

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Memory making’: commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the International Conference on Manding Studies (London, 1972)

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## Abstract

Participants in the International Conference on Manding Studies, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in summer 1972, were contacted to share memories of the event in recognition of its fiftieth anniversary and while such recollections could still be gathered. An event in honour of fifty years of kora music at SOAS was also documented, bringing the project into the present. The result was a lengthy special feature in *MANSA Kibaru*, the newsletter of the Mandé Studies Association (MANSA), in early 2023. Given the strong positive response from the MANSA community, which has historically looked back to the 1972 conference as a predecessor, it was decided to revise the newsletter’s special feature as a separate publication. This is an account of the process of bringing the commemoration together, the key contributors, and the timing and connections that shaped the outcome. It provides details that do not appear in the published commemoration. Some questions at the beginning of the project were cleared up by the evidence and accounts gathered. The Manding Conference’s ‘filiation’ or influence is touched upon, including the founding of MANSA. The selective and incomplete nature of this ‘memory making’ initiative is acknowledged.

## Resumé

Des participants au Congrès international d’études manding, organisé à l’École des études orientales et africaines (SOAS) de Londres à l’été 1972, ont été invités à partager leurs souvenirs de cet événement à l’occasion de son cinquantième anniversaire. Un événement en l’honneur des cinquante ans de la musique de kora à SOAS a également été documenté, ramenant le projet dans le présent. Il en a résulté un long article spécial publié dans *MANSA Kibaru*, le bulletin d’information de la Mandé Studies Association (MANSA), début 2023. Face à la forte réponse positive de la communauté MANSA, qui a historiquement considéré la conférence de 1972 comme son prédécesseur, il a été décidé de réviser le dossier spécial du bulletin d’information sous la forme d’une publication distincte. Il s’agit d’un compte rendu du processus de mise en place de la commémoration, des principaux contributeurs, ainsi que du calendrier et des liens qui ont façonné le résultat. Il fournit des détails qui n’apparaissent

pas dans la commémoration publiée. Certaines questions au début du projet ont été éclaircies par les données et les témoignages recueillis. La « filiation » ou l'influence de la conférence sur les études mandingues y est évoquée, ainsi que la création de MANSa. La nature sélective et incomplète de cette initiative de « création de mémoire » est reconnue.

## Introduction

This article describes a project to recognize the fiftieth anniversary of the International Conference on Manding Studies, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, 30 June–3 July 1972.<sup>1</sup> The project evolved in the context of the Mandé Studies Association (MANSa), which looks to the 1972 conference as a predecessor. Originally conceived as a newsletter special feature to capture recollections of a few participants, it grew into a substantial documentation of the event, with essays, photos and sound recordings, ephemera, and excerpts from the journal that linguist David Dalby kept while travelling in West Africa to organize the conference. Public programming around the conference included a lecture by Alex Haley on his 'Roots' research and performances by music ensembles from West Africa, which both resonated in participants' memories, as well as an exhibition at the British Museum. Senegal's President Léopold Sédar Senghor's opening address is transcribed in full. The project concludes with documentation of a parallel half-century celebration of kora music at SOAS organized by musicologist Lucy Durán. A bibliography of the conference papers, a list of libraries/institutions known to hold the proceedings, and description of publications related to the conference are included. The newsletter feature was then revised and published as a softcover book and online.

The idea to commemorate the 1972 International Conference on Manding Studies (Congrès international d'études Manding) emerged out of two roles that I occupy: Africana cataloguer of materials for the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University Libraries since 2009, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Mandé Studies Association (MANSa) since 2019. As cataloguer, I keep an eye out for materials in the rich holdings of the Herskovits Library pertaining to Mandé studies and francophone West Africa in general, and often retroactively improve the cataloging of those items. As MANSa Secretary-Treasurer, the editing of its newsletter, *MANSa Kibaru* – previously done by MANSa's presidents – fell by default to me, as someone with relatively more time to spare for such a task.

My awareness of the 1972 conference was based on the history of MANSa's 1986 founding and its first decades, as documented on the MANSa website by its longtime President, David Conrad:

At the 1988 MANSa meeting in Chicago, Ariane DeLuz suggested that the organization convene a larger meeting every three years in which we would endeavor to draw as great an international representation as possible . . . . The

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<sup>1</sup> A related presentation, "Memory making": commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the International Conference on Manding Studies (1972)', was given at the African Studies Association (USA) 66th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 1 December 2023, as part of an Africana Librarians Council panel, 'Seeking inclusive knowledge: how the rapid changes in technology, scholarly communication, publishing and the information marketplace have impacted Africana library and archival collections and services.'

idea was well-received, and at the 1989 meeting in Atlanta, MANSA members began to talk about organizing an international conference. Adam Ba Konaré spoke at length on the importance of holding the conference on African soil and argued in favor of Bamako. Lansiné Kaba recalled the success of the famous Conference on Manding Studies held at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Kaba suggested that another international conference on Mande studies would continue the trend of reclaiming African history for the continent . . . . Indeed, the SOAS conference (30 June-3 July 1972) did set an auspicious precedent. Chaired by David Dalby, the official conference program lists 240 participants, ninety-four of which presented papers. That meeting included nearly every notable scholar in Mande studies at that time, along with many others who would later make significant contributions to the field. (Conrad 2007)

The Second International Conference on Mande Studies, organized by MANSA, was held in Bamako in 1993, its name thus claiming the 1972 SOAS conference as its predecessor. Historian Adam Ba Konaré, First Lady of Mali since the prior year, gave an opening address, and attendees were hosted at a reception by President Alpha Konaré (Conrad 2007). The third such conference was held in Leiden in 1995. The fourth, held in Serrekunda near Banjul, the Gambia in 1998, was conceived as something of a twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1972 conference, and was co-organized by Conrad and SOAS's Lucy Durán. Subsequent conferences organized by MANSA, generally triennial, have been held in Leiden (2002), Conakry/Kankan (2005), Lisbon (2008), Bamako (2011), Bobo-Dioulasso (2014), Grand-Bassam (2017), and Uppsala (2021, held virtually). The twelfth conference (hybrid) was held in Bamako in late June 2024.

A few years ago I became aware that the Herskovits Library holds the proceedings of the 1972 conference. In summer 2022 I revised the bibliographic record for the conference proceedings as a whole, then created analytic records for each of the 108 papers, plus the presidential address of Léopold Sédar Senghor. In the Herskovits Library, the proceedings are housed unbound in four clamshell boxes, and include a cover letter from the Centre for African Studies at SOAS, the conference schedule, and a list of the papers in alphabetical order by author.

The proceedings were never published. According to the conference final report, a selection of the papers was being prepared for publication, edited by David Dalby, Gordon Innes and Lamin Sanneh (Dalby 1972: 12). There is no record of such a compilation to be found. Twenty-six years later, in his message to the fourth International Conference on Mande Studies held in the Gambia, Dalby stated, 'For a variety of reasons, including their bulk, the totality of the 108 papers presented in 1972 were never published as a complete collection' (Dalby 1998: 48). However, sets of the proceedings were promptly distributed to libraries and other institutions in Africa, Europe, and North America.<sup>2</sup> Copies of the individual papers were available at

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<sup>2</sup> African holdings of the conference proceedings documented in OCLC Connexion are only in South Africa, at University of Cape Town Libraries and the University of the Witwatersrand. The proceedings would have undoubtedly been sent to IFAN (Dakar) and to the Archives Nationales or Bibliothèque Nationale in Bamako, and probably to the National Library in Gambia. Emails to IFAN and the Bibliothèque Nationale (Bamako) received no response.

the conference itself, for a fee.<sup>3</sup> By the time David Conrad arrived at SOAS as a graduate student a year later they were free for the taking, in ‘random piles’ in the SOAS basement.<sup>4</sup> There must certainly have been informal sharing of the papers. Chérif Keita (Carleton College) noted, ‘Massa Makan Diabaté was present at that conference Diabaté (1972). I want to point out that his wonderful paper on the Mande Hero/Le Héros mandingue, typed at the beginning and hand-written at the end, inspired so many scholars, for decades.’<sup>5</sup>

In January 2022, Lansiné Kaba – Guinea-born historian, Northwestern alumnus (PhD 1972), founding MANSAs member, and past President of the African Studies Association – asked for help in finding someone who could provide editing assistance, and I offered to do it myself. The task was to revise a draft text (Kaba 2022) related to his monograph on the holy man of Kankan, Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif (1874–1955) (Kaba 2004). This mostly consisted of adding French diacritics, and was carried out by email and then phone, though Kaba’s home was not far from mine. In August we finally met for lunch (post-Covid restrictions and in warm weather), as a delayed thank-you for the editing help. I had just finished work on the 1972 conference proceedings, and I mentioned seeing his paper among them (Kaba 1972). He talked a little about his memories of the conference and people he had met there, including the organizer, David Dalby, and Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian historian of religion who became professor at Yale Divinity School. I recognized Sanneh’s name because he had contributed three papers to the 1972 conference, including one on the travails of Islamic education for young children, written in a humorous tone from the distance of some years (Sanneh 1972); he served on MANSAs’s Advisory Board, and died in 2019.

A week or so later, the realization that it was the fiftieth anniversary year of the SOAS conference, and that there were ever fewer voices left to recall it, crystallized into the idea to try to gather and document some memories of the conference from Kaba and others.

### The memory gathering process

My first query was to Maria Grosz-Ngaté, who had just researched the SOAS conference for an African Studies Association roundtable and subsequent article in MANSAs’s journal, *Mande Studies*, regarding the usage of the concept of ‘Mande’ ethnicity and its potential relevance to MANSAs in reassessment of its name (Grosz-Ngaté 2021). In the same communication I included Rosa de Jorio, Editor in Chief of *Mande Studies*, to see whether the journal or the newsletter might be the better venue. De Jorio was interested in the idea; but as Grosz-Ngaté pointed out, the more informal newsletter provided a better chance to produce a commemoration within or at least close to the anniversary year, which was already approaching its final months.<sup>6</sup> Also, I wanted to be free to include a variety of responses, brief as well as developed.

My next ‘proof-of-concept’ query was to longtime MANSAs member Robert Launay, anthropology professor at Northwestern, who had a paper among the proceedings

<sup>3</sup> Email from Pascal Imperato, 23 October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Email from David Conrad, 4 November 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Email from Chérif Keita to the MANSAs listserv, 23 February 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Emails to and from M. Grosz-Ngaté and R. de Jorio, 5–6 September 2022.

(Launay 1972). He explained that he was not actually present at the conference, having just begun fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire. But he had been asked to contribute a general paper on Manding clans and castes by Dalby, who was tutoring him weekly in Bamanakan (Bambara) while Launay was in his first year of graduate school at Cambridge, in preparation for fieldwork with Dyula communities.<sup>7</sup> Despite his absence from the conference, he quickly produced a historiographic overview of its significance (Launay 2023). That tangible result encouraged me to pursue the project.

The next step was to send an email to David Dalby, on 12 September. His personal webpage (now taken down) said that he had retired to Wales in 1995, so I didn't have high hopes of a response. My colleague Charles Riley at Yale had an email address for him from linguistics circles. I did receive a reply three days later, from his daughter Alison Dalby: her father had died just three weeks earlier, on 24 August – two days after the lunch with Lansiné Kaba.<sup>8</sup> But her mother, Winifred Dalby, had also participated in the conference's organization and could provide some recollections, and she suggested that I contact her. I did so and, with Alison's facilitation, two versions of her mother's memories of the event were provided (Dalby 2023a; 2023b). An interesting account that Winifred Dalby provides is the 'bit of a kerfuffle with the Foreign Office' since it was Senegal President Senghor's first visit to Great Britain, and therefore official arrangements needed to be made with the Queen and the Prime Minister:

A month or so before the conference was to begin David had a phone call at his office. A rather cross voice said, 'I'm speaking from the Foreign Office. We understand that you have invited the President of Senegal to the UK. You do realise, don't you, that this has implications for the Queen's diary?' Well no, of course he didn't and anyway the President had sort of invited himself! (Dalby 2023b)

I then began to contact other living participants, some of them longtime or former MANSA members, to solicit contributions – whether informal anecdotes or more developed essays – anything that pertained to the conference. Since I had done name authority work on all the authors (creation or revision of Library of Congress name authority records, including biographical information and life dates) while cataloguing the conference papers, it was relatively clear who to attempt to contact. But my approach was less than systematic – based on names I was familiar with, names suggested by others, and names for whom I could find an email address. The intended audience was the MANSA community, and I was timid to go much beyond those boundaries. And time was short.

Some, inevitably, did not reply. Art historian René A. Bravmann was one who did; like Launay, he had contributed a paper (Bravmann 1972) but was doing fieldwork in Upper Volta in 1972–73 when the conference took place and did not attend, and so

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<sup>7</sup> Emails to and from R. Launay, 9 September 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Email from A. Dalby, 15 September 2022. 'He remained alert in mind right up until his passing and it is with deep sadness to me that he did not have the chance to communicate with you and help you with this project on the anniversary of the Conference he conceived.'

was unable to contribute to the project.<sup>9</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, one of the few French participants contacted and a MANSA member in the early days, recounted a couple of delightful moments (not to include) and sent photos of the conference brochure from his files. He provided the names of several other surviving French participants: Louis-Jean Calvet, Gérard Dumestre, Marie-Paule Ferry, and Gérard Galtier.<sup>10</sup> For some reason that I no longer recall, of those names I only contacted Dumestre, who sent a brief but colourful memory (Tiede 2023: 30).

Paulo F. de Moraes Farias (University of Birmingham), a longtime MANSA member, was listed among participants in the conference final report, but not as an author among its proceedings. He had attended the conference because a doctoral student of his, Musa Baba Idris, was presenting a paper (Idris 1972). I had found almost no information about Idris when cataloguing the proceedings, other than that he had died unexpectedly in 1973, the year after the conference. Farias explained that Idris and his new wife died in an accident on the 'notorious' Zaria-Kano road.<sup>11</sup> He was happy to hear of the project and considered writing something about Idris and his research, but was busy with other things.

Lansiné Kaba, whose perspectives as the only African (diasporic) contributor were particularly valuable – few African participants were known to be still living, and I lacked contact information<sup>12</sup> – said that he did not have the focus to write a proper essay. Instead, I compiled excerpts from several of his emails to serve as a short contribution from him. Kaba noted the relative lack of British participation, and that Paris would have seemed a more fitting venue:

*Quelle grande rencontre, malgré la présence plutôt modeste des Britanniques de Soas ou d'autres écoles célèbres. Mais la Reine a envoyé ses salutations par un émissaire, et je crois qu'elle reçut Senghor. Paris aurait été la place idéale, je pense pour cette rencontre, si Dr Dalby n'avait pas mis tant d'efforts personnels.*

*What a great conference, despite the rather modest presence of the British from SOAS or other famous schools. But the Queen sent her greetings by an emissary, and I believe she received Senghor. Paris would have been the ideal place, I think, for this conference, if Dr Dalby had not put so much personal effort into it. (Tiede 2023: 30)*

Pascal Imperato also commented, 'Many of the French scholars present thought it strange that such a conference should be organized by the British in London when most of the Manding world was geographically situated in what were once French colonies and territories.'<sup>13</sup>

Imperato, a man of many talents and interests (epidemiologist, Bamana art collector, photographer, historical dictionary compiler), was a stalwart contributor to the project early on. He was well positioned to describe the fuller context of the event.

<sup>9</sup> Email from R. A. Bravmann, 25 October 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Emails from J.-L. Amselle, 24-27 September 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Email from P. F. de M. Farias, 11 October 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Senegalese archaeologist Abdoulaye Sokhna Diop was still active as of 2019. Gambian historian Bakari Kebba Sidibe died in August 2021. Senegalese linguist Pathé Diagne died in August 2023. (See Concluding thoughts below.)

<sup>13</sup> Email from P. Imperato, 4 October 2022.



**Figure 1.** Exhibition invitation, courtesy of Pascal Imperato. The photograph, by Gilbert Rouget, is of Mamadi Dyoubaté playing a *sonon* (nineteen-string harp), with his wife and daughter each playing a *karinya* (rasp); Kankan, Guinea, 1952. Information provided by Lucy Durán.

He not only presented a paper on Bamana dances and masquerades at the conference (Imperato 1972) but also lent sculpture to the companion exhibition, 'Manding: Focus on an African Civilisation'. He helped Guy Atkins (linguist and art historian at SOAS), organizer of the exhibition, with production of the exhibition catalogue (Atkins 1972a) and thematic booklet (Atkins 1972b) prepared in association with the conference. Imperato wrote an essay for this project describing his involvement in the exhibition as well as the conference, and the two films that he brought with him for the film showings; he also provided correspondence, the film schedule, and event tickets for reproduction (Imperato 2023) (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> He and Dominique Zahan were present at Atkins' request when Senghor toured the exhibition.<sup>15</sup> Gambian President Sir Dauda Jawara and his wife also visited the museum exhibition.

<sup>14</sup> Imperato sent two more letters related to the 1972 conference in March 2024, not therefore included in the 2023 publication. One is from Guy Atkins, Assistant Conference Organiser, 6 June 1972, confirming that they had made a hotel reservation for him, and adding:

As you know from the programme, we are holding a joint session with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (where you are well remembered). The chairman of the joint session has asked me to say that he is very happy to know that you will be present and that you will be giving a paper on some of the medical problems you encountered during your long stay in West Africa.

This joint session does not appear in the conference programme reproduced from Bai T. Moore's report, or in the conference final report.

<sup>15</sup> Email from P. Imperato, 4 October 2022. 'I recall that Dominique and I went to the museum on a double-decker bus which was a real treat for him as he had never been on one before.'

The commemoration project did not focus on the exhibition, held at the British Museum in the Department of Ethnography's Museum of Mankind, 23 June–31 August 1972. But it must have been impressive. It included objects brought from Dakar by IFAN's Museum of African Arts curator Bodiél Thiam, newly discovered terracotta figures from medieval Mali, and the 1413 Catalan map by Mecia de Viladestes,<sup>16</sup> as well as masks, marionettes, gold jewelry, and musical instruments (Dalby 1972: 10).

Peter M. Weil, who presented a paper at the 1972 conference on Mande age grades (Weil 1972), was a rich source of information regarding Alex Haley, who gave a lecture on 'Manding Origins in the New World' as part of the public events around the conference. (Camara Laye also gave a public talk.) Haley's novel topic – family memory–fragments leading back through the generations to West Africa – impressed attendees, and his sonorous delivery and story-telling gifts must have as well. Weil and David Gamble conversed with Haley over a lengthy dinner about a draft version of *Roots*, which Haley was then circulating to scholars, though it would be another four years before it was published.<sup>17</sup> Weil gave detailed background on Haley's development of *Roots* and his own role as a consultant for Reader's Digest to vet the book prior to publication (Weil 2023).

Before receiving Weil's contribution, I was curious about Haley's presence at the conference prior to his *Roots* fame, and searched for connections between him and SOAS. This led to finding that Lucy Durán – SOAS musicologist, music producer and longtime MANSAs member – was a cultural consultant for a BBC remake of the 1977 *Roots* television series, broadcast in the UK in 2016. It strangely had not occurred to me to contact Durán about the conference project before that, because she wasn't there (as far as I knew). Yet she had been at SOAS since the 1970s, and is an expert on West African music and influential in its dissemination (Henderson 2021). Performances by music ensembles from Mali, Senegal and the Gambia, including kora or 'harp-lute' musicians, were prominent in recollections of the conference, along with Haley's talk. The conference final report describes other performances, broadcasts, and recording sessions in London by the visiting musicians and singers, and concludes:

An historic encounter between Manding and British cultures occurred when a recital on Manding harp-lutes was given on 29 June in the dining-hall at 10 Downing Street (at a dinner held in honour of President Senghor by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Edward Heath), and when a group of Manding musicians and singers performed at Whitehall on the following day in the seventeenth century Banqueting House designed by Inigo Jones. (Dalby 1972: 11)

Lucy Durán, once contacted, proved an energetic contributor. She wrote a lengthy essay in which she described her first chance encounter with kora music in the office of Anthony King at SOAS in 1974, and hearing mention of the 1972 conference from

<sup>16</sup> MANSAs's logo is based on the detail of Mansa Musa in the 1375 Catalan Atlas by Abraham Cresques.

<sup>17</sup> In his lecture, Haley said that the book was due to be published the following year, by Doubleday (USA) and Hutchinson (Great Britain), and that motion picture rights had already been negotiated (Knight 2022: Haley Pt 4).





**Figure 2.** Gambia ensemble, Lalo Kebba Dramé playing kora and his wife, Rohia Jeng, with audience during concert at the Africa Centre, Covent Garden. Photo by Roderic Knight; information provided by Lucy Durán.

him and Gordon Innes, who taught her Mandinka grammar. She shared a message from David Dalby when he was finalizing his *Linguasphere Register*, addressed to attendees at the 1998 Mande Studies conference in the Gambia, in which he looked back a quarter-century to the 1972 London conference and where the idea to organize it had come from, and looked forward as well (Dalby 1998). This in essence made Dalby a part of the commemorative process.

In another breakthrough moment, Durán put me in touch with musicologist Roderic Knight, who presented a paper at the conference (Knight 1972). He had taken colour photos of the musicians and singers (Figure 2) and made recordings of the Senegal music ensemble and Haley's lecture, as well as of a BBC interview of himself and his kora teacher, Jali Nyama Suso (also at the conference) later in the year. As part of the commemoration, he had the recordings posted online at the University of Washington Ethnomusicology Archives (Knight 2022); they could then be linked to in the newsletter conference feature. Durán provided identification for almost all the musicians and singers in Knight's photos. Knight also contributed conference correspondence and a card from Haley (Figure 3). His photos and sound recordings, though not abundant, are all the more valuable given that Durán had been unable to find any media preserved from the conference by SOAS.<sup>18</sup>

As it happened, Lucy Durán was in the midst of organizing a fifty-year commemoration event as well, focusing on the history of the kora at SOAS, which took place in the Brunei Gallery concert hall on 30 November 2022. She created a soundtrack for a short film made in 1970 by her first kora teacher, Anthony King, of

<sup>18</sup> Email from L. Durán, 18 October 2022.



Figure 3. Card from Alex Haley to Roderic Knight, received in conjunction with a talk that Knight organized at the University of Washington after the London conference. Courtesy of Roderic Knight.

Jali Nyama Suso making a kora in his community in the Gambia, which was screened as part of the programme. Her lecture there described changes in kora construction and the growing reputation of the kora to an international audience. The programme concluded with musical performances, featuring Ballaké Sissoko, whose father Djelimady Sissoko had performed at the 1972 conference. Sissoko's cousin Kadialy Kouyate, kora instructor at SOAS, also performed and translated for him. South African guitarist Derek Gripper, who has adapted kora repertoire and style to the guitar, joined in for the finale (Durán 2023). The entire three-and-a-half-hour event is viewable online (SOAS, University of London 2022) (Figures 4–5).

The MANSA newsletter that was to include this feature on the 1972 conference was delayed beyond the end of 2022 – fortuitously, as it happened – while waiting for last-minute additions. Alison Dalby, who was most helpful throughout the project and had access to her father's papers, came across his 1971 travel journal in mid-February 2023: 'I have struck gold!'<sup>19</sup> David and Winifred Dalby had travelled to Bamako, Dakar, and Bathurst (now Banjul) in November–December 1971 while organizing the conference. Excerpts from this primary resource provided a much more precise backdrop to the conference's staging, as well as brief glimpses of West African personalities and administration at that time (Figure 6).

I transcribed excerpts from the journal pages that Alison sent, and included images of some of the pages as well (Dalby 1971). It was up to Alison to choose what pages to photograph and send to me; but I asked her to look for anything about Djibril Tamsir Niane, author of the groundbreaking *Soundjata, ou L'épopée mandingue* (1960). His apparent absence from the SOAS conference had been pointed out as a mystery in Robert Launay's contributed essay:

<sup>19</sup> Email from A. Dalby, 15 February 2023.



**Figure 4.** Lucy Durán, SOAS, with Julien Cooper (Enkore Arts) showing his newest kora. Screen shot from *Ballaké Sissoko/Fifty Years of Mande Studies at SOAS*.



**Figure 5.** Kadialy Kouyate, kora instructor at SOAS, translating for his cousin Ballaké Sissoko. Screen shot from *Ballaké Sissoko/Fifty Years of Mande Studies at SOAS*.

The number of African participants is impressive, although the absence of Djibril T. Niane is remarkable. Niane's version of the Epic of Sundiata was in fact paradigm-changing, not only for Manding Studies but for the

Mon. 8<sup>th</sup> NOV. arr. Dakar by Swissair 5:45 am: met by Brit. Ambassador's car, but luggage did not arrive on flight. Staying at Ambassador's Residence (I.F. PORTER, \* C.M.G., O.B.E. - Govt): Mrs Porter as host, Ambassador at Conf. in London.

3:0 visit to (tourist-gear) dancing display at 1<sup>st</sup> Antenn Women's Club

4:30 visit to IFAN: met <sup>✓</sup>UMAR BA (hopes to attend Conf. to present paper on Manding loans in Fula in Senegal valley: have promised fare from Paris, & he hopes to be there at that time in connection with his doctoral thesis under Yves Person); also MICHEL SCHMITT (completing thesis on Fula-French phonological interference)

5:15 at IFAN: met <sup>✓</sup>SERÉNE MODY & CISSOKO (Malian chef du départ. d'histoire, author Essai de Hist. de l'Af. Occid.): he had been passed our letter addressed in June/July to Forzygroffles, & is very keen to attend

Figure 6. First page of David Dalby's travel journal in West Africa, November–December 1971. Photo courtesy of Alison Dalby.

understanding of Africa in general. It established the importance, both of a deep history and of an elaborate literary oral tradition, changing the ways in which Africa was understood outside as well as inside academia. A number of the papers do discuss the oral traditions of the Mande and of other neighboring peoples, a testimony to Niane's legacy. In all fairness, I do not know whether or not he was invited and either unable or unwilling to attend. (Launay 2023)

Lansiné Kaba was certain that Niane was at the London conference, along with the contingent from IFAN in Dakar. Niane had gone into exile from Guinea that year, joining IFAN. Dalby's journal states that Niane had indeed been personally invited. The Guinean embassy in Dakar, in response, communicated that

... all invitations should be directed thru' the Guinean government, who reserve the right to select who may attend. The Ambassador mentioned, as a

person who would be directly interested in the Conf., M. Nenekale Kendito<sup>20</sup> (écrivain, au musée) = Le Secrétaire d'Etat aux Choses Scientifiques. (Dalby 1971: 40)

Appendix II of the conference's final report is a thorough listing of conference participants, including even Launay and René Bravmann, who had contributed papers but were not physically there (Dalby 1972: 22–31). The only Guinean participants in evidence in that list were in exile or diaspora: Lansiné Kaba, who had already begun his academic career teaching at the University of Minnesota and had just obtained his doctorate from Northwestern; Ibrahima Baba Kaké, teaching in Paris; Camara Laye, also living in exile in Dakar since 1965; and Sory Camara, then at the Université de Bordeaux III.

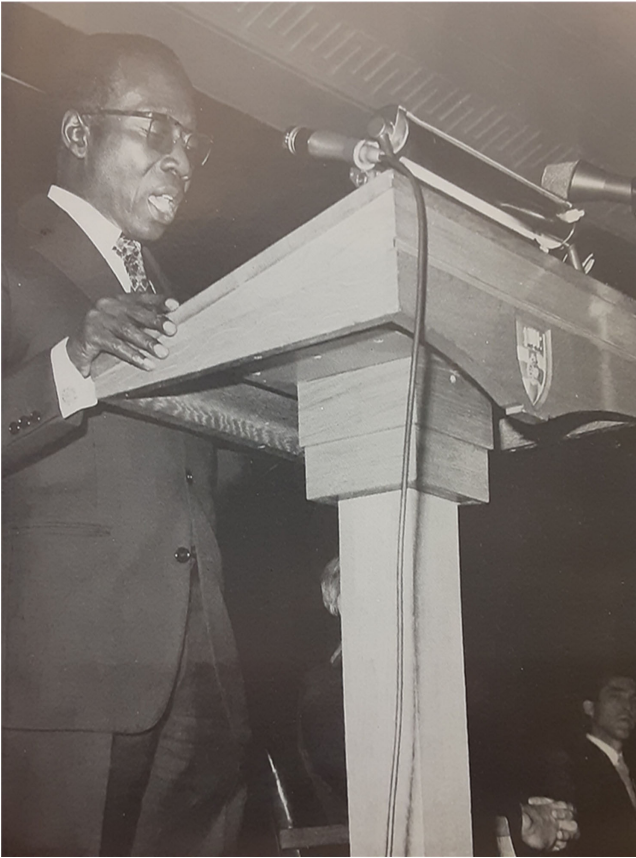
David Dalby's travel journal also documents how Léopold Sédar Senghor became involved with the conference. Winifred Dalby's contributions touch on their contact with Senghor while in West Africa, but the travel journals make things much clearer. They met with Senghor during his first official visit to Mali, in Bamako on 4 December 1971. Senghor had already accepted the role of *Président d'Honneur* for the conference (through prior correspondence), and he hoped to attend in person. David Dalby met with him again in Dakar on 21 December, by which time Senghor's attendance in London seemed certain. Dalby adds, 'He mentioned fact that he had told Houphouet [Boigny] about the Conf. & that Ivory Coast must be involved bec. of its large Manding population' (Dalby 1971: 41). Moulouk Souleymane Konaté seems to have been the only Ivoirian participant.

The conference final report by Dalby, however, does indicate official acknowledgement of the event by Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire: 'The closing session ended with the delivery of messages, welcoming the holding of the Conference, by representatives of several West African governments, and heads of state, including The Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone; messages were also received on behalf of the participants from Guinea and the Ivory Coast.' (Dalby 1972: 7)

Following up on Maria Grosz-Ngaté's suggestion that Senghor's address as honorary president of the conference (Senghor 1972) might be of broad interest, I transcribed it for inclusion.<sup>21</sup> Senghor's presence as a head of state added a layer of diplomatic recognition to the event, in receptions for him by both Queen Elizabeth and Prime Minister Heath. Prince William of Gloucester, the Queen's cousin, who had served with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Lagos, gave introductory

<sup>20</sup> The only information I found that apparently refers to the same person was an interview with Sansy Kaba Diakité, director of L'Harmattan Guinée, 21 May 2022, proposing to republish the works of Ahmed Sékou Touré as well as those of Néné Kalé Kondoto Camara and others. But I was unable to find that name in any other context. <https://infospremieres.com/2022/05/21/litterature-les-editions-harmattan-guinee-decide-de-republier-les-oeuvres-de-sekou-toure/>, accessed 10 November 2023.

<sup>21</sup> I tried to contact the Fondation Léopold Sédar Senghor to ask for permission to include the complete address by Senghor, but could not find contact information for them, except for a branch in France. I then found an email address for the Musée Senghor, at his former home in Dakar, on their Facebook page. I received a very supportive response from an employee, Bintou Camara, on 17 February 2023. She informed me that the administrator of the Fondation Senghor, Raphaël Ndiaye, had recently died, and provided me with an email address for the museum's curator, Mme Ndoye, but I did not receive a response from her.



**Figure 7.** H. E. Léopold Sédar Senghor's presidential address at the Conference. Photo: Central Office of Information. From *Manding Conference 1972: report and recommendations*.

remarks at the conference.<sup>22</sup> Senghor's address also adds a significant element in French to the commemoration, which language is otherwise under-represented considering the nature of the conference. (Framing texts – preface, introduction, and acknowledgements – are in both English and French; other content is in its original language, either English or French.) Senghor's presidential address, with its reproduced first page of the typescript, also serves as a reminder of the over one hundred other contributions that make up the proceedings, represented only via a bibliography (Figures 7–8).

Alison and Winifred Dalby suggested in late 2022 that I contact Herman Bell, the linguist (with a PhD from Northwestern, 1968) who served as Academic Secretary for the 1972 conference. They had mentioned the project to him, and he was 'eager' to take part. But his health declined just then, and his daughter Bethany replied that he was unable to do so.<sup>23</sup> He died on 7 February 2023. His voice, identified by Alison Dalby,<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Email from P. Imperato, 4 October 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Emails between M. Tiede and H. (B.) Bell, 26 November–27 December 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Email from A. Dalby, 24 February 2023.

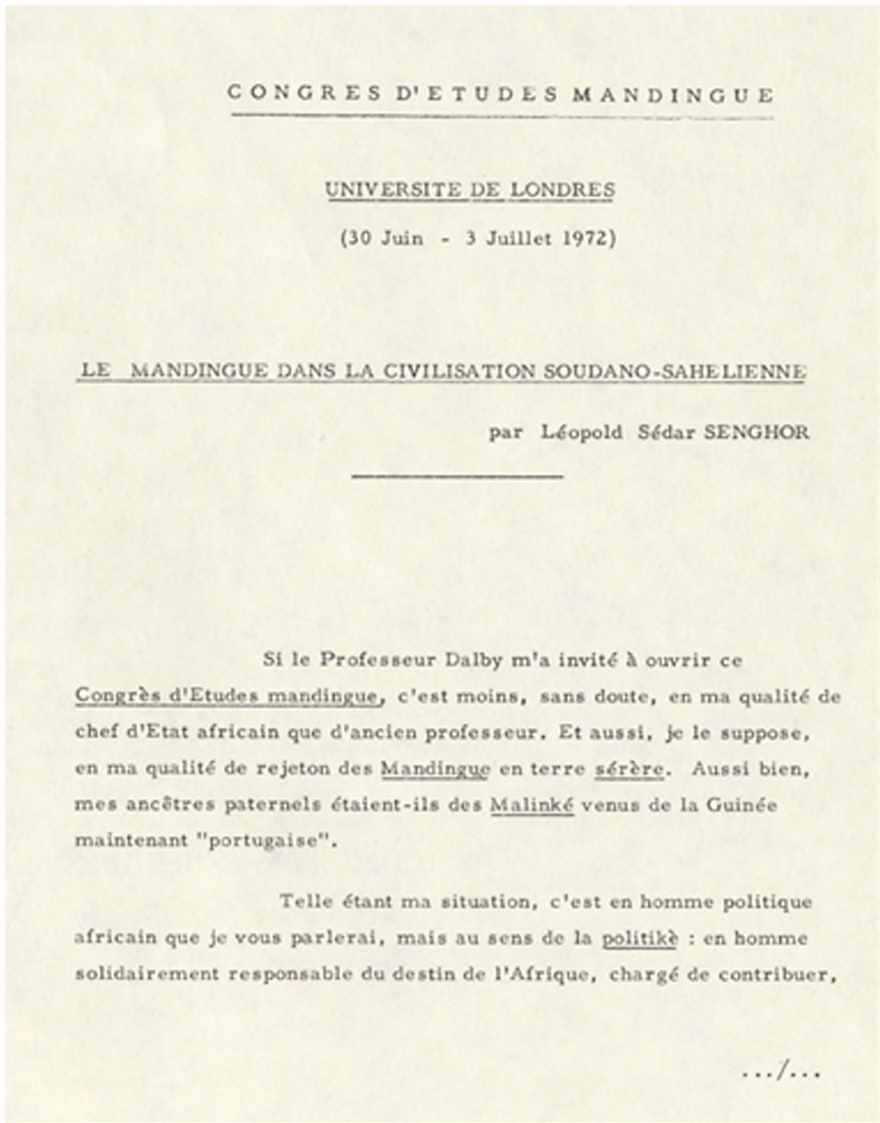


Figure 8. First page of Senghor's presidential address. Northwestern University Libraries, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies.

is heard on one of Knight's recordings, outlining the events schedule and introducing Alex Haley, and saying, 'For me, personally, this is the high mark of the Manding Conference, because in introducing Alex Haley, I'm introducing someone who is showing to us, showing to the world, the relevance of the Manding civilization in the New World' (Knight 2022: Haley Pt 1).

On a related note, I had not heard back from Lansiné Kaba in early 2023 when I tried to get his feedback on my compilation of his email communications for inclusion in the conference feature. The MANSA community learned later that he had gone to Guinea in January 2023, had a stroke, and eventually died from it on 27 May. He therefore never saw the result. But working with his widow to inventory his massive book collection this past year has been an ongoing learning experience.

### The conference's 'filiation'

A 'Colloque d'historiens francophones' took place at the Université de Dakar on 28–30 December 1972, six months after the SOAS conference. The original thought was to limit participation to West African francophone historians 'for practical reasons' with anglophone colleagues as observers. By the end of the event their scope had shifted to a pan-African one, and it was transformed into the Congrès constitutif de l'Association des Historiens Africains (Association of African Historians). The Association's first president was Sékéné Mody Cissoko, and co-vice-president was Ibrahima Baba Kaké (Rabemananjara 1977: 303–4) – both participants in the SOAS conference.

After intensive efforts, particularly by Cissoko, to communicate about the Association's existence and set up national branches in other countries (Konaté 2005: 7), a second Congress was held in Yaoundé, chosen for Cameroon's bilingual status, on 16–20 December 1975, with almost one hundred attendees from twenty-one countries in all regions of the continent, as well as diaspora representation: I. B. Kaké was delegate of the 'French section' and Lansiné Kaba was delegate of the 'American section' (*Afrika Zamani* 5 1975: 156). Joseph Ki-Zerbo was elected the second president. Looking back at the Dakar Congress of 1972, he described it as '*le congrès de la prise de conscience*' [the conference of coming into awareness]: 'The Congress of African Historians which [was] held in Dakar in 1972 was intended to make members aware that: it was necessary for us to meet as historians and as Africans in order to assume the responsibilities which are imposed on us by virtue of this double title' (Ki-Zerbo 1975: 5, 8).

One could interpret the emergence of the Association of African Historians as triggered in part by experience of the SOAS conference and the community brought together there. Though it would perhaps be more reasonable to see it as a moment whose time had come, over a decade after independence. In Cissoko's tribute to Kaké after his sudden death in 1994, he says that they swore to each other in 1966, while students at the Sorbonne, to write and to make African history known (Cissoko 1996: 253).

One of the statements in the Association's bylaws preamble is 'the need to decolonize African history in order to make it an effective instrument of political, economic and social liberation' (Rabemananjara 1977: 317). Ki-Zerbo's cover statement of mission in *Afrika Zamani*, the Association's journal, encapsulates the idea of responsibility to effect progress by addressing one's own history:

*... la connaissance objective de notre passé doit nous aider à mieux assumer notre destin. Mais cette connaissance ne peut jouer pleinement ce rôle que si les Africains eux-mêmes prennent l'initiative de la promouvoir.*



*... objective knowledge of our past must help us to better take on our destiny. But this knowledge can only fully play this role if Africans themselves take the initiative to promote it. (Afrika Zamani 5 1975: 1)*

The theme of the second AAH/AHA Congress in Yaoundé was 'History and Development'. Cissoko's presidential address at the Yaoundé conference repeated that message:

The Africa of today, master of its future, must also be responsible for its past. ... As a result, a group of young historians from several African countries took the initiative of organizing a Congress in 1972 with a view to setting up a Pan-African historical association. Thanks to the sympathy and assistance of President Leopold Sedar Senghor and his Government, the first Congress met at the University of Dakar [in] 1972 and set up the Association of African Historians. It was a significant event. For the first time in history, the historians of the continent, fully aware of their responsibilities, decided of their own free will to seek knowledge of their past, and not leave the reconstitution of that past entirely to foreigners. (Cissoko 1975: 40)

As successful as the Yaoundé Congress was, it would be a quarter of a century before the next iteration, the IIIe Congrès des Historiens Africains, held in Bamako in 2001 with the support of Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré and his wife Adam Ba Konaré, both historians. Doulaye Konaté summarized this hiatus: 'After the Congress of Yaoundé, which crystallized the ambitions and hopes of an entire generation, the AAH/AHA experienced a long period of lethargy, for multiple reasons, but all linked to the turbulences of independent Africa - with their often dramatic repercussions on personal and collective destinies' (Konaté 2005: 9; author's translation).

Given this review, we can now look back at David Conrad's description of the early years of the Mande Studies Association and realize that Lansiné Kaba's observation in 1988 that 'another international conference on Mande studies would continue the trend of reclaiming African history for the continent' (Conrad 2007) directly echoes the founding principle of the Association of African Historians, though in a diasporic or external context. The supporting role that Alpha Oumar Konaré and Adam Ba Konaré played for the conferences of both MANSAs (1993) and the AAH/AHA (2001) in Bamako during Konaré's presidency (1992-2002) is also noteworthy.

One of the recommendations from the 1972 conference was:

That a second Conference on Manding Studies should be held in Dakar in 1975, that the School of Oriental and African Studies should liaise with the Senegalese authorities responsible for the organisation of that Conference, and that the setting up of a Society for Manding Studies should be discussed on that occasion. (Dalby 1972: 9)

In a fruitful tangent, Fanta Traoré, widow of Lansiné Kaba, had told me to look for the conference about Gabu/Kaabu, where she had met her husband in 1980 while serving as an event host for the Senegalese Ministry of Culture. It turned out that its

selected proceedings<sup>25</sup> had been published as a special issue of the journal *Éthiopiennes* (Fondation Léopold Sédar Senghor 1981). I only discovered that from French and Dutch catalogue records for the issue. I ‘established’ the conference (created a Library of Congress name authority record for it via OCLC Connexion) and made analytic records for the twenty published contributions plus the opening speech by Senghor. The introduction in that volume reveals that the Gabu conference was conceived as a prelude or *pré-colloque* to an anticipated *Ile Congrès mandingue*, to take place in Dakar under the auspices of the Fondation Léopold Sédar Senghor, which apparently was never realized. Familiar names from the SOAS 1972 conference include Senghor, Amar Samb, Yves Person, Lansiné Kaba, Mbaye Gueye, Sékéné Mody Cissoko (two papers), Jean Boulegue, Oumar Ba, and the previously elusive Djibril Tamsir Niane. Niane’s familiarity with the 1972 conference proceedings, as well as with those of the 1980 Gabu conference in which he participated, is indicated in the published commemoration alongside introductory excerpts from the Gabu conference issue (Tiede 2023: 46). So here again one notes the sponsoring role that Senghor and/or Dakar-affiliated intellectuals had for extending, or attempting to extend, the apparent legacy of the 1972 SOAS conference. I do not know what communication might have taken place between London and Dakar in the planning of that event.

I also do not know what echoes of the SOAS conference might have occurred in other disciplines such as linguistics and anthropology. It was by happenstance that I came across the possible link with the AAH/AHA’s founding.

### Publishing the results

The newsletter *MANSÀ Kibaru* 74 which was to contain the special feature on the 1972 SOAS conference, already delayed, was issued a mere week after Alison Dalby’s important find of her father’s 1971 travel journal, on 22 February 2023 (Tiede 2022). The MANSÀ community’s reaction, from longtime members and the project contributors in particular, was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. It was seen as a significant documentation of the origins of Mande studies and of MANSÀ itself. Stephen Wooten responded:

Adding my voice to the flow of praise and gratitude . . . for such a big and consequential work. I immediately found myself saying ‘this story should be elevated’ – shared more widely. Maybe there are plans in that regard? A special issue of *Mande Studies*? Or something else? So the history can be accessed more widely. In any case, thank you so much for your amazingly rich and detailed contribution.<sup>26</sup>

MANSÀ President Sten Hagberg (Uppsala University) asked that I pursue separate publication of the commemoration. He contributed a new preface, about ‘what we remember, and what we forget’ – referring to under-represented actors and voices

<sup>25</sup> B. K. Sidibe, who had written three papers on Kaabu for the 1972 SOAS conference, also contributed at least two papers to the 1980 Gabu conference, perhaps not included in *Éthiopiennes* because of length: ‘The battle of Kansal (reciter Sana Kuyate)’ (27 pp) and ‘Bijini tarikha’ (64 pp), according to French-language records in the WorldCat database.

<sup>26</sup> Email from S. Wooten, 23 February 2023.



**Figure 9.** Mali ensemble, Lansiné Kaba and Sékéné Mody Cissoko being acknowledged by a *jali*keo praising them during concert at the Africa Centre, Covent Garden. Photo by Roderic Knight; information provided by Lucy Durán and Fanta Traoré.

when constructing histories of ‘Mande studies’ (Hagberg 2023). My title phrase ‘memory making’ is borrowed from him.

Besides Hagberg’s preface, the final version has some other new content, and the style and arrangement are revised from the newsletter presentation. There was a slight pivot from capturing memories for the benefit of the MANSA community to seeing the goal more broadly as documentation of the conference.

Several other small improvements made it into the new version. In addition to directing me toward the 1980 Gabu conference held in Dakar, Fanta Traoré identified the one photograph by Roderic Knight whose subject Lucy Durán was unable to name as her future husband, Lansiné Kaba, with his new friend, Malian historian Sékéné Mody Cissoko of IFAN (Dakar), in front of a *jeli* performer (Figure 9). Durán identified the musicians depicted on the British Museum exhibition invitation provided by Pascal Imperato (shown in Figure 1). Maria Grosz-Ngaté had sent me a copy of the 1972 conference report by Liberian participant Bai T. Moore, which I forgot to include in the newsletter but recollected just before the revision was published (Moore 1972). A lengthy broadcast in Mandinka and Wolof<sup>27</sup> about the 1972 Manding conference, credited to GRTS (Gambian Radio and Television Services) (GRTS 1972), was discovered the day before signing off with the printers, on the Facebook page of the Gambian community of Pakalinding – a name I had just heard while listening to Knight’s recording of Alex Haley’s talk, as a place Haley’s ancestors had migrated through from Mauritania into the Gambia (Knight 2022: Haley Pt 4).

The resulting publication, printed by the Graphic Arts Studio, Inc. (Barrington, Illinois), appeared in late November 2023. Its production was funded by MANSA with

<sup>27</sup> Email from L. Durán, 27 April 2024.

support from Northwestern's Program of African Studies and the Herskovits Library of African Studies. It was also posted in a lower-resolution version on MANSA's website.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The Manding Conference commemoration project seemed to take on its own momentum once begun, because of its collaborative nature, along with plenty of serendipity, or what Salman Rushdie calls 'the intrusion of the random' (NPR 2024). At the same time there was a certain urgency to the memory-gathering, and missed opportunities due to the passing of key people. Conference participants shared generously of their resources and recollections, and some who were adjacent to the event itself testified to its influence. Bringing the pieces together happened within a mere five months. The resulting compilation augments the record left by the conference's proceedings (still with limited access) and minor publications, captures fresh assessments of the conference as well as a good sampling of media and ephemera from the event, and helps to connect the dots between the 1972 event and the founding of the Mandé Studies Association in 1986 and MANSA's subsequent laying claim to the conference name.

In reviewing emails, I came upon a forgotten 'snippet' sent by Alison Dalby that her father wrote in 1994, which I include here since it was previously overlooked:

The first Manding conference, held at SOAS in 1972 ... was attended by leading scholars, musicians, writers (e.g. Camara Laye and Alex Haley) and even heads of state (Leopold Senghor). It proved to be a watershed for Manding studies. In the 22 years that have passed, there have been numerous scholarly publications which arose out of, or were first presented at that conference. Manding music has entered the international arena, with singers like Salif Keita; the kora has become one of Africa's best known instruments, now featured in concert halls around the world and in hundreds of recordings and different types of music (even rock and classical, e.g. the Chronos Quartet) and the word griot has entered common parlance. Many of the musicians and scholars who were at the 1972 conference were then junior, but have since established themselves as the leaders of their field.<sup>28</sup>

Some regrets about the project's outcome include failure to have the proceedings made available online due to copyright concerns; the lack of African and French perspectives on the event (mostly but not entirely beyond my control); and the omission of important voices, including those of the organizer and conference secretary, which could have been captured if the initiative had begun only a little earlier, or if I had been more persistent in trying to reach surviving participants. The short time frame was a major factor, in retrospect, in limiting the outreach effort to those closer to home, who I knew (of) through MANSA. Also, the initial concept was intended for the MANSA community. During the revision process for the published version, I included some additional information as it was discovered in order to

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<sup>28</sup> Email from A. Dalby, 15 October 2022.

broaden conference documentation, but I did not attempt to contact more participants.

In researching this article, I came across the recent deaths of two important African participants. Gambian oral historian Bakari Kebba Sidibe, affiliated with the Public Records Office, Bathurst, in the list of participants, died on 5 August 2021. A description of his impressive career (with an obituary linked) states that, having just completed two years of research at SOAS, 'he was tasked to prepare Gambia's delegation to the famous Manding Conference of May [sic] 1972 held at SOAS' (NCAC 2016). That information may well have been somewhere in David Dalby's travel diary, but I only saw excerpts and it was not something I was aware of. The conference final report's list of participants, which doesn't touch on roles, merely lists him as affiliated with the Public Records Office, Bathurst; but its Conference Organisation appendix gives him as responsible for the Gambian ensemble under 'Music Programme' (Dalby 1972: 21). Senegalese linguist, translator and historian Pathé Diagne, affiliated with IFAN (Dakar) at the time of the 1972 conference, died on 23 August 2023, three months after Lansiné Kaba, while the newsletter project was being revised for publication (Diop and Sall 2023). Contributions from them, had it been possible, or from other of the African or French participants, or from any of the musicians, would have conjured up a richer depiction of the SOAS conference and its aftermath.

### Publication resulting from the commemoration project

Tiede, M. (ed.) (2023) *International Conference on Manding Studies/Congrès international d'études Manding: School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London: fiftieth anniversary commemoration/commémoration du cinquantenaire 1972–2022* (MANSA Kibaru supplement). Barrington IL: Mandé Studies Association. (ISBN: 979-8-218-32417-9)

Online version: <http://mandestudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SOAS-1972-commemoration-booklet-website-2023-12-21.pdf>

The printed version of this publication is available for sale from the author (pb US \$10); proceeds go to the Mandé Studies Association (MANSA).

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