Chapter 1
Introduction

As if such monumental endeavor can be reduced to one day, Souleymane Kanté is credited with inventing the N'ko alphabet on April 14, 1949.[1] Its purpose was to provide a truly indigenous written form for Mande languages. Since its invention the alphabet has acquired a life of its own. A grassroots movement promoting literacy by using the N'ko alphabet has blossomed across West Africa from Gambia to Nigeria, wherever there are speakers of Mande languages, despite the fact that these countries use French and English as official languages. Islam is the dominant religion in much of the region. Although Mande-speaking Muslim religious leaders use Arabic and its script for studying and teaching, Mande speakers have acquired N'ko literacy in what seems an attempt to gain control over maternal language knowledge. Thus, the number of various people who are literate in N'ko has systematically increased from the colonial through independence periods without government intervention or without support from Islamic religious communities. Why is this phenomenon still occurring? N'ko is spreading at the grassroots level because it is practical and, more importantly, because it has allowed speakers of Mande languages to write and to cultivate and to take pride in their cultural heritage; informants from the city of Kankan and its vicinity, one small area of the vast region of N'ko's spread, emphasize that their motivation to learn the alphabet is pride in their culture.[2]

Souleymane Kanté's linguistic effort is the seed grown into a movement. The Mande are a group of people whose members use indigenous language and the heroic and historic past of Mande speakers as the basis for their unity. Their ancestors who lived within the mythical "Mande Heartland" (roughly a region the size of France) later spread in a diaspora across West Africa. Kanté's effort has further unified this disparate group of speakers of Mande languages by allowing them an easier access to their cultural heritage.

Like a good revolutionary, Souleymane Kanté deploys intellectual knowledge through the use of the technology of literacy. His work has led to a cultural revolution designed to dismantle foreign cultural domination and also to create a Mande Renaissance state. In one scene from Bob Fosse's movie *Lenny*, a character reveals that the satirist Lenny Bruce used "words … as weapons." This statement about Lenny Bruce could also be made about the human subject of this book, for the book will detail the odyssey of one man, Souleymane Kanté, whose lifelong task became using words to recapture and to preserve in an alphabet of his

own creation the totality of knowledge available to speakers of Mande languages. However, unlike Lenny Bruce whose words often assaulted those he addressed, the words Kanté generated in his N'ko alphabet were weapons of defense to be used by those whose culture was being assailed by European languages and cultures. The written word became Kanté's weapon, and universal literacy for the speakers of Mande languages his goal. This was indeed a quixotic goal, and like Sancho Panza at the end of *Don Quixote*, the followers of Kanté and the practitioners of N'ko have accepted the idea of righting European wrongs. Thus, the grassroots movement has kept on growing because of its affirmation of the heroic past.

One colonial paradigm which offers that sub-Saharan Africans were not and could not be considered literate because African languages had no indigenous writing systems is viewed as a fallacy today. The N'ko alphabet demonstrates one case where Africans developed their own educational practices and achieved literacy by themselves. N'ko offers evidence against colonial paradigms that have conceptualized the spread of literacy in Africa. Furthermore, while many historians have analyzed the deep cultural impact of western schooling and of Islamic education in Africa, this study differs from such works in that it offers the first full-scale examination of an indigenous writing system and, particularly, the flourishing of the associated educational institutions, thus documenting an African attempt to place cultural initiative back into African hands.

The present inquiry into N'ko also provides a detailed account of its creation and dissemination. It analyzes the sociopolitical context under which N'ko was created, investigates its inventor's motives, his commitment to literacy, and speculates about his rationale for the selection of texts to be transmitted in N'ko. The study also revisits the subject of indigenous literacy in West Africa and theorizes about the social uses of literacy and its transnational dissemination. Moreover, it describes a people's control over their own language and literacy. Finally, it explores the N'ko literacy movement as a seminal form of the Pan Africanism that has permeated the twentieth century.

Because of the contemporary nature of the N'ko literacy movement, however, one cannot assess its long term results or full implications. Much of the information presented herein concerning the initial development and spread of N'ko, specifically the literacy movement from 1949 to 1986, bears a further and more thorough investigation in the towns and cities identified in this study. Nevertheless, the information on the N'ko literacy campaign from 1986 to the present establishes the events surrounding its inception and the events that have occurred in the present. But a thorough assessment of the literacy movement and its resultant

literacy campaign will still require a future investigation. To this end, I conducted literacy surveys of Kankan in 1994 and 2000 in order to build a statistical base for further study.

With regard to terminology, this study uses *Mande speaker* to serve as an umbrella term embracing all members of the community of speakers of Mande languages. Furthermore, the term *Maninka* denotes the local language of Haute-Guinée, the area in which the N'ko alphabet originated and from which it was disseminated.

Issues surrounding decolonization

African scholars have struggled with issues of political, economic, and cultural decolonization since African independence. While independence should signal the deconstruction of colonial domination, it has been really impossible for African nations to achieve total deconstruction of colonial influence and control. Hence, the notion of independent African nations reinventing themselves has been an elusive one. After 40 years of independence, decolonization is still a major issue of concern for many African intellectuals.

While in the political sphere African nations have gained their independence, the conceptualization of the nation state into which they were framed was a European construct and not an African one. In order to be granted separation from the colonizing country, African nations had to acquiesce to certain restrictions. First, they had to accept the formal boundaries set by the European countries at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. These boundaries arbitrarily divided ethnic groups such as the community of Vai speakers who were divided between Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Berlin Conference also created pluralistic societies by forcing rival ethnic groups to live within the confines of one nation state such as did happen in modern day Nigeria which houses at least 250 ethnic groups—the 3 major ones being the Hausa speakers of northern Nigeria, the Yoruba speakers of western Nigeria, and the Igbo speakers of eastern Nigeria. European domination did not allow Africans to group themselves together as they saw fit, but instead forced them to accept the western model of a nation state. Unfortunately, the leaders of the newly independent African governments were often neither educated or barely trained in running nation states nor did they have any lengthy period of experience in decision making while operating their governments. Consequently, since independence African states have had governmental systems that often do not seem to reflect indigenous ideas about governance; therefore, these governmental systems have lacked stability. Ghana, for example, had less than 10 years to learn the lessons of governance while Zaire (now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo) had fewer than 6 months.

In the economic sector African political independence did not change the economy. Under colonial tutelage African nations provided raw materials and mineral wealth to the West. Colonizing nations developed their charges economically for their own economic benefit by encouraging all of their colonies to compete among themselves for sales of the same products. African nations have never recovered from what has been called their underdevelopment. Today, for example, Kenyans who produce coffee for the global market are competing with coffee producers worldwide for sales. Unfortunately, overproduction by Third World producers in competition with one another drives the price down for growers of this commodity. Underdevelopment has created African nations who only produce raw materials and supply mineral wealth for industrialized nations, and thus they remain poor because of their inability to break into the global economy at the technological or industrial level. But even if African nations were to gain today the necessary technology to become industrialized, they still could not compete in price of the items produced with the industrialized nations.

Within the cultural sphere, political independence has not given African nations an ability to return to their African languages as a method for socialization of the young or for religion; so African nations still accept European languages and their writing systems as their official means of communication. Furthermore, they still use the mode of the European school system and its curriculum in the socialization of the younger generations. This in turn has caused a brain drain of people who have become proficient in western technology. However, perhaps the cultural sphere may be the one in which greater progress can be made. As a result, the current study will also focus on the language and literacy occurring in an indigenous language writing system which is being transmitted through a grassroots movement that uses an indigenous methodology for education. While this phenomenon is not in itself a decolonization process, it does represent an initial step by one group in the process of defining Africa culturally in African terms.

The sources

The literature of the N'ko literacy movement is limited. David Dalby recorded evidence of the alphabet's existence in 1969, and he offered a visual representation of what he calls the "Manding" alphabet.[3] (See Chart 2 .) Dalby also identified its author as Souleymane Kanté and situated its use in Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. Although Dalby did interview a Malian who was literate in N'ko, he was unable to meet with Kanté or others who may have had information pertaining to the invention and

Chart 1. The N'ko alphabet and numerals. Source: Communication by SIM missionaries. The organization retained the acronym, that originally meant Sudan Inland Missions, after its scope extended to other areas of Africa.

Chart 2. The N'ko alphabet, tabular format. Source: David Dalby, "Further Indigenous Scripts of West Africa: Manding, Wolof, and Fula Alphabets and Yoruba 'Holy' Writing," *African Language Studies*, 10, 1969, p. 164.

dissemination of the alphabet because at that time the Sékou Touré administration had restricted foreign scholars' access to Guinea.

While Kanté invented the N'ko alphabet during the period of colonial domination, I have been unable to find any mention of the alphabet in either official or unofficial administrative reports. Documents from Sékou Touré's First Republic have not been catalogued and were also unavailable for scrutiny. A 1980s United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report on Guinea's maternal language learning project does discuss the alphabet, however.[4] While Christian missionaries in post-colonial Guinea had translated the New Testament into the Maninka language using the Roman alphabet, I have learned that they are now writing their translations in the Maninka language written in the N'ko alphabet because of the results of my 1994 literacy survey of Kankan.[5] (See Appendix F.)

Since I have been unable to document the existence of the alphabet in the more conventional historical manner of using written primary sources, it has been necessary to rely heavily upon African informants for the information concerning the alphabet's origin and its dissemination. This study, therefore, uses the oral histories of Maninka speakers residing in Kankan. I interviewed the family of Souleymane Kanté and the supporters of N'ko. (See Appendix B.) However, 50 percent of the interviewees were non-supporters of the alphabet; others had not even heard of the alphabet.

Specific information concerning the alphabet itself, however, mostly came from supporters, teachers, or students involved with the N'ko literacy movement. I observed their dedication to promoting literacy in the N'ko alphabet, and I witnessed several individuals investing their meager financial resources in the promotion and teaching of the alphabet. At times, I was amazed by their commitment to learning: teachers and students were striving toward literacy after a hard day's work or after school under very difficult conditions. People connected to N'ko were enthusiastic about the alphabet because (as they often expressed) N'ko literacy provided an opportunity to acquire and use knowledge. Often they showed their enthusiasm by always carrying books published in N'ko, and they repeatedly demonstrated its value by sharing the knowledge contained therein with those around them. Many practitioners of N'ko did belong to the organization that officially promotes the alphabet, *L'Association pour l'Impulsion et la Coordination des Recherches sur l'Alphabet N'ko* (ICRA–N'KO). Nevertheless, proponents of the alphabet were not the only ones who exuded enthusiasm for N'ko. Community members with whom I spoke also expressed admiration for its inventor and for the alphabet itself and its promotion.

Unaware of David Dalby's observations about N'ko, many members of ICRA–N'KO were pleased that I had an interest in the alphabet. I am thankful that they have embraced my work as a vehicle which disseminates the biography of Souleymane Kanté, his invention of N'ko, and N'ko's characteristics as a grassroots, transnational, literacy movement. It did seem to them that my interest in the alphabet confers upon it value in the eyes of the local community. As an outsider to African culture, I have struggled in this study to find a voice with which to tell the history of the Maninka speakers and the writers and teachers of the N'ko alphabet who are currently engaged in a cultural revolution. They are the ones, however, disseminating the knowledge of Kanté's creation and his alphabet and documents, and this is the grassroots literacy campaign which has spread across West Africa. Thus, I will try to manifest in my writing their enthusiasm about N'ko. Becoming literate in N'ko is contagious. In Kankan those who were literate in N'ko as well as those who were not supported my research of the data, one reason being that they considered the events to be important to their local history. Almost all of those I contacted offered hospitality, shared their stories, and opened their personal archives.

Oral history

Writing history from oral sources necessitates discerning the accuracy of the information gathered because lacking written documentation, one cannot check data. When doing oral history, data can only be checked by counterpointing the memories of informants. One particular problem is that some of the informants have at times discussed the data with one another and thus have formulated a collective memory. While some informants may recall facts with precision, often their recollections are limited because these are confined to their personal interpretation of the events. However, reminiscences are valuable because they tell us about the context of the alphabet's invention and dissemination and also the people's understanding of it. Furthermore, with regard to the intention of the alphabet's inventor, personal reminiscences do convey what informants remember Souleymane Kanté told them and also what others have said. For this study, data that have been corroborated by two or more informants provide the substantive documentation for the research.

Another difficulty with relying on oral narratives has to do with the process of remembering. Many of Kanté's contemporaries who were interviewed suffered from the vagaries of old age which at times seemed to cloud memories of the past. This study also faces the problems created by translations because elderly informants have mostly related their stories in the Maninka language whose words have a specific cultural context.

Moreover, reminiscences in this study were translated and transcribed into French by college-age assistants who may not have understood the full cultural context of the informant's language. The problem is that while the informant offers his own contemporary knowledge of the past, the modern language interpreter may affect to a certain degree the data collected. Despite these obvious problems of doing oral history, Souleymane Kanté and his development of the N'ko alphabet is quite valuable; it fills a vacuum with information that would otherwise be lost. Kanté's intellectual struggle is a historical reconstruction authenticated by people who knew him well. Souleymane Kanté died of diabetes in 1987.
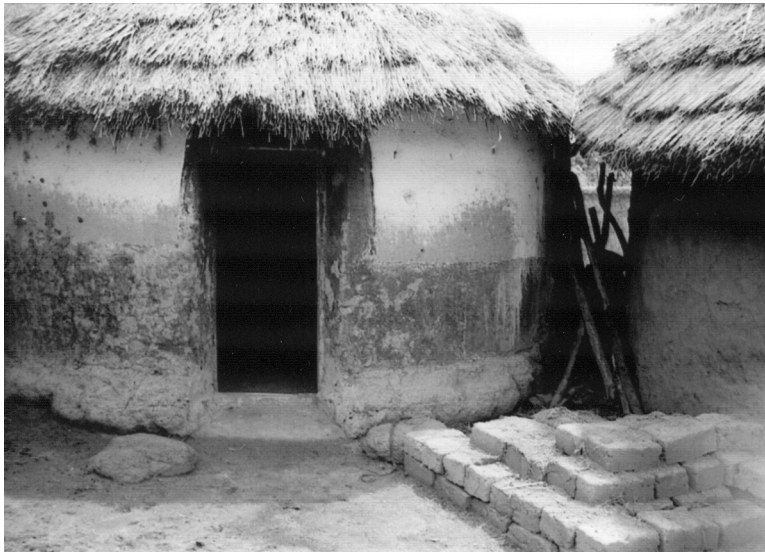
Souleymane Kanté's burial site is his natal home, Soumankoyin-Kölönin, Haute-Guinèe. Photographer, Dianne White Oyler.

Literacy as an extension of language

It has been said that language is the core component of cultural identity; it forms the culture as well as the culture informs it. Literacy, the written form of language, records and sets its cultural identity. Kanté created N'ko in order to record and set a valuable corpus of knowledge for speakers of Mande languages. However, according to informants, his goal seems to have been greater because he wanted the speakers of Mande languages to achieve literacy in N'ko, his own writing system.

In 1957 UNESCO described literacy as an indistinct continuum of abilities.[6] Jeanne Chall has established three stages of literacy which di-

vide the continuum according to the reader's skills. At stage one (the least literate) the reader learns initial decoding; at stage two the reader gains fluency by reading texts which are already familiar; at stage three the reader reads to learn new ideas.[7] Most researchers use the term *literacy* to mean functional literacy which occurs when people read for ideas that they in turn apply to new contexts. UNESCO defines persons as being literate if they can read and write and understand a short simple statement related to everyday life.[8] Others, however, may see *literacy* as the ability to use the written word as a means of communication. It has been pointed out that perhaps *literacy* is an altogether inappropriate term that should be replaced with *alphabetism*.[9] This term is already widely used in French-speaking countries where literacy is discussed in terms of *alphabétisation*.

The concept of literacy is also an ever-changing social tool which has evolved over time. The stated goal of most governments today is to have 100 percent functional literacy for their citizens. Before the sixteenth century in Europe, literacy was limited to an educated elite, and the clergy controlled it through the Latin language. An ampler "culture of the book" emerged in Europe as a direct result of the Protestant Reformation, and the invention of the moveable type printing press gave rise to a print industry which provided vernacular Christian texts. During this period literacy was demonstrated by reading the Bible and the works of the Protestant reformers from texts which in earlier periods had been memorized. Lawrence Stone observes that "God's people were to be a literate people taking in God's Word from the Printed page."[10] Jeanne Chall points out that reading the Bible and other religious texts which had previously been committed to memory occurs at the second stage of literacy.[11] Today, as did Christians of the sixteenth century, many non-Arabic speakers in Islamic societies demonstrate stage two literacy by reading memorized texts such as the Quran.

Inherent to the character of literacy is the process of communication within and among communities, because literacy does not consist solely of controlling the mechanics of reading and writing. Rather, it also encompasses the cultural context of what is read or what is being written—that is, the pool of knowledge which a community shares.[12,13] A shared general knowledge enables the literate community to deal with new ideas, events, and challenges.[14] In addition, the community's institutions also define the social context of literacy.[15] In particular these communities include the schools which are responsible for the acculturation of youth to their social and political responsibilities.[16] It is obvious that literacy helps people to exert better control over their lives and to rationalize

decision making; literacy gives people an equal power in transforming social relations.[17]

Whereas spoken language represents the acquisition of knowledge and skills from the direct communication and interaction of personal experience, literacy represents a consumption of information which is indirect and is mediated through written language. In both cases, known knowledge and unknown knowledge are brought together. Although literacy is only intended to supplement the personal interactions of experience, the reading of books has vicariously replaced field experience in education.[18] Consequently, achieving literacy has become a necessity of modern life.[19] The ability to read and write is essential for successful employment, upward social mobility, achievement of personal goals, and political and social stability.

One can also observe that the function of literacy in society is based upon the varieties of reading and writing activities available to ordinary people under ordinary circumstances.[20] Adults read and write at different levels for many types of social purposes. As a result, literacy may provide information about the practical problems of daily life, deliver information pertinent to social relations, distribute information about local and distant events, support attitudes or ideas, record pertinent information, serve as an aid to memory, or else become a substitute for oral messages. A "Literacy Event" is any occasion when any type of written information is central to comprehension, to interaction, and to interpretation of the text by a literate reader or a group of readers.[21]

Although at one point language discourses among interest groups may be negotiated from positions of equality, the variety of literate discourse allows for cultural manipulation and thus for a resulting cultural inequality. Particular forms of language and literacy may lose their autonomy so that some may move into positions of advantage and become dominant while others are lost except to lexicographers. In the case of Africa's colonial period, the dominant group consisted of members of an outside culture who imposed their specific form of language and literacy as a part of their political domination.[22] Thus, their dominant discourse, promoted by an emergent state bureaucracy, mediated the divergent discourses of cultural pluralism within the confines of the nation state. In that process the state develops an official (or state-sanctioned) elite culture that represents the goals of the state's ruling groups, and this is the dominant culture, which is the one also described in the public transcript. Nevertheless, juxtaposed to the dominant group's official transcript is the unofficial culture of the subordinate interest groups who are not accepted into the official culture.[23] The relationship between the

dominant and subordinate interest groups occurs within the social relations of class, gender, race and ethnicity, culture, and age.[24]

Social and cultural literacy, however, do not reflect only the interests of the dominant group because dominant group goals and values often evolve from the cultural struggle between the dominant and subordinate interest groups. However, it is the dominant group's intellectuals who assert a national culture based on a national language through the state-sponsored educational system; this is done based on the idea that a national culture and national language are needed for nation building.[25] Therefore, nations regularly provide compulsory education, and at the elementary level, they create a pool of loyal, literate citizens who can be drafted into the military or employed in the government's bureaucracy. Thus, literacy can be used to manipulate the existing relations among interest groups because in order to retain its controlling position, a dominant group may provide a subordinate groups with an inferior education so that the subordinate one is unprepared for the cultural contest; instead the subordinate group may accept implicit messages about the dominant group's superiority.[26,27]

For the subordinate interest groups, literacy also constitutes the "language of possibilities" because literacy offers the potential for bringing about change.[28] There is always a tension between literacy as an instrument of social control and literacy as a vehicle of liberation.[29] Students from subordinated cultures can employ selected knowledge contained in the dominant discourse to empower themselves and to restructure social relations. Moreover, literacy gives students access to the knowledge available beyond what the dominant interest group is willing to provide in its pre-packaged, pre-determined and pre-established discourse.[30] Literacy empowers subordinate groups whose culture has been marginalized by education, mass media, and economic production to reclaim their cultural identity.[31]

Literacy in the colonies

In the case of the colonies, governments representing foreign national cultures did establish administrative control over previously independent African cultures. Under the umbrella of colonialism, governments imposed their foreign national metropolitan culture on pluralistic communities. The colonial government became the dominant interest group, and it relegated diverse African ethnicities to the role of being subordinate interest groups. Their method was to use state-sponsored education to redesign a national culture in its own image and also to impose a European language. Colonizers have spent centuries trying to convince

Africans to choose a European language; popularly, they had considered African languages too "ugly" by western standards. One result is that many leaders of the independence period were influenced by linguistic assimilation and colonization.[32]

Colonial education reinforced the rights of Europeans to govern by insidiously limiting the numbers of students eligible for language and literacy and also by limiting the content of their education.[33] "Colonial schools introduced class, gender, and racial inequalities," which were later promulgated by Africans themselves as the educational structure inculcated Africans with beliefs that demeaned their language, culture, and history.[34,35] Because the school system became the key institution by which the colonial state controlled society, governments constantly changed the process of regulating class, race and ethnicity, gender, age, and locations.[36] The legacy of colonial education can be perceived as being a de-Africanization of African peoples.[37]

Believing in the supremacy of European culture, colonial governments spread literacy in order to inject European values into African cultural identities. Government controlled literacy instilled new assumptions about the value of the written word and thus created profound changes in cultural identity and the social basis of knowledge.[38] The process was so gradual and overtly non-threatening that indigenous cultures were not overwhelmed by cultural shock; instead they were debilitated. Colonial governments also made subordinate cultures eminently aware of the dominant culture's power.[39] Seen in this manner, literacy then becomes a part of the much wider process of domination. Its practice in the administration, bureaucracy, and religion consolidated the colonial government's authority over the subordinate groups. But at times the imposition of a foreign-based culture met with a resistance to becoming literate by many members of each subordinate group.[40] This act was often a refusal to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies valued by the dominant culture. The teaching of students in a European foreign language in primary school had the effect of being "a brutal rupture of his family life."[41] Particularly in Francophone Africa, as students advanced through the school system and to jobs in the civil service, French acculturation elevated them to the status of *evolué*, a term defined as a small but important group of Africans devoted to education and acculturation so that they could achieve citizenship and full political rights.[42] That type of acculturation, however, did not assure them assimilation; instead it lost them cultural continuity. Colonial schools deculturated Africans while acculturating them to a pre-defined colonial model. More often than not, the schools educated a labor force of low-level workers and managers whose job was the promotion and maintenance of the status quo.[43] It

has been observed by Judith Marshall that these educated Africans believed that they were "white" and superior to the "peasants."[44]

Social uses of literacy in Guinea's First Republic

As the successor state to the colonial government, Guinea's First Republic attempted to establish a national culture with French as its official language.[45] Often national leaders of newly independent African countries chose the European language because of Europe's international status and its attendant guarantees of upward mobility.[46] Thus, French became the language of power; it was the official language for education, administration, and cultural life of the First Republic.[47] The government's business and international diplomacy were conducted in French; the media and the economy also used the official language. The use of French was supported by bureaucrats and an elite class whose command of the language placed them in a position of power over those who did not have such a command.[48] Guinea's population was willing to use French rather than the individual maternal languages such as Maninka, Pular, or Susu because French fulfilled economic and social goals.[49] Through the state-sponsored educational system the government guided the general population into a planned social order. French literacy worked itself into the fragile unified consciousness that had brought all the ethnic groups together in order to defeat colonialism. French, the First Republic hoped, would mold a wholly educated Guinean citizenry who would support the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the country's newly created socialist economy; the citizens would acquire the modern practical skills of reading and writing so as to fulfill their place in the state.

However, the promotion of a national culture through an official language eventually became a failure in Guinea because of deep loyalties to maternal languages as the languages of instruction at the local and regional levels.[50] As a result, Sékou Touré instituted the "National Language Program" in 1968 whose focus was the promotion of maternal language education. In the Touré example, the mother tongue became the language of instruction for primary and elementary schools, and French became the language of instruction at the secondary and college levels. But Touré's policy fragmented the "national" cultural order because it also focused on a return to African roots. The problem was that instead of forging a single culture, the policy promoted the individuality of the subordinate cultures, thus creating a type of pluralistic mixture. Additionally, because the government was unable to provide universal elementary and secondary education to the entire population of Guinea, it created a gap between those who knew the local language and those who commanded the official language; only those who had mastered the

official language became part of the elite class, which had redesigned itself at the time of Guinea's independence. Nevertheless, the small French-speaking elite found itself being opposed by a general population who resented the fact that they were illiterate in the official language. Those who recognized the intrinsic value of education in the maternal language were outnumbered by those who saw the consequent imbalance of opportunities available to illiterates in the official language.[51] The resentment solidified, and at the founding of the Second Republic in 1984, Touré's "National Language Policy" was overturned.[52]

Under the Second and Third Republics of Lansana Conté, French remained Guinea's official language, and it became again the language of instruction. Guineans themselves reestablished French as the language of instruction perceiving it as an ethnic equalizer which, regardless of the level of a person's education, would allow one to become upwardly mobile. It would allow individuals seeking upward mobility to aspire to white collar jobs. Since the late 1980s, however, the country's economic problems have made it difficult for most Guineans who have graduated from a lycée or a university to find jobs.

The social liberation through N'ko literacy

On that mythical date when Souleymane Kanté invented the N'ko alphabet, some speakers of Mande languages were either literate in Arabic or in French. Those who controlled Quranic religious knowledge in Arabic mainly focused on the maintenance of an established religious order. Literacy for those who learned French centered on the creation of favorable political and social orders. One accepted idea is that Kanté designed his alphabet to reclaim knowledge from those special interest groups and to place knowledge in the hands of the general Mande-speaking population; this was a form of social liberation.

Literacy in N'ko as a means for social liberation would bring about an individual's improvement, thus allowing people greater power within their community. One social use of N'ko literacy became the standardization and distribution of local knowledge. Since 1949 when dissemination of the alphabet began, speakers of Mande languages have collected, recorded, and preserved local knowledge. Those who write N'ko have shared that knowledge with all others in the general Mande-speaking population. This is one way literacy has legitimized local knowledge. As a result, Mande languages have achieved the same status in recording knowledge as have French and Arabic.

Kanté's translations of religious, political, technological, and scientific materials into N'ko have made foreign knowledge more accessible to Mande speakers. At the same time, transcriptions have expanded the

understanding of that knowledge because of N'ko's grounding in the maternal language. Souleymane Kanté had advised Mande speakers to learn all three literacies, but, more emphatically, also to learn the written form of Mande in N'ko for a purer understanding of what they possessed imperfectly in non-maternal languages and literacies. It is believed that he reasoned that Mande speakers would more easily retain concepts and ideas they had learned in N'ko and also that they would become better Muslims because using N'ko would clarify the words of the prophet Mohammed; furthermore, they would have better access to modern technology and scientific information without having to depend upon a foreign language.

The literacy campaigns

The invention of the N'ko alphabet and the grassroots literacy movement that followed inspired a Maninka cultural revival in Guinea and a transnational one in West Africa. The grassroots movement portends the overcoming of an inertia spawned by colonial and neo-colonial subordination. Today many Maninka see themselves as stewards of culture whose use of the N'ko alphabet will draw together the Mande nation into a coherent whole. One can divide the dissemination of the alphabet into two phases: one was individual initiative alone (1949–1985) and the other was a literacy campaign driven by collective individual initiative (1986–present).

A *literacy campaign* can be defined as

a mass approach that seeks to make all adult men and women in a nation literate within a particular established frame of reference. Literacy is seen as a means to a comprehensive set of ends—economic, social-structural, and political. …a [literacy] campaign suggests urgency and combativeness; it is in the nature of an expectation; it is something of a crusade.[53]

To find a historic model of a literacy movement one must look to sixteenth-century Europe. But those literacy campaigns focused more so on the acquisition of reading and writing, instead of focusing on reading and writing as a means of social control. Thus, a tension exists between the use of literacy for achieving collective goals of social control and its use for achieving individual goals.[54] The mobilization of these early literacy campaigns have depended upon governmental or religious leadership for the dissemination of literacy.[55]

There are dynamics that make literacy in N'ko different from others. The goal of N'ko literacy is commensurate with the goals of other literacy campaigns in that literacy itself is not the ultimate goal, but instead

it is a part of the process in achieving a specified goal. One goal of N'ko literacy has been the formation of a national character. This was also a goal in the United States during the nineteenth century.[56] N'ko literacy differs from the typical historic model in that the alphabet is an indigenous African creation, and its mobilization focuses on individual liberation. Achieving literacy in N'ko is voluntary; it provides access to a wide variety of knowledge of interest to its readers. Although the N'ko literacy campaign is a child of the twentieth century, its decentralized nature mimics the pattern of a nineteenth-century literacy movement. Its change to a centralized effort in 1986 is an attempt to reduce the amount of time necessary to recruit converts to literacy in N'ko. However, unlike twentieth-century literacy movements whose campaigns are contained within the boundaries of a state, the N'ko literacy campaign extends across the borders of any one state because the speakers of Mande languages reside across West Africa. Literacy in N'ko, therefore, has also become a transnational identity movement.

Based on my data, the dissemination of N'ko literacy began as a local development which initially enriched cultural life for Guineans and later for speakers of Mande languages wherever they reside. If among academicians today it is fashionable to speak of cultural productions as forms of domination or of appropriation, it is necessary to speak also of the often unbridgeable distances which separate the African people of the post-colonial world. In spite of all the possible pitfalls, N'ko is becoming a powerful tool in the hands of local people in Guinea because it is helping them to define and interpret their cultural heritage at precisely a moment in time when marks of cultural authenticity are often questioned. Today N'ko is being taught as far away as Thailand, and the alphabet has been added to the curriculum at the Cairo University Institute of African Research and Studies.[57]

In summary, it is my objective in Chapter two to clarify the indigenous cultural context of the speakers of Mande languages in West Africa, giving specific attention to the area of Kankan, Guinea. Moreover, the chapter identifies the location of the speakers of Mande languages across West Africa and offers a transnational, cultural connection based on the relationship of their languages and their perception of a past— either heroic, historic, or both. Similarity in cultural practices will also be highlighted in order to define Mande culture. The chapter then discusses the construction and reconstruction of Mande cultural identity over time, thus illuminating the events, personalities, and intellectual groups who have forced change and defined identity. Chapter two concludes by showing how N'ko literacy is participating today in the shaping of Mande

identity, particularly in Guinea and generally in other parts of West Africa.

Chapter three describes the historical, political, and social background of the region in which the Kantés lived. It reconstructs the socio-political environment of colonial Kankan from the time of Amara Kanté, Souleymane's father, to the present generations.

Chapter four details the invention of N'ko. Based on the testimony of Kanté's family and friends, or else people contemporary to his period, this chapter reconstructs Kanté's response to perceptions of the alleged inferiority of African culture. It is in this chapter that informants discuss conversations they had with Kanté. Informants tell what they remember he said concerning his motivations for inventing N'ko and his recommendations for the dissemination of the alphabet. Chapter four also describes the texts Souleymane Kanté translated and transcribed into N'ko and addresses the value of N'ko literacy to the Mande-speaking community. Furthermore, it reconstructs the historical, political, and social context of independent Guinea at the time Kanté formally introduced the alphabet. Finally, it traces the dissemination of the alphabet as N'ko schools spread within Kankan.

Chapter five discusses Souleymane Kanté's contribution to Pan Africanism and establishes his historical position within the political and cultural perspectives of the movement. Kanté's cultural nationalism paralleled two larger Pan African movements found on both sides of the Atlantic basin; so intellectual affinities between Kanté and other important thinkers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o are offered. Furthermore, it establishes Kanté as the prime mover of a grassroots literacy movement which is spreading among speakers of Mande languages across West Africa, thus uncovering an era of Mande Enlightenment heretofore undocumented. Chapter six adds some general conclusions concerning Souleymane Kanté and his role in African intellectual history.

Notes

[1] According to informants, this date probably reflects the ending date of the complicated process by which the alphabet was created.

[2] The research area is the city of Kankan in the predominantly Mande-speaking, Muslim region of Haute-Guinée, Republic of Guinea. The informants from Kankan and the towns of the Baté in Haute-Guinée have expressed pride in their culture as the source of their motivation to learn the alphabet. This pride was identified by one informant as "cultural nationalism."

[3] Found in *African Language Studies*, 10, 1969:162–165.

[4] Germain Doualamou, *Langues Guinéennes et Education*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).

[5] I have a copy of each text.

[6] Daniel A. Wagner, *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 6.

[7] Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, Volume 47, Number 3, 1977, pp. 383–384.

[8] Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-century City*, (New York: Academic Press, 1979), p. 3.

[9] Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900," *Past and Present*, Number 43, February 1969, p. 98.

[10] Stone, p. 79.

[11] Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1977:383–384.

[12] Colin Lankshear with Moira Lawler, *Literacy, Schooling, and Revolution* (New York: The Falmer Press, 1987), p. 32.

[13] Laitin (p. 25) defines community as being created by the shared values of a culture that develop from a particular configuration of internal and external stimuli that lead to a common filtering of information.

[14] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1987) p. 11.

[15] Jay Robinson, "The Social Context of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, eds. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) p. 252; Winterowd states that the social basis for literacy is grounded in the social context. W. Ross Winterowd, *The Culture and Politics of Literacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 11.

[16] Hirsch, (p. 18) asserts that the acculturative responsibility of the school is primary and fundamental.

[17] Michael Apple, in the "Foreword" to *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution* Colin Lankshear with Moira Lawler, (New York: The Falmer Press, 1987) p. ix.

[18] Wlad Godzich, *The Culture of Literacy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 101.

[19] John F. Szwed, "The Ethnography of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 303.

[20] According to Hirsch (p. 3), the chief function of literacy is to make those who are literate the masters of the standard instrument of knowledge and communication.

[21] Shirley Brice Heath, "Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, Eugene R.

Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 350–356.

[22] Brian V. Street, "Literacy and Social Change: The Significance of social Context in the Development of Literacy Programs," in *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 55.

[23] Godzich, pp. 83–95.

[24] Lankshear, p. 21.

[25] Hirsch, p. 83.

[26] Apple, p. ix.

[27] Lankshear, p. 30.

[28] Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo., *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 54.

[29] Judith Marshall, *Literacy, Power, and Democracy in Mozambique*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 2 Freer and Maced (p. 38) explain that education reproduces the dominant ideology while simultaneously inculcating knowledge that negates that ideology.

[30] Freier and Macedo., p. 55.

[31] Freier and Macedo., p. 7

[32] Freier and Macedo., p. 111.

[33] Stone, p. 91.

[34] Freire and Macedo., p.143.

[35] Freire and Macedo., p. 143.

[36] Marshall, p. 17.

[37] Freire and Macedo., p. 142.

[38] Street, pp. 50–51.

[39] Street, p. 50.

[40] Laitin, p. 50.

[41] Laitin (p. 52) cites a study done by A. Colot in Dakar, Senegal.

[42] Defined by Patrick Manning in *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa 1880–1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 60.

[43] Graff, p. 28.

[44] Freire and Macedo, p. 143; Marshall (pp. 107–108) who observes that the choice of one Mozambican language would have privileged one ethnic group and marginalized the others. To avoid this, they chose the European language, Portuguese, as the official language.

[45] An official language is defined here as any language, even a foreign colonial language, that has been chosen by the government for formal use in government, education, or business while a national language is an indigenous language which has been similarly appointed by the national government for formal use. Julia R. Van Dyken, "The Role of Languages

of Minority Groups for Literacy and Education in Africa," *African Studies Review*, Volume 33, No. 3, 1990, pp. 404–41.

[46] Freire and Macedo., p. 117.

[47] Laitin, p. ix.

[48] Laitin, p. 79.

[49] Laitin, pp. 42–43 and 52.

[50] Van Dyken, p. 41. In 1953 UNESCO proclaimed the importance of the maternal language in education.

[51] Van Dyken, pp. 44–45.

[52] Laitin (p. 93) states that in 1984, the *Comité de Redressment National* made the "National Language Program" the scapegoat for the educational and economic failures of the First Republic. Thus, the military junta returned French as the national language and the language of instruction.

[53] H.S. Bhola defines the literacy campaign in Robert f. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds. *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), p. 3.

[54] Bhola, p. 7.

[55] Bhola, pp. 10–14.

[56] Bhola, pp. 6–7.

[57] The study of the N'ko alphabet figured prominently at the Conference on Language and Culture in Africa held October 27–28, 2001 at the Institute of African Research and Studies at Cairo University.