Chapter 7

Hunters and Boundaries in Mande Cultures

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In Europe and the Americas, oral folktales are generally associated with subordinate social categories, and the ideology most often identified with such narratives is one of resistance and subversion: the clever farmer outwits the devil, the simpleton brother wins the princess, Brer Rabbit rides the fox, the slave fools the master. There, the folktale is defined as the property of the subordinate groups, set in some opposition to the normative structures and institutions of the society as a whole. The opposition of oral and written finds its equivalent in the power relations of social groups: those normative structures and institutions are defined and transmitted through writing, with a presumption of increasing reliance on reading and writing as one moves up the ladder, whereas what is oral is associated with the under-educated, the poor, and the powerless.

The equation changes somewhat when we shift our attention to Africa. The oral-written divide which marks social differences in the Occident loses much of its value as a social marker: the cultures of west Africa are marked far more by a pervasive orality at all levels of the “traditional” society (i.e., where there is continuation of precolonial structures and relations). For them, oral folktales serve a normative purpose, and they function as the vehicles for the expression of social expectations, rules, and behavior. Suggestions of subversion and resistance are not so universal. While west Africa offers its share of theriomorphic tricksters who define the limits of the human sensual appetites and find ways to evade the rules which govern the common run of mortals, these figures are not found everywhere.
Ananse the spider and Ajapa the tortoise are associated, respectively, with the Akan-Ashanti peoples of Ghana and the Yoruba of Nigeria. Leuck the hare is found among the Wolof of Senegal. But other regions, and particularly the world of the Mande peoples, are not so easily characterized by the rules-breakers; tricksters appear a minor element of their oral literature. Folktales may explore and question social norms, but almost invariably the outcome justifies and reinforces the current status quo.¹ This is not to say that the societies involved are without (consciously expressed) tensions, or that they see the status quo as an ideal condition. Mande societies are marked by strong social hierarchies and barriers, and their members are fully aware of the personal limitations which this system imposes upon individuals; the indigenous systems are also under considerable pressure from the forces of modernization and, increasingly, of imported forms of Islam. It does suggest that the boundaries of discourse are defined somewhat differently than within literate systems, and it may be useful to consider how these boundaries are defined and, at times, questioned. In what follows, we shall briefly consider how the epic traditions, narrated by specialized performers, and folktales, narrated by ordinary people, incorporate social norms, before looking at the ideology and narratives of hunters’ associations as a possible site for challenges to the social boundaries laid down elsewhere.

### Mande Society

It may be useful first to provide a brief description of the Mande cultural world.² “Mande” is an essentially linguistic term, describing a family of languages whose core population is associated with the medieval empire of Mali (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries). The principal languages involved would be Maninka, in Mali and Guinea, Mandinka in the Gambia, Bamana in central Mali, and Dyula in Côte d’Ivoire, which can all be considered regional variants of a single language; Soninke (Sarakholle) is also closely associated to this grouping linguistically and culturally. The geographic core of this empire lay on the Manding plateau and the headwaters of the Niger river, in a region now divided between the modern republics of Guinea and Mali. At its largest extent, the empire stretched east (down the Niger) as far as Timbuktu, west into Senegal and the Gambia, and south to the edge of the forest zones of Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and Ghana. Since the time of the empire, the peoples have spread somewhat further, either as satellite populations speaking distinct languages that can be related to the Mande family, or as part of a trading diaspora (the Dyula; the term means “trader”) whose language (known as Dyula or Jula) is essentially a dialect of the central Maninka-Bamana core.