different positions were reiterated and then a formal agreement and truce were reached.

This was in a way Simbon's farewell to politics: he died six months later, in October 1985 (Hoffman 2000:126). The last public act of Simbon highlighted his skills as a mediator in a quarrel that typified the historic social structure.

Individual and structure

This paper presents the life of Simbon Keita in the context of social and institutional changes in his home environment. While the focus on the individual cannot supplant the concern with the institutional, it can shed light on their intersections. Here we see how a single individual navigated within different social contexts, from a colonial school to modern administration and party politics, and then back again to involvement in a dispute articulated in the language of Maninka tradition. Simbon took key initiatives at certain junctures in his life, and so contributed to the persistence of his society within a framework of change. I have presented Simbon's life both from his own point of view, as expressed in interviews in the early days of Malian independence, and from the point of view of others.[15]

Simbon's success was based on his skill in handing interpersonal relations, particularly in the political structure of Kita that mingled factionalism and patron-client relations. Thus he was often called on to adjudicate disputes, bringing opposing parties to agreement short of breakdown. He was adept at dealing with the outside forces, first the colonial French and then the Malian government of Modibo Keita. He maintained a reputation for probity. Probably as much as anything Simbon's command of language gave him a prime role in the changes experienced by Kita society. His eloquence gave him a role in public discussions. This made him an essential figure in public meetings and official delegations. His command of language revealed both a familiarity with the past and its evocative vocabulary and an insight into contemporary changes with their new requirements.

This paper also strongly reflects the changes in the economic and political structure of Malian history during the 20th century. The changes in life opportunities for individuals during this long period are central to any comprehension of historical development. But at the same time there is continuity in terms of tactics and strategies. Simbon's key ability was his skill at operating on many different registers during this life, both local and national, both economic and political, both formal and informal political. He accumulated these skills throughout his lifetime as he reinforced his reputation for honesty and conciliation.

Simbon also retained a stance as an educator all his life. For that reason it is appropriate that he was memorialized some years after his death when his mature children, some of them also teachers, started a school in his name in greater Bamako.

Figure 3. The school founded by his descendents in honor of Simbon Keita, Bamako (2011). In the foreground is a group of family members and teachers. Author's photograph.

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Figures

1. Map of Kita canton and the Kitakourou around 1950. From Paul Jaeger, "Légendes et coutumes au pays de Kita", in *Notes Africaines* #52, pp. 103-106 (1951).

2. Simbon Keita at the opening of the Makandiambougou consumers' cooperative (1965). Simbon is on the left. Author's photograph.

3. The school founded by his descendents in honor of Simbon Keita, Bamako (2011). In the foreground is a group of family members and teachers. Author's photograph.

Endnotes

1. According to an informant, Simbon was circumcised in 1914, as part of the *nonkonsi* age grade, so-called because of raids on French caravans in the early days of World War I.
2. In 1966 I contacted two former French colonial administrators who had served in Kita: Paul Delmond who had been the Deputy Commandant de Cercle in 1932-1935, and Paul Barlet, Commandant de Cercle in 1942-1944. Both graciously and extensively responded, and some of their information is included here. Both knew Simbon, although Barlet worked with him more closely.

3. Supposedly his lineage of Keita was a relatively recent arrival compared to the founders (Hopkins 1979).

4. "Mahadigué, lui, était un pauvre homme, âgé, inculte, sans consistence et sans autorité, surtout à Kita où il était inconnu, et qui n'aurait jamais dû être choisi comme chef." (Delmond, letter, 11 October 1966).
5. For additional details on this history, see Hopkins 1972:24-44, where Simbon appears under the name of "Fatogoma."
6. In fact, the creation of new villages was probably a process in several stages, but impossible to reconstruct in detail.
7. "J'ai bien connu Mamadou, garçon aimable et sympathique, qui s'efforçait de plaire à l'Administration, mais qui était loin d'avoir les qualités de son père." (Delmond, letter, 11 October 1966).
8. Barlet wrote (letter, 27 July 1966): "Je l'ai connu au début de la guerre où nous nous trouvions dans le même régiment." Mann, in his study of African soldiers in the French army, refers to a Lieutenant Fadiala Keita who on leaving the French army in 1928, asked to be appointed to an administrative position in Bamako (Mann 2006:91). This could be the same person, but confirmation is lacking.
9. Barlet (letter, 16 January 1967) sums up the position of the veterans: "Moins intimidés que le commun des villageois par l'Européen, baragouinant le français, disposant d'une pension, exemptés de l'indigénat, ils servaient volontiers d'intermédiaires entre la population et l'administration ou le commerce. Ils tendaient à surclasser les chefs coutumiers." But he then goes on to note that this influence was still in the traditional sector. Meanwhile, "Le fonctionnaire africain, le commerçant, l'évolué en général ont un niveau culturel supérieur. Leurs revenues, leur standing sont plus élevés. Et surtout, ils se sont dès les débuts de la vie politique plus vite dégagé de tout complexe de loyalisme à l'égard de la France."
10. On artisanal gold mining in this part of West Africa, see Balandier, 1957:67-78.

11. On this pattern see Delmond (2001:131-142), "La tournée de recensement", reflecting in part his experience in Kita during the 1930s.

12. Snyder (1965) contains many passages reflecting interviews that Snyder held with Mamby Sidibé in the 1960s, reviewing his career. Jézéquel (2006) adds some additional comments. More scholarly than the others, between 1927 and 1959 Sidibé published 25 pieces in French publications on Malian history, society, and culture.
13. Keita, Diallo, and Sidibé were all former teachers.

14. Tiemoko Kouyaté was the personal griot of Simbon (Hopkins 1997:50). The chief Kouyaté family in Kita was considered not to be eligible for the post of chief in order to retain a certain neutrality. On the other hand, Simbon was on bad terms with one of Kita's best-known griots, Kelemanson Diabaté.

15. To some extent Simbon's life can be contrasted with that of his contemporary Nambala Keita of Neréna (Jansen 2001), though Nambala's life was less "modern" than Simbon's. Among the common features is that both presented themselves as candidates to be canton chief at a time when the French were trying to attribute the position on the basis of an election by village chiefs rather than simply by genealogy and seniority. Both had to face dynastic and other rivalry. Both had sometimes contentious relations with their "griots." It is also striking how many of the tactics attributed to Simbon echo those in the story of Wangrin as recounted by Amadou Hampaté Bâ (Bâ 1999).