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Youssouf Tata Cissé and the Responsibility of Inheritance

A Personal Remembrance

There are people whose disappearance leaves behind more than absence.

They leave a responsibility.

Youssouf Tata Cissé was such a man.

I knew him as a scholar of extraordinary knowledge, as a man deeply committed to the history and cultural inheritance of the Mandé, as an exceptional communicator, and as someone whose intellectual generosity extended beyond books and conferences into conversation, counsel, and encouragement. I had the privilege of listening to him, discussing with him, receiving his advice, and working with him during the launch of the Convergence Africaine pour le Renouveau (CARE) at Kurukan Fuga.

When he passed away, I wrote that we would have to continue without him, strengthened by the immense inheritance he had left us. At the time, those words expressed both grief and gratitude. With the passage of years, however, I have come to understand them differently.

An inheritance is not simply something left behind.

To inherit is not merely to receive. It is to become responsible for what has been received.

That responsibility is perhaps the most appropriate way in which I can remember Youssouf Tata Cissé today.

A Man Who Listened

Much can be said about Youssouf Tata Cissé the historian, ethnologist, researcher, teacher, author, and specialist in African oral traditions. His published work constitutes an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of the Mandé and, more broadly, to the intellectual recovery of West African history. He devoted much of his professional life to discovering, studying, preserving, and transmitting knowledge carried through oral tradition.

But there is another way of understanding what he did.

He listened.

That may sound like a modest achievement beside the books, research, teaching, and scholarship associated with his name. It was not.

To listen seriously to an oral tradition is to accept that knowledge may exist outside the places in which modern scholarship has conventionally been trained to look for it. It may reside in memory. In language. In ritual. In genealogies. In stories transmitted across generations. In the knowledge of people who possess no university title and

may never have written a book, but who carry within themselves fragments of the historical consciousness of a society.

Cissé understood this.

His long engagement with traditionists, including the celebrated Wa Kamissoko, was therefore not simply an exercise in collecting stories. It belonged to a much larger intellectual undertaking: allowing knowledge preserved within African societies to enter serious historical inquiry without requiring that it first deny the form through which it had survived.

The collaboration with Wa Kamissoko that contributed to *La Grande geste du Mali* illustrates the significance of this undertaking. Through sustained inquiry into Mandé traditions, Cissé helped bring into documented form knowledge concerning political organization, historical actors, social structures, the formation of the Mali Empire, and the world from which its institutions emerged.

This required more than transcription.

It required listening with discipline.

It required comparison, questioning, interpretation, translation, and judgment.

And it required respect without intellectual surrender.

That distinction remains important today.

African historical recovery cannot mean accepting every inherited account uncritically merely because it is African. Oral tradition is no more exempt from interrogation than a written archive. Memory can preserve and illuminate; it can also compress events, combine periods, privilege particular perspectives, and change through transmission.

The serious scholar therefore has a double obligation: to respect the source and to interrogate it.

Cissé's work inhabited that difficult territory.

Restoring African Knowledge to Serious Inquiry

One of the great intellectual consequences of colonialism was not simply the political domination of African societies. It was the displacement of African societies from authority over the interpretation of their own historical experience.

Africa possessed history, but others frequently determined what counted as evidence of that history.

Africa possessed political experience, but the conceptual languages through which political thought was studied often came from elsewhere.

Africa possessed knowledge, but much of that knowledge remained outside the institutions through which modern knowledge acquired legitimacy.

The recovery of oral tradition therefore had consequences extending far beyond ethnology.

It raised a fundamental question:

Who possesses the authority to produce knowledge about Africa?

Cissé's life and scholarship belong within the long African effort to answer that question.

His contribution was not to argue that African historical traditions should be accepted because they were African. That would simply replace one intellectual prejudice with another. The greater contribution was to insist, through the seriousness of the work itself, that African inherited knowledge deserved investigation on its own evidentiary terms.

This is an important distinction.

Intellectual independence does not require immunity from criticism.

It requires equality before criticism.

African historical sources should neither be dismissed because they were transmitted orally nor protected from examination because they belong to African heritage.

They must be studied. They must be compared.

They must be debated. They must be preserved.

And where uncertainty remains, that uncertainty must be acknowledged.

This is how knowledge matures.

Kurukan Fuga and the Complexity of Inheritance

Nowhere is this responsibility clearer than in the traditions associated with the Mandé, the Manden Charter, and Kurukan Fuga.

These traditions have acquired enormous contemporary significance. They have become part of discussions concerning African political thought, human dignity, social organization, freedom, responsibility, governance, and the historical capacity of African societies to construct institutions responsive to their circumstances.

Cissé played an important role in bringing elements of this inheritance into modern scholarship.

His work on the hunters' traditions and his collaboration with Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvauroux in *La Charte du Mandé et autres traditions du Mali* helped make available traditions addressing the value of human life, responsibility toward others, freedom, opposition to enslavement and slave-raiding, work, family, and community. His later work on the Manden Charter continued that intellectual undertaking.

Yet one of the lessons we should draw from Cissé is that respect for inheritance should not eliminate complexity.

The traditions associated with the Manden Oath, the hunters' brotherhoods, Soundiata, and Kurukan Fuga have not reached us through a single surviving written constitutional text whose transmission can be followed uninterrupted across eight centuries.

There are oral traditions. There are variants.

There are different custodians. There are different reconstructions.

There are disagreements among scholars.

There are questions of chronology, attribution, transcription, translation, and interpretation.

These difficulties do not diminish the inheritance. They make our responsibility toward it greater.

For if we transform history into mythology in order to defend it, we ultimately weaken the very inheritance we seek to protect.

Cissé's intellectual importance should therefore not be measured by whether every interpretation associated with his work becomes the final interpretation.

No serious scholar should be remembered that way.

Scholarship advances through argument.

What matters is that he helped make an enormous body of inherited knowledge available for examination. He helped move African oral knowledge from the margins of historical inquiry into spaces where it could be recorded, studied, contested, preserved, and transmitted.

That is an enduring contribution.

The Man I Remember

My remembrance of Youssouf, however, cannot be confined to scholarship.

I remember the man.

He possessed an extraordinary ability to communicate knowledge. His learning did not remain imprisoned within academic language. He could captivate an audience because one sensed that history was not for him a collection of dead facts. It was alive. It belonged to people. And he believed that knowledge acquired meaning through transmission.

I saw in him what I once described as the engaged historian.

His professional commitment was inseparable from a wider social commitment. Students, researchers, colleagues, and those who encountered him in conferences and conversations could find in him not only knowledge but encouragement.

I was among those fortunate enough to receive that encouragement.

On a personal level, Youssouf was a source of inspiration to me. He gave me advice that has remained with me. Meeting him was an honor. Working with him during the launch of CARE at Kurukan Fuga gave that relationship a particular place in my own intellectual journey.

There are conversations whose significance we understand only later.

At the time, one listens.

One discusses. One asks questions.

One moves on to the next responsibility.

Years later, something returns—a sentence, an observation, an insistence, a way of approaching a question—and we discover that the conversation never really ended.

I think of Youssouf in that way.

From Preservation to Responsibility

When I wrote about him following his death, I remembered his determination to encourage us to safeguard our history and to make our own contribution to it. I concluded that we would have to continue without him, strengthened by the inheritance he had left.

Today I would add something.

Safeguarding history is only the beginning.

Every generation receives an inheritance it did not create.

Language. Memory.

Knowledge. Institutions. Values.

Historical achievements. Historical wounds.

Unresolved questions.

The intellectual labor of those who came before.

But inheritance creates a temptation.

We can become custodians without becoming creators.

We can preserve texts without continuing the inquiry that produced them.

We can celebrate great scholars without accepting the responsibility their work places upon us.

We can quote our ancestors while refusing to confront the questions of our own time.

That cannot be the purpose of inheritance.

The greatest tribute to an intellectual predecessor is not repetition.

It is continuation. And continuation requires judgment.

We must determine what should be preserved.

What should be questioned. What requires reinterpretation.

What must be corrected. What should be abandoned.

What can be carried forward. And what our own generation must add.

This is where inheritance becomes responsibility.

The Past Must Not Become a Refuge

Africa today has good reason to recover its historical knowledge.

Too much was ignored. Too much was distorted.

Too much was lost. Too much survived precariously because individuals and communities carried knowledge that institutions failed to preserve.

Recovering that inheritance is therefore necessary.

But historical recovery contains its own danger.

The past can become a refuge from the difficulty of creating the future.

We can respond to centuries of intellectual marginalization by attempting to prove that everything contemporary already existed in Africa.

That temptation should be resisted.

Africa does not need to prove that every universal principle, scientific discovery, institutional innovation, or philosophical concept originated somewhere on the continent.

Its dignity does not depend upon such claims.

Africa's dignity lies partly in something more demanding: its capacity to participate fully in the continuing production of human knowledge.

That requires historical confidence without historical imprisonment.

Cissé's work helps us recover confidence because it reminds us that African societies thought seriously about human life, social obligation, political order, community, freedom, authority, work, and coexistence long before the contemporary African state existed.

But the responsibility of our generation is not to remain there.

Our circumstances are different. Our institutions are different.

Our knowledge is greater in some areas and diminished in others.

Our technologies would have been unimaginable to earlier generations.

Our societies are confronting urbanization, demographic transformation, climate change, artificial intelligence, global markets, new forms of inequality, continental integration, and political challenges that no historical charter could possibly have anticipated.

Inheritance cannot relieve us of the obligation to think.

It should give us the confidence to do so.

Returning to Kurukan Fuga

My own return to Kurukan Fuga many years after those earlier experiences has made this responsibility particularly tangible.

The questions have changed.

So have I.

So has the institutional undertaking through which I approach them.

What began years ago as reflection on history, culture, governance, and the relationship between inherited knowledge and contemporary institutions has gradually become part of a broader inquiry into Africa's political modernity and institutional capability.

Returning to the Mandé inheritance has therefore not meant returning in search of ready-made answers.

It has meant returning to a question.

What does one generation owe to the knowledge transmitted by another?

The answer, I believe, has several parts.

We owe it preservation where preservation is necessary.

We owe it honesty where history is uncertain.

We owe it criticism where criticism is justified.

We owe it gratitude without mythology.

We owe it transmission without distortion.

And we owe it continuation.

This last obligation is perhaps the most demanding.

Because continuation means that eventually we must stop asking only what our predecessors thought.

We must ask what we think.

An Inheritance Is a Beginning

Youssouf Tata Cissé spent a remarkable part of his life ensuring that knowledge carried through generations would not disappear without entering the historical record.

Others participated in that work before him, beside him, and after him.

The traditionists themselves carried the greatest burden of transmission.

Scholars helped preserve, interpret, translate, compare, and disseminate what they received.

Institutions provided places where some of that knowledge could survive.

Books gave it another form of permanence.

But no form of preservation is final.

Every archive awaits another reader.

Every book awaits another mind.

Every inheritance awaits another generation.

And each generation must decide what it will do with what it has received.

That is why I return to the thought with which I began:

To inherit is not merely to receive. It is to become responsible for what has been received.

That responsibility does not ask us to become Youssouf Tata Cissé.

Nor does fidelity to his memory require agreement with every interpretation he offered.

It asks something both simpler and more difficult.

Take knowledge seriously.

Listen before speaking.

Preserve what deserves preservation.

Question without contempt.

Disagree without erasing.

Do not allow inherited knowledge to disappear merely because its custodians are gone.

Do not transform it into mythology merely because you love it.

And do not receive an inheritance without adding something worthy of transmission to those who will follow.

What We Pass Forward

There is a particular sadness in losing someone who carries knowledge.

A library seems to disappear.

Conversations become impossible. Questions one intended to ask can no longer be asked.

The voice is gone.

But transmission changes the meaning of death.

Something remains.

It remains in books. In recordings.

In students. In institutions.

In the work of other scholars. In the memories of those who listened.

In questions planted in younger minds.

In intellectual journeys whose beginnings may not be recognized until years later.

And sometimes it remains as responsibility.

I remain grateful that my own journey crossed that of Youssouf Tata Cissé.

I remember the scholar. I remember the extraordinary communicator.

I remember the man who possessed immense knowledge of our history and wanted others to understand its value.

I remember his counsel.

And I remember the conviction that accompanied his transmission of knowledge: that those who receive an inheritance have a responsibility to safeguard it and contribute something of their own.

Years later, that responsibility appears even clearer.

We honor those who came before us not by standing permanently in their shadow, but by ensuring that the intellectual journey continues after they are gone.

Youssouf did his part.

He listened. He studied. He questioned.

He preserved. He taught. He transmitted.

What remains belongs to us.

And someday, what we do with it will belong to others.

That is the responsibility of inheritance.

In respectful remembrance of Youssouf Tata Cissé.

Cheick Boucadry Traore