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### Sabbatical Report – Winter 2008

My request for sabbatical was based on my desire to enrich my understanding of African literature through seeing the landscape in which it originates. My focus was to be Mali, whose late 13<sup>th</sup> century national epic poem celebrates the founding of the Mali empire and its hero, King Son Jara, also called Sundiata Keita. I teach the poem in World Literature, along with fables and stories from West Africa, many of which include the Niger River and its animals and are set in village life and family compounds. I also wanted to do the DL Academy, so I could put World Literature into DL format. I have achieved the first goal fully, the second substantially but not completely.

I will begin with Mali.

The empire of Mali once included vast regions of Africa. Its city of Timbuktu, founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and closed to Westerners until the 1800s, attracted Islamic scholars in huge numbers to what is still a functioning but now a small university and a library with an astonishing collection of 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts. These are kept in tables under glass and are guarded by an a thin, parched looking and tall old man, garbed in white, whose eye sight has begun to fail him so that he bends down to the glass, one eye half closed to scrutinize what he is looking at.

Once a powerful empire trading in gold, Mali is today one of the poorest countries in the world. Much to my surprise it is essentially a medieval and largely pastoral society of Manding, Bamako, Fulani, Songhai, Tuareg tribes. Except for a few cities such as the

capital Bamako, the historical and former French colonial city of Segou, the vibrant port and trading town of Mopti situated at the confluence of the Niger and Bani Rivers – to where Tuareg ship massive tablets of Sahara salt to be sold in the salt market- the population lives in small villages; there is no industry. I never saw a factory along any stretch of the Niger we travelled. These villages are formed of several family compounds, each compound with two granaries, the smaller the woman's granary, the larger the man's. These primarily store millet. The Mali diet of millet is augmented with a bit of onions and some peanuts, an occasional bit of stringy chicken. (I ordered a chicken breast in Bamako, near the museum, and received what I thought was a chicken wing but which was actually a chicken breast). All structures in the villages are built of mud and in terms of color form continuity with the yellow or rust color of the Sahelian landscape in which the colorful clothing of men and women stand out eye catching. These compound structures as well as the famous Grand Mosque in Djenne, the largest mud-brick building in the world, and the mosque in Timbuktu partially "melt" in the rainy season but wooden pegs built into them that stick out like the spines of cacti, allow Malinese to climb up the structures to add more mud in repairing them. (The mosque at Djenne is considerably larger than the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City.) The wood that is available is primarily used for cooking, and donkeys, the Malinese mode of transportation and hauling, strain against the tottering loads of wood placed on their backs. A bit of wood, namely ebony, which is not all black but a mixture of black and white wood, is carved into hippos, combs, masques.

While Mali is largely a Muslim country unlike Nigeria where Christianity has found a larger foothold as told in Chinua Achebe's famous novel *Things Fall Apart*, a few churches are seen. But Islam here is distinctly African. For instance, in the heat, the high temperatures of over 100 to 120 even 140 degrees, women do not cover themselves with chadors but in villages will be bare breasted as they wash themselves and clothes in the river. I only saw one woman wearing a chador in Bamako. In fact, it gets so hot that trees will turn their leaves to a vertical position to preserve moisture.

Pockets of the population, chiefly among them the Dogons, are animists and on the way to Timbuktu, my group and I stopped to hike in Dogon country, a remote and mountainous region where, like in the Dordogne Valley of France, mud huts are built right against the rock or perched along the steep slopes of the Bandiagar Escarpment, and where the dead are pulled up on ropes into high caves for their final resting.

The hike through Dogon country and its villages included walking through elaborately designed villages where not all areas can be passed by all people at all times. We walked past the isolation huts of menstruating women, past thickly thatched elders' houses also called palaver huts, where the men come to talk while the women work, past the intricately carved doors and collections of fetishes pinned on the compound walls to protect the inhabitants. Masked dancers and dancers on stilts still perform ritual dances, some of which they will show for a fee to the few tourist groups, largely French and German, which travel through there. Here the prominence of the hare became clear to me. Unlike in Western tales, the African hare is celebrated as smart for it runs not in a straight line and usually outruns the hunters. Braer Rabbit originates in the African slaves' tales they recounted in captivity in the US. The Baobab tree, an immensely large tree, similar to the thick old growth Redwoods but not as tall and with a wider canopy, provides the people with food, the fruits and even the leaves at times, wood, bark, shade and even musical instruments. Its fruit, the size and shape of a grenade, is prized for its sweet flesh, and is also used as a rattle or a musical instrument, the seeds clacking inside the shell when the dried fruit is shaken.

Little traffic moves on the one road that leads from Bamako to the fabled city of Timbuktu, and the arrival of a group of tourists in one of the villages along the way brings out troops of children and adults alike. Frequently, the older children, some only four, carry baby sisters or brothers on their backs. There are no toys for these children. They play with what is in their environment -- sticks, birds, insects. The eyes of the

children often weep and the corners are packed with accumulated discharge, flies buzzing around the affected areas. Pink eye, a result of lack of water to keep clean and piercing sandy winds, is a national illness and when I left, I left the pink eye medication I had gotten in France on my way to Mali with the tour guide.

Travel is either on foot, by donkey, or the rare rusty van. On market day in Segou, an empty area near the market and close to the Niger was packed not with cars but donkeys and carts. These carry everything--people, cassava gourds, dried fish and particular piles of wood as they wobble along under these precarious mile-high loads. Wood is the fuel for cooking and is diligently collected. One almost never finds in the landscape a branch lying on the ground.

No industry exists, as one might expect it, along the banks of the Niger, which winds through the vast landscape, linking Timbuktu with Bamako. Only small villages, mostly fishing villages, rim the wide which, during the dry season is also shallow. Herds of bony cattle come to drink and villagers, carrying calabashes on a pole across their backs, walk down to the river to scoop up water for the small fields of onions or green beans they tend. Pinasses, narrow long dugout canoes, some with tattered or quilted sails, some with sails of plastic bags, move down or up the river, carrying barrels of cooking oil, fishermen, even tourists. The river is the heart of this landlocked country and everything happens there – the markets, the trading, the washing of one's dishes, one's one's clothes, one's body. In Segou, a group of soldiers practiced building pontoon bridges to quickly transport astonishingly smartly dressed soldiers in dark blue uniforms of crisp shirts and shorts across the water. They were assisted by a German military officer and no photographing was allowed. In these countries you do not mess with what is prohibited. Hippos still live in sections of the river but the notorious crocodile, subject of African stories such as Mother Crocodile are gone, killed by hunters. But a restaurant run by a Frenchman, the only restaurant in Segou, kept two enormous crocodiles in a much too small water bath, boarded up with heavy metal wire. These

animals could barely turn around but certainly where there is so much poverty and illness --- I saw a man stricken by Polio walk like an animal on his hands and one leg, with the second leg high up in the air, the hands stuck into flip flops to provide some protection --- the plight of animals is not of much concern.

The road to Timbuktu, unpaved and rippled like a washboard, does not parallel the river. Instead it runs through the dry landscape (dry when I was there in February and March) until it meets the Niger close to Timbuktu. Here the people are largely Fulani and Tuareg. Here Tuareg, in billowing indigo dyes or spanking white cotton robes (how do they keep them so white?) and matching turbans, kneel on the sand of the river bank, facing Mecca, bowing deeply in unison for their daily prayers.

Timbuktu, founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century where there was once was an oasis with a source of water, lies at the edge of the Sahara but in actuality the advancing Sahara has infiltrated the city already and while continuous sweeping keeps the sand out of homes, it does not keep it out of the bread the Malinese bake in that region, a leftover food from the Colonial French. Sandy French bread, baked in the city's only oven, a mud oven, was on the menu in the mornings. There are a few hotels and restaurants in the city. In recent years, Timbuktu has been the place where those attending the Festival of the Desert, a world music festival, stay. Most tourists mail post cards from Timbuktu to friends and relatives for the postal stamp that attests to their having been in Timbuktu.

I am not surprised that a world music festival, the Festival of the Desert, is held in Mali near Timbuktu. In fact, the Malinese have a long tradition of music sung by griots (storytellers) and groups of singers. Mali today is a center of world music and our tour guide took me through impossibly winding streets to a hole in the wall in Bamako, so I could buy some CDs that were stacked in tight columns everywhere and up the ceiling. The music generally is gentle but recently has begun to incorporate hip hop rhythms and political content although the Republic of Mali is not a repressive society. I talked to

some of the young people, thinking that maybe they were depressed, but like all young people around the world, they were hopeful, some planning careers in Africa and some futures in Europe.

The State Department warns Americans to be aware of Al Quaida in this area; the department's warning spoke of Al Quaida operatives 90 miles north of Timbuktu, but there is no reason why Al Quaida members would not travel to the nearest city, so being in Timbuktu is not without danger. Why would Al Quaida members not go into Timbuktu for supplies? I felt fear in Timbuktu and here was the only place where I was accosted and shouted at by a group of young men. There are abductions in that area. Some individuals are returned for ransom, others disappear.

I did go into the desert at the outskirts of Timbuktu, and when the sun began to set, I and another traveler turned back to return to Timbuktu. Although I could see the minaret of Timbuktu as I was passing the occasional small tented camps of Tuareg, their donkeys and camels under tarps, I was nearly unable to orient myself. The sand dunes one must climb and descend, make one lose perspective and so panic sets in, and I pushed harder and harder to get back. I tried to keep the direction of the minaret in mind but not always successfully. Obviously, I made it in the end. But I am left with a hearty fear of the Sahara.

On the return to Bamako from Timbuktu, a trip entirely in a dugout canoe, we stopped at the Island of the Women Potters and watched the making of pots and plates, which included the placement of the wet ceramic item into straw lined and straw covered sand holes. The brown pottery that emerges has the black streaks of Raku pottery which is also baked in sand pits.

We left the Island of the Women Potters in the late afternoon to early evening and here an image clarified the literature of Mali to me. About 30 women and their children had

congregated under a Baobab tree, the women in typical African women's fashion sitting on the ground with their legs stuck straight out in front of them, were chatting with each other, some cutting mangos, some holding children in their laps. A few men were standing nearby, one leaning on a tall stick in this communal gathering. This is where much, most, of African literature of this region is shaped and maintained.

It is oral literature, it is story telling in just such settings, and some of these stories and poems,, including the Epic of Son Jara Keita, have been recorded by Malinese educated in France. The written literature is the literature of the Diaspora, of Malinese, many of them women, living in French-speaking countries where the tradition is to sit at a desk in a room with a computer or paper, not on the sand under a Baobab tree. Stories are told by speakers and the community responds with affirmations such as "indeed", true, Amen, Mmm." These stories are familiar to the listeners and so are the characters and events. There must be an analogy between this format and the interaction between pastor and audience in American Black churches.

It is in these settings that the stories we read in the West in our text books in World Literature are kept alive and passed on like the Anglo-Saxon bards who kept alive the history of a people and its heroic kings and lords, traveling story tellers, or griots, retell these stories as they are passed through generations.

One important stop was a visit to the compound of the King of the Bamakos. Like all other structures it too was built of mud-brick, extraordinarily clean, horses in a stall and a giant turtle in an open mud cage. This turtle, yes, the turtle, was the food taster for the King, a dignified older man who graciously received us sitting down, who must have feared being poisoned or who continued a long-held tradition.

Arriving in Mali I left one world and entered another. Being there was the most profound travel experience I have had in my life, and I have traveled quite a bit. Has it informed how I teach World Literature? Absolutely. The landscape is burned into my mind and the photos I took underline my delivery of African literature and subsequent discussions. Not only have I shown my photos in class, but I have also included some in my class postings on Portal. Items I have brought back from Mali, including a chunk of Sahara salt, have passed from one student to another in the classroom to be held and inspected. The term after I returned, spring term, the students and I, in addition to the *Things Fall Apart*, anthologized in their text book, read *Too Far Gone: A Memoir of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, about his experiences as a child soldier in the Senegalese civil war. This book “magically” was available free of charge in the Multnomah County Library’s *Everybody Reads* series.

A most amazing situation occurred after my return when a young woman student knocked on my door. She is Aisha Keita, a descendent of Mali’s founding king, and she subsequently visited my classroom of students who knew her national epic. She came to talk about the life of the royal family which included that she and her family cannot be singers because “the griots sing for us.”

An added bonus to my Mali visit was that I traveled with a group of Germans, some retired educators, pharmacologists, musicians, and business people. Highly educated and widely traveled, these people were informed, funny, and tried to persuade me to vote for Barack Obama when I mentioned Hillary. It was a pleasure to update in some ways my German and I am still in contact with some of my fellow travelers. By the way, the pharmacologists and medical doctors had outfitted themselves with plenty of medication and, as we traveled along, ministered to injured or ill individuals.

I would go back to Africa in a heartbeat were it not for the dengue fever mosquito's bite, for which one cannot be immunized and of which there are plenty swarming about one's ankles in areas like Bamako.

To DL Delivery

My second goal to become involved in DL delivery has been mostly completed. I team-taught World Literature, English 109, on line with Jodie Marion. But while I have learned to navigate in the DL system, I have not yet created a shell for a class. That part of the Academy I still need to complete and I feel anxious about it. This term will have to be it. I have committed myself to teaching English 108, which includes the Epic of Son Jara, to DL students.