SILENT TRADE: MYTH AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE*

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Since it is related by so many we can accept it
Ca da Mosto

There have been several accounts of the practice known as ‘silent trade’ in west Africa during the last thousand years.¹ The oldest known account, that of Herodotus, is almost twenty-five hundred years old—although it probably refers to northwest rather than west Africa. Such accounts purport to describe exchanges of imported goods for gold from sub-Saharan Africa. These exchanges are said to have been made according to very particularized rules: two (and only two) trading parties would transact business with one another. They would do this not only without the help of middlemen but also without speaking to one another, or coming face to face or even within sight of each other. Elaborate precautions would in fact be taken to prevent any kind of direct visual contact. Despite this mutual avoidance and the resulting impossibility of negotiating rates of exchange, agreement presented no serious difficulties. Bargaining was carried out through gradual adjustment of quantities, arrived at by alternate moves by the two parties. Though each of the two in turn would have to leave his goods unguarded in a place accessible to the other, neither would take advantage of this for dishonest purposes. A shared table of market and moral values, as well as (and in spite of) silence and mutual invisibility, were thus the trademarks of such exchanges.

The available accounts may conveniently be grouped into two categories. One category represents the exchanges as taking place between traders coming from what are assumed to be ‘more developed’ cultures (e.g., Carthage or medieval north Africa) and ‘less developed’ barely known cultures outside the sphere of direct influence of the greater sub-Saharan pre-colonial states. The other category refers to contacts between those barely known cultures of the hinterland and black Africans (e.g., Wangara, ‘Accanists’) playing the role of middlemen between the gold producers and the Arabs and Moors or Europeans. It is on the information provided by these middlemen that the second category of accounts depends.

Modern European accounts of silent trade seem mostly to belong to this second category. Sometimes they are doubly removed from direct observation of the transactions; that is, they are records of information supplied by Arab or Moorish middlemen who had in turn learned it from other (such as Wangara) middlemen. It is not inconceivable that many of the medieval Arab accounts will eventually be proven to belong to this second category.

*This paper is part of a series devoted to the reconsideration of some west African historical sources, on which I have been working for some time. A paper entitled “Du nouveau sur les stèles de Gao: les épitaphes du prince Yama Kun et du roi F.n.da (XIIIème siècle)” is to appear in BIFAN shortly. Other contributions—on the Kisra legend in Nigeria and Dahomey, on the reinterpretation of the Gao epitaphs, on the methodology of medieval and early modern west African Muslim historians—will appear in due course.
Several years ago Mauny made the telling point that it is actually the more detailed and comprehensive Arab sources that fail to record silent trade in west Africa, leaving to those that are more vague and sketchy the task of expatiating upon the exotic characteristics of that form of trade. More recently Sundström has contributed a well-documented and perceptive critique of the stories about silent trade. He casts serious doubt on the historicity of such a type of trade in Africa in classical, medieval, or modern times. Unfortunately this portion of Sundström's work has not yet received the attention it deserves. Most historians have continued to feel no qualms about treating silent trade as a historical reality, and as possibly the earliest evolutionary stage in the history of long distance trade, or even of market trade in general.

This paper, on the strength of a close re-reading of the relevant texts, advances the hypothesis that the accounts of silent trade in west Africa are a misleading combination of a mythical stereotype with concrete evidence about the traditional African trade-through-broker pattern of exchange. It will maintain that the evidence for the historicity of the stereotypical model we call silent trade is considerably weaker in west Africa than even Mauny and Sundström have realized. It will also suggest that reiteration by various sources formed a chain of literary borrowings that either distorted or masked the realities of African trade, on which the same cliché was superimposed time and again.

A recent work by H.T. Norris has called attention, in the context of Saharan history, to a problem (in theory well known) that historians in Africa and elsewhere have to face. This is the occurrence of mythical or legendary material in historical sources, even comparatively recent ones, and the difficulty of identifying such material despite all the critical tools available to the modern historian. In many cases the presentation of mythical or legendary information as concrete and valid historical data is done in quite a convincing way in the sources. More than once the modern historian's panoply of rationalism and scepticism has failed to protect him against excessive credulity.

It is, of course, no secret that literary borrowing and pseudo-historical and pseudo-geographical lore are all too often mingled with factual accounts in both Muslim and non-Muslim sources, but in practice historians have frequently been unable to distinguish between the one category of material and the other. They have then proceeded to reconstruct the past through an improbable alchemy in which doses of concrete history are combined with doses of myth and legend without discrimination. A good example of this from another area of Africa is the mythical element in the story of the 'Jaga' of Kongo and Angola in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It has recently been argued persuasively that the 'Jaga' were only a pseudo-historical entity, conjured up by the artificial unification of scattered bits of solid historical evidence around the medieval Christian motif of the devil and his hordes.

The weakness of the evidence for silent trade in the western parts of Africa starts, as we have noted, from Herodotus' account. To accept this as factual is to assume that the Carthaginians had unaccountably abandoned their traditional and well-known policies of commercial secrecy and were willing to allow the free circulation of classified information on the least known of their sources for precious metals. On the face of it this seems more than a little unlikely.

The first medieval Arab accounts come in the works of al-Mas'ūdī, who wrote in the tenth century but who never visited west Africa. We owe to him two passages about silent trade in west Africa, one referring to "the land of gold beyond Sijilmāsa" and the other to the gold mines bordering the kingdom of Ghana. The two accounts are closely homologous and at the same time vague from a geographical point of view. In fact, they appear to be unreconciled accounts of the same story. From them alone it would be
difficult to decide whether the account of silent trade reflects concrete historical facts or merely the vestigial reminiscences of Mediterranean traditions similar to those recorded by Herodotus.

Yaquût, who, like al-Mas'udi, never visited west Africa, wrote in the thirteenth century an account that has since been regarded as solid historical evidence for the existence of silent trade: yet, on closer scrutiny it can be seen that his text is self-contradictory. Yaquût began by describing how the traders, on their way to the land of gold, situated “to the south of the Maghrib,” stopped at Ghana. After thus bringing together the two descriptions that Mas'udi has treated as separate, he continued that they stop here [in Ghana] and recover ... and recruit jahābidha and samāsira for their negotiations with the owners of the gold .... They proceed until they arrive at the place that divides them from the owners of the gold. There they beat the big drums that they have brought, which can be heard from the horizon of the region inhabited by the Blacks .... When the traders know that these people [i.e., the Blacks] have heard the drums they produce whatever they have brought of the goods .... Then they withdraw to a distance equivalent to one traveling stage. Then the Blacks come out and put certain amounts of gold beside each ware, and leave. The traders come again and each of them takes the gold found beside his merchandise, which he leaves there. Then they beat their drums and depart.

This text has been grossly misinterpreted. It cannot by any means be construed to serve as the cornerstone of the historical existence of silent trade; indeed, quite the contrary is true. What has made this misinterpretation possible is the way in which this passage has always been examined, with a sort of ‘tunnel vision’ that focuses on one paragraph while remaining blind to the context. Each time it has been quoted the initial lines on the recruitment of jahābidha and samāsira have either been deleted or ignored. Yet they are essential.

The word samāsira means ‘brokers’, ‘middlemen’, ‘agents’. Jahābidha can be translated either as ‘those who verify the weight of coins before money is exchanged’ or as ‘those who distinguish good quality merchandise from bad quality.’ The latter meaning seems to fit the sense of Yaquût’s account better. It becomes clear that recruiting such middlemen (who may well have included gold testers) would have made no sense had the blacks who sold the gold really kept themselves invisible and silent. To perform their role the brokers would have needed verbal contact with both trading parties (though not, of course, necessarily at the same time).

What may have happened was that the trans-Saharan traders themselves had no direct contact with the black “owners of the gold.” Contact would be established on their behalf by the Ghanaian middlemen. In this case Yaquût’s text (and probably al-Mas'udi’s as well) would not have recorded information provided by Arab travelers who had been eye-witnesses to the transactions described by him as “silent”. Instead it would have been accounts (rumors?) passed on to the Maghribi merchants by the Ghanaian middlemen. Whatever its origin, Yaquût’s information is probably the earliest available evidence for the operation of the broker systems that still survive in the Wangara or Dyula and other trade networks of west Africa. Seen in this light, it reinforces Polly Hill’s suggestion that the broker or ‘landlord’ system in west Africa is “perhaps as old as long-distance trade itself.”

It was probably through the operation of a broker system that the kings and traders of Ghana were able to secure their strategic position in the gold trade, in spite of not having the mining of the metal directly under their control. The recruitment of jahābidha may have been necessary not only for testing the gold for the benefit of the
Arab merchants; it may also indicate that the owners of the gold would accept only goods whose high quality was guaranteed by these Ghanaian middlemen. Furthermore, it is more likely for the Ghanaians than for the Arab or Berber traders to have known the language of those who sold the gold. This would suggest that, contrary to what is often argued, 'silent' trade would not have resulted from an impossibility of verbal communication determined by language barriers and the absence of interpreters. Rather, it would correspond to a pattern of contact characterized by the interposition of middlemen between the two principal trading parties—in language matters (that is, with interpreters) as well as in purely commercial ones.

All this infringes upon an essential aspect of the stereotype of silent trade; namely, that "there is no third party present to supervise or mediate in the exchange." Instead of an agreement on equivalence being reached solely on the basis of common criteria of evaluation and honesty upheld by both parties, it required the introduction of neutral arbitrators; in this way disputes between the parties might be avoided or resolved. This picture contradicts the description of silent exchange that fills the rest of Yaqut's account. We seem to have in this, as in many other sources, the superimposition of a traditional model onto empiric data that did not quite conform to it.

I will omit here, for lack of space, any discussion of the medieval accounts of silent trade that can be traced to borrowings from the works of al-Mas'udī and Yaqut even though they appear to refer to later times. These include passages in the works of al-Zuhri (twelfth century), al-Qazwīnī (thirteenth century), Ibn al-Wardī (fourteenth or fifteenth century), and al-Bakuwī (fifteenth century).

The only other available account that seems to have a claim to containing independent evidence for silent trade is al-ČUmarī's, which was written between 1342 and 1349, probably in Damascus, using materials collected in Cairo and elsewhere. The passage on silent trade is part of his valuable section on Mali. Al-ČUmarī is one of our best historical sources for Mali because he was able to interview people who had known well the Malian ruler mansa Musâ in Cairo, at the time of the mansa's famous pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in 1324/25; however, his description of silent trade has a fatal weakness. Apparently neither mansa Musâ nor his companions said a single word about silent trade, although they did talk about gold and about the relations between Mali and the gold producers, and although the information they did provide does not seem to be deliberately falsified (contrary to what we might assume at first glance).

In order to introduce into his text the silent trade stereotype, al-ČUmarī had to resort to quoting somebody who seems not to have visited Mali or to have met mansa Musâ abroad. This somewhat weaker authority was the shaykh ČAbdallah Muhammad b. al-Šaygh (or al-Sağîgh) al-Amawī from Almeria in Spain. Thus the passage is based upon hearsay and not upon firsthand reports from the Malians themselves, although those should have been available had they existed. The crucial point is, as Sundstrom remarks, that "there is no firsthand account of silent trade; all the sources quote the evidence of other, usually extremely elusive, authorities."

Ibn Battuta is the best medieval source for the western Sudan, and in particular for Mali, which he visited in 1352/53. He recorded some information about the contacts between Mali and the gold-producing populations but did not report on the practice of silent trade between them. This of course considerably weakens the accounts of al-ČUmarī and al-Qalqashandi (ca. 1412) who, without having visited Mali, refer to the existence of silent trade there both before and after Ibn Battuta's tour of the area. Al-Qalqashandi's passage, which I shall not discuss here, actually seems to be an anachronistic borrowing from al-ČUmarī's work.
Only half a century after al-Qalquashandi the theme of silent exchanges was taken up again, this time by the Portuguese and Italian navigators approaching Africa from the Atlantic Ocean. The greatest authority in this new wave of silent trade stories was Alvise da Ca da Mosto, a Venetian working for the Portuguese crown. It has been suggested that he obtained his information from black African sources. However, his text explicitly states that most of his informants were Arab and Azanaghi (i.e., Moorish). Although during his second voyage to the African coast in 1456 he established contact in the Gambian area with tributaries of Mali and obtained gold and slaves from them through barter, he did not connect silent trade with the Gambia as later authors were to do. His passage on silent trade, which refers to Mali’s gold trade, seems to be based on information gathered during his first trip (1455) and it is vague in its references to geographical locations.

In brief, Ca da Mosto wrote that salt was brought to Mali by Arabs and Moors and then carried further by Mali traders to the banks of “certain waters.” At this point the Mali traders would exchange the salt for gold produced by another race of blacks who did not wish “to speak or to be seen.” The account of silent trade that followed is strongly reminiscent of al-Mas'udi's and Yaqut's stereotype. This is not difficult to understand, since Ca da Mosto’s informants came from areas where interest in both Sudanese trade and medieval Muslim scholarship was traditional.

There is, however, an interesting difference between the Arab accounts and Ca da Mosto’s. In the latter the blacks who sell the gold were said to arrive at the meeting place in large boats, apparently coming from some island. This could be a recollection of al-Idrisi’s Wanqara (Wangara), which he described as an island on the “Nile” near Ghana, from which the gold came. Curiously, it also seems to be almost a mirror image of the arrival of the European ships.

It is also worth noting that Ca da Mosto stated explicitly that his informants could not (or would not) tell him whether the “certain waters,” the banks of which formed the meeting place for the silent exchanges, were fresh or sea water, “though they consider it to be the sea.” This, at the very least, would emphasize the vagueness of the geographical information about the auriferous regions available to the Arabs and Moors. It may also mean that these traders, ready as they were to relate tales of silent trade, were much less willing to discuss the location of the gold fields. In any case, this is yet another instance of the general difficulty in ascertaining exactly where silent trade allegedly was practiced, a difficulty that seemed striking to Mauny. Often the accounts of silent exchanges seem almost independent of any precise context of space or time.

Ca da Mosto also recorded a story about a supposed attempt by one of the rulers of Mali, “not many years previously,” to find out what the mysterious gold producers really were. Having captured one of them, the king’s men soon ascertained that the prisoner would not speak at all despite being addressed in several languages, nor would he eat. After four days he died. In consequence, Ca da Mosto wrote, it was believed in Mali that either the gold producers were congenitally unable to speak, or that they refused to speak out of “disdain”.

Then Ca da Mosto introduced into his text a theme that was to become a standard feature of modern European stories about silent exchanges. This is the theme of the monstrosity or deformity of the black gold diggers. It was ushered into modern literature at the very time when the end of the Middle Ages seemed to herald the dismissal of all monsters from European books and maps. According to Ca da Mosto, it was believed in Mali that the blacks of the gold-bearing area had a terrifying appearance, with two large teeth on each side, gums that exuded blood, and enormous glistening lower lips.
Purportedly it was only in order to obtain the salt needed to prevent their lips from putrefying during the hot season that these blacks engaged in trade at all.

It is difficult to believe that the realities of gold mining and the physical appearance of the gold-producing populations were as mysterious to the inhabitants of Mali in the fifteenth century as Ca da Mosto’s informants claimed. As we have seen, al-CUmarī’s text suggests that mansa Mūsā had some knowledge of the mining techniques employed in the western Sudan. Furthermore, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa referred to the visit of a group of gold producers accompanied by their chief (āmr) to the court of mansa Sulaymān, a brother of mansa Mūsā who was ruling Mali during Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s visit and who died in 1360. He recorded information about their mode of dress and stated that they were cannibals. In addition, he recorded a story about a white qaḍī (judge) named Abū’l-ʿAbbās al-Dūkālī, who had been exiled by mansa Mūsā and had spent four years in the land of the pagan gold producers. If the story is true, it is likely that on his return he brought information about the gold producers’ way of life. Such evidence of normal contacts between the Malians and the gold producers in the fourteenth century seriously weakens the story accepted by Ca da Mosto that, a century later, the two parties had not yet come to organize normal exchanges but resorted to silent trade.

It is also significant that, in the information said by al-CUmarī’s informants to derive from mansa Mūsā himself, there is no mention either of deformities or of anthropophagy in connection with the gold producers. The mansa is on record simply as saying that there was a truce between him and the pagan blacks, that is, that he did not wage jiḥād or holy war on them and that he did not levy the jiyya tax. Light is thrown on this relationship by another passage of al-CUmarī which relates that the production of gold diminished in the regions where Islam had penetrated, while increasing in those that remained pagan.28 According to Muslim law, the world is divided into dār al-Islām (‘the abode of Islam’) and dār al-harb (‘the abode of war,’ which should be converted, forcibly if necessary). At the price of paying the poll tax (or jiyya) and conforming to certain other obligations, some non-Muslim religious communities such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were allowed to live peacefully under Muslim rule as part of the dār al-Islām; this toleration was not extended to the pagans or kuffār (which was the appellation given to the gold producers in al-CUmarī’s text).29 However, in practice matters were somewhat different. Some jurists accepted the notion of a third abode, the dār as-sūlah (‘the abode of peace’) or dār al-cāhd (‘the abode of covenant’) which included non-Muslim countries that temporarily could not be converted but were willing to pay an annual tribute instead. A case in point is that of Christian Nubia, with which the Muslim governor of Egypt concluded an agreement in 652 stipulating that the Nubians should pay an annual tribute and should give protection to Muslims traveling in their country and allow them to practice Islam. In return, war would not be waged against them and they would be able to travel within Muslim lands. This treaty soon developed into a kind of barter agreement under which, in exchange for their annual tribute, the Nubians would receive cereal, horses, and garments from the Egyptian Muslims. Such a situation bears many similarities to the relations between Mali and the gold producers. Mansa Mūsā referred to the existence of a truce. A Muslim like the qaḍī al-Dūkālī was able to live for four years among the pagan gold producers and, presumably, to practice his religion during that period. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that, in return for what al-CUmarī termed their tribute, the gold producers received goods available in Malian markets. Mansa Mūsā himself described the exchange of copper for the pagans’ gold. Thus the Nubian precedent may have reinforced mansa Mūsā’s case in the eyes of the Cairo jurists.30 The Malian ruler’s attitude toward the pagans, which seems to have stretched a long way the
Islamic doctrine of the treatment of pagans, does not seem to have unduly upset his Egyptian hosts. They apparently had no difficulty accepting the idea that special concessions were needed if gold was to be brought into the international monetary market in sufficient quantities.

Actually, if one brings together all of mansa Mūsā’s statements about gold that appear in al-CUmārī’s text it becomes clear that they were totally incompatible with Ca da Mosto’s version. Far from maintaining that the gold-producing areas were a complete mystery to him, mansa Mūsā is said to have stated that the inhabitants were his vassals and paid tribute to him, and that he employed them in the extraction of gold. Obviously, nothing of this can be reconciled with the concept of relations characterized by silent trade.

Admittedly, the story of the auriferous areas propagated by mansa Mūsā was an ambiguous one. On the one hand, these lands were pagan and were to remain so, with the least possible interference by Muslims. On the other hand, they were not to be treated as bilād al-ḥarb (‘the abode of war,’ that is, enemy country). Politically and economically they were vassals of a Muslim ruler, the sovereign of Mali. This ruler, who, as al-CUmārī states explicitly, waged war against other pagan populations, would not wage it against the people of the mines. Yet this ambiguity may be illusory. The point mansa Mūsā seems to have wanted to make can be summarized as follows. First, the gold lands were under Malian suzerainty; that is, foreign powers had no right to explore or conquer them. Second, even if other Muslim countries decided to send directly to the gold areas not armies or invaders, but only missionaries, they must realize beforehand that this would reduce the amount of gold injected into their economies. To put it another way, it was in the best interests of all concerned parties that every contact with the gold producers should be made through Malian mediation and without disturbing the status quo. Here the Malians appear to be defending for themselves, with great shrewdness, the same privileged position that Yaḥyā’s account attributed to the Ghanaians centuries before. For this purpose they used juridical and economic arguments in Cairo, not stories of silent trade and physical deformities. Wittingly or unwittingly the mansa may have succeeded in making yet another important point: since the gold mines were not to be regarded as bilād al-ḥarb, the private appropriation of mines by lucky Muslim adventurers would be void of juridical legitimacy.

What emerges from all this is again, as with Yaḥyā’s account, a pattern of mediation and brokerage rather than of silent trade, even if mansa Mūsā was claiming a greater degree of control over the gold fields than he actually was able to maintain. It is a pattern that cannot be reconciled with that proposed by Ca da Mosto’s informants, who probably told the Venetian traveler a camouflage tale of their own, to which he may have added some details provided by the unspecified “trustworthy persons” he claimed also to have consulted.

Ibn Khaldūn, who wrote in the last decades of the fourteenth century, was able to interview several informants from Mali and its provinces, though he himself never visited the western Sudan, but he recorded nothing of silent trade. When one compares the evidence recorded by Arab authors in the fourteenth century (al-CUmārī, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn Khaldūn) with Ca da Mosto’s, one feels strongly inclined to believe Valentim Fernandes, who, in 1507, wrote that silent trade was a tale told by the Wangara traders to protect their commercial monopoly.

Yet it could be argued that the Arab authors referred only to the northernmost gold-producing areas, whereas Ca da Mosto described the situation in areas further south, at “a great distance” from Mali, as he described it. Pacheco Pereira’s account would seem
to reinforce such a belief. In his *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* two strands of ancient and medieval lore, the one on the Cynocephali and the other on silent trade, finally met and merged. Pacheco Pereira began by talking about Mandingua (Manding) traders from the Cantor area and in particular from the village of Sutucoo in the Gambia. He said that, in peacetime, these traders were in the habit of coming to the coast to meet the Portuguese ships and to barter gold for red cloth, bracelets, and other commodities. Then, apparently on the strength of information gathered from such traders, he said that two hundred leagues from the kingdom of Mandingua (Mali) there was a country rich in gold, called Toom, where dumb barter was practiced by blacks who had dogs’ faces, dogs’ fangs, and dogs’ tails. These Cynocephali were “de esquina conversacam, que nam querem ver outros homens,” that is, “they avoided engaging in conversation and were unwilling to see other men.” The silent transactions reached the point of agreement when the Cynocephali filled with gold holes in the ground, of a size acceptable to both trading parties.

Though the dogs’ fangs of the silent traders mentioned by Pacheco Pereira may be a simple exaggeration of the “large teeth” referred to in Ca da Mosto’s account, the theme of the Cynocephali existed independently of this and is well known. It is part and parcel of the pseudo-geographical lore of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and often figures both in Muslim and non-Muslim sources. That these motifs were at some date absorbed into the traditions of Manding-speaking trading peoples is confirmed by a legend about Cynocephali purporting to explain the defeat of the Borgu armies at the battle of Ilorin in 1835 or 1836. This later legend was collected among the Muslims of Nikki in northern Dahomey. Nikki, and Borgu in general, was the scene of particularly intensive Wangara activities in pre-colonial times.

*Toom* seems to be a transcription of the name *Ton* given by the Dyula or Wangara to the lands inhabited by Akan-speaking peoples; that is, to present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast. However, in his section on Mina on the Gold Coast Pacheco Pereira did not refer to silent trade but only to normal exchanges of gold for European goods. Not all the Portuguese sources recorded stories of silent trade. They were absent, for instance, in two accounts written by inhabitants of the Cape Verde islands. In 1466 Afonso V opened to the inhabitants of the Cape Verde island of Santiago all the coast of Guinea (with the exception of Arguim) for trade. Six years later this privilege was restricted to the stretch of coast from Senegal to Sierra Leone, and the Cantor area was excluded from it. In 1582 this part of the coast was described by Francisco D’Andrade, a military officer on Santiago, who sent Philip II a report on it and on the Cape Verdes. D’Andrade paid special attention to economic matters and, despite the restriction concerning Cantor, described Gambia and the gold trade there, which, he stated, was not then as important as it had previously been. He speculated about the sources of the metal and stated that the blacks said it came from “Cofala”. In this discussion he failed to mention silent trade.

Andre Alvares de Almada, born on Santiago of an African mother, completed in 1594 a work entitled *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guine*. This work was written on the basis of information personally gathered on the coast during the 1560s and 1570s. Almada even managed to visit the Gambia and the Cantor resgate (trading post) of Sutuco (Pacheco Pereira’s Sutucoo) in 1578. He had been sent there in his capacity as a military officer to investigate whether the black Muslim traders of Sutuco were buying copper bracelets and other copper objects from the Portuguese in obedience to orders from the Ottoman Turkish government, for the purpose of melting them down for cannon. Thus
he becomes a particularly interesting source from the point of view of this paper, since he had a special mission to ascertain where and how the Mandinka traders obtained their gold. He was also an intelligence officer interested in their political loyalties and religious propaganda. Since his work has not yet been translated into English or French it is worth quoting at some length:

In this river [the Gambia] there are more [Muslim] men of religion [called] bixirsins than in all the rest of Guinea. There are in it many establishments of this religion, and itinerant propagandists who travel from kingdom to kingdom. On the northern bank there are three major establishments, similar to our monasteries, [centers of] great religious fervor and devotion for them. In them live those men of religion and those who are studying to become such. The first is at the mouth of the river . . . , the second one seventy leagues from the first, at a narrow pass of the river, where it divides itself into three branches . . . . The third one is fifty leagues from the second, at a village which is one league distant from the river, called Sutuco . . . . They write in bound books . . . . where many lies are told. The Devil gives the others ears to hear and believe them . . . . At the village of Sutuco there are transactions in gold, which is brought there by Mandinka traders who are also men of religion. The gold is of good quality, most of it gold dust but some of it in pieces. These traders are very knowledgeable regarding weights and everything else. They have very sensitive balances . . . . and silk-thread strings. They [also] have little writing desks made of leather, without fasteners, in the drawers of which they keep the weights. These are in brass and look like dice; [but] the marco [eight ounce weight] looks like a sword pommel. The gold is brought in quills of big feathers and bones of cats, hidden and strapped in their clothing. They do this because they must cross many kingdoms, and are often robbed, in spite of the fact that their caravans include officers and guards. Some caravans bring more than one thousand archers. The most important goods traded for the gold are [copper] bracelets and all others already mentioned [i.e., red thread, red cloth, beads, cereal, paper, cloves, copper cauldrons, and especially kola nuts from Sierra Leone] except wine (which they do not drink, for they are men of religion) and horses . . . . I asked in detail of the traders where they fetched the gold from, and for what purpose the bracelets were used there. I was reliably informed that they were used only as ornaments and trappings, and wound on arms and legs . . . . Without doubt this gold, and that which goes to Tumbocutum [Timbuktu] comes from the mountains of Sofala, for while talking to Anhadelen, captain of a caravan, I asked him in great detail about the place to which they went and took the bracelets and he told me that he went to the Cafres, and used this very word to name them . . . . These traders spend much more than six months on the trip . . . . they travel in obedience to the orders to the Black Emperor, whom all the Blacks of this Guinea we are talking about obey. He is called Mandimanga [king of Mali] . . . . The inhabitants of the Mina refer to this king as 'Big Elephant,' so well known is he to all the Blacks who obey his name over more than 300 leagues.

Almada then went on to relate that he had left five arrobas (one arroba [from the Arabic al-rub, quarter] equalled 32 pounds) and eight arreteis (one arretei [from the Arabic ar-rati] equalled one pound) of gold in Sutuco because he had no goods to exchange for it. He concluded that “this resgate is now lost since for the last eight years no ship has been to it. Those traders are now trading with those of Tumbocutum . . . . to which come some Moors, to exchange red cloth and other things against gold.”

Almada’s text, with its fascinating references to the exchange of kola nuts for gold, to the Muslim “monasteries”, to the association of trade with religious propaganda in the activities of the Mandinka traders, and the like, is probably the best piece of evidence we now have available on such matters. It explains the reason for the confusion between the gold-producing areas of west Africa and those of Sofala in east Africa. The Portuguese term cafres (from the Arabic kafir, ‘pagan’) was current in the literature of the time as a generic term for certain south and east African tribes. While the Mandinka informant
simply tried to explain that the gold was produced by pagans, Almada attributed to this very general Arabic term a precise geographical connotation; hence the identification with Sofala in Mozambique. The reference to the fame of the ruler of Mali on the Gold Coast would seem to reinforce the identification of Pacheco Pereira's Toom with the Akan areas. But, significantly, Almada, despite the abundance of detail he provided, made no reference to silent trade, nor did he speak of the Cycnocephali or similar beings.

Other sources, like Dapper and Barbot, followed Pacheco Pereira's pattern of describing silent trade in their sections on Senegambia while failing to mention it when discussing the Gold Coast itself. Yet they recorded tales told on the Gold Coast about the gold mines—tales apparently designed to keep outsiders away. Others, such as Jobson and Winterbottom, simply repeated Ca da Mosto. Still others, like Lyon, based their accounts on hearsay collected at a great distance from the regions described.

However, some seventeenth-century sources did purport to describe silent trade on the Gold Coast. Among these was Samuel Br[u]un, who wrote that

... the Abrambu, the Accanists go 300 miles inland and bring some hundred-weights of gold.... And if, exceptionally, the Accanists at the Ymbally or frontiers come into the land, no one dare go further into the land, but they send a man of that country to the king to tell him that they want to trade with him for goods and gold. Then the king has the gold brought to a large field. In that place stands a hut in which the goods are [put], until the Ymbally or frontier people come, who take the goods away and put the gold into little containers (Küchelin) in return. Then when they have gone away, the Accanists come and take the gold and return home, so that the Accanists do not see the merchants who give them the gold for the goods. It is a great wonder that one party does not betray the other.

Michael Hemmersam also left an account of silent trade, which differs from Brun's in a number of interesting aspects. According to Hemmersam the Akanists trade with other Moors who live further inland. Some of these, as they themselves say, trade with them but do not see one another, believing they might die; they have never been able to find out if these Moors are black or white, as they lay their goods in the field, with as much weight as they want gold for them, and go away. And the others come and look at the goods, and put as much gold by them as they will give; after some days they come again to their goods and see the gold beside them, but [if they] do not want to give them for this [amount], they leave the gold and take their goods and come back another time until they trade them....

For purposes of comparison the following passage from the nineteenth-century account of Allen and Thompson is worth citing:

We met several parties of Ashanti traders, starting off for the interior with various articles of European produce, but principally salt, which they exchange for gold-dust and ivory. Everything is borne on the heads of slaves, a portion of whom belong to the commissariat department and carry provisions for two or three days. These Ashanti traders communicate with all the nations of the interior adjoining their country, but they do not pass the frontier. Others meet them at appointed and regular markets, to interchange their commodities. It requires twelve days to reach a place called Sari, to meet those of Mallowa [Mali?] which some describe as a very large country; others say that it is a general name for all the nations beyond Ashanti.

It is as if Hemmersam's account and Allen and Thompson's account occupy the opposite extremes in a three-point scale, with Brun's narrative as the bridge between them. Hemmersam gives us a conventional, stereotyped account of silent trade that could be transferred—without changing more than a few words—to anywhere else in the world.
Allen and Thompson describe a type of commercial intercourse reminiscent of practices that are well-known throughout Africa. Mythical or camouflage elements seem not to play an important role in this account.

Brun, though an older source than Hemmersam, represents a type closer to Allen and Thompson, though the wondrous honesty of his traders seems to be part of the silent trade myth. Though the traders in Brun's account are said not to meet face to face, it does not include all the essential elements of the stereotypical silent trade theme. On the other hand, it includes features suggestive of real economic practices, such as the mediation by market authorities and the fact that the market seems to be held in 'neutral' frontier territory. The mutual invisibility of the trading partners becomes perhaps less extraordinary when we look at it in the light of well-known African institutions such as the ja tigi and the mai gida, the 'host' who receives the goods on deposit and is authorized to trade in the absence of the owners. The suggestion that the accounts of silent trade both in the hinterland of the Gold Coast and in the fringes of the Saharan areas, insofar as they contain any concrete data, refer to a trade-by-broker system, seems to be reinforced by Mouette's report, which was published in 1683 and which has been perceptively discussed by Sundstrom.

Mouette's informants were Moors from southern and southeastern Morocco ("Dras" and "Tafilet"). His narrative concerns trade between Arabs and Moors on the one side, and, as he ambiguously put it, the kingdoms of Sudan, Guinea, and Timbuktu on the other. According to his account verbal contacts were forbidden during the exchange itself, which took place on the marshes of the blacks' regions under the watchful eyes of the soldiers of the region's commander, although the traders would not meet, or even see, the commander himself. One of the commander's men, however, was allowed to talk to them in order to give instructions, take stock of their merchandise, and note their names and order of arrival. The text seems to imply that, though the Arabs and Moors did not speak to the blacks selling the gold, they nevertheless were able to see them. Agreement was reached by successive alterations of quantities by the Arabs and Moors in order to reconcile their own interests with the needs and interests manifested by their customers. After this the soldiers would levy a tax of one ounce per pound of gold and one-twelfth of the salt for the "Alca-ir", the commander. Trade was conducted in perfect order and was not disturbed by either side. In the event of a disturbance the Alca-ir would punish the guilty party, whether Arab, Moor, or black.

Mouette's account, as much as Brun's and Yaqut's, seems to couch the description of actual commercial practices in the idiom of the silent trade myth, but in such a way that reality is still partly recognizable. The importance given to the role of the neutral ('invisible' and 'silent') authority, not only as guarantor of the rules of exchange but also (indirectly) as interpreter between the trading principles, suggests that another possible source for stories of the silent trade was contact with rulers and their representatives conducted through a third party, not because of language difficulties but for the sake of ceremony. For instance, Ibn Baṭṭūta was surprised to see at Īwālāt (Oulata) that when merchants went to the farbā Ḥusayn, the local representative of the Mali ruler, though they stood in front of him the farbā would not address himself directly to them, but rather to a man described by Ibn Baṭṭūta as an interpreter. Ibn Baṭṭūta thought this to be due to contempt and bad manners.

Thus, under careful scrutiny, the frozen portrait that has been termed silent trade seems to melt away, revealing behind it a much richer and more varied reality of commercial practices. Be that as it may, the mythical stereotype itself is worth further analysis, but I propose to defer this to a second paper, which will also examine a few other examples of the silent trade story.
NOTES


4. A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), p. 8n., remarks that as a matter of fact the whole of Sundström’s study “has hardly been noticed even by specialists.”


10. Al-Mas'udī, *Akhbār al-Zamanān,* ed. cAbd-al-Hamīd Ahmad al-Ḥanāfī (Cairo, 1938), p. 65; French translation by Baron Carra de Vaux under the title *L’abrége des merveilles* (which he hesitated to attribute to al-Mas'udī) (Paris, 1898), p. 103.


14. Even after Ghana had become tributary to Mali its rulers were allowed, as late as the fourteenth century, to have special privileges. These included the use of the title of king. Apparently they were granted such privileges because of their persisting role as middlemen in the gold trade. See al-`Umarī, *Al Taṣrif bi-t-Muṣṭalah al-Sharīf* (Cairo, 1894), p. 27. The Arabic text is quoted by Marquart, *Benin-Sammlung,* p. cclxiv. See the French translation in M. Gaudefroy-Demobynes’ *Notes on the African Trade,* pp. 27-38.

15. Sundström, Trade of Guinea, pp. 28-9, remarks "that the exchange takes the form of silent trade [often is ascribed to] ... lack of common understanding and/or language difficulties" but continues that "in other contexts the language problem has never seemed insurmountable. Sign language and a general eager desire to come to an understanding appear to have been sufficient."

16. Ibid., p. 23.


19. Stories explicitly said to have been told by mansa Musa himself are recorded by al-Ümari in the Masalik al-Absur, pp. 56-62, 66-7 (Arabic text), pp. 70-6, 80-1 (French translation). Information provided by Shaykh Abû Uthman Sa`d al-Dukkal, said to have lived 35 years in the capital of Mali, is also recorded, ibid., pp. 45, 50, 57, 66-7 (Arabic text), 58, 64, 72, 80-2 (French translation). Information on the salt trade, provided by a faqih called Abû `Ali al-Zawawî (on the strength of stories told to him, is recorded on p. 69 (Arabic), 83-4 (French). None of them mentions silent trade. Mansa Musa gave his friends in Cairo some information on gold that seems to have been correct. He described accurately one of the techniques used in mining gold. Cf. al-Ümari, Masalik al-Absur, p. 67 (Arabic), 81 (French), with P.D. Curtin, "The Lure of Bambuk Gold," JAH, 14 (1973), p. 628. Even the mention of "gold plants," Masalik al-Absur, p. 57 (Arabic), pp. 70-2 (French) may be a reference to the association of certain vegetation patterns with auriferous areas. See R. Summers, Ancient Mining in Rhodesia and Adjacent Areas (Salisbury, 1969), pp. 15-7, 162. See also H. Labouret, "L'échange et le commerce dans les archipels du Pacifique et en Afrique tropicale" in J. Lacour-Gayet, ed., Histoire du commerce, III, Le commerce extra-européen jusqu'aux temps modernes (Paris, 1953), pp. 55-6, Mauny, Tableau géographique, pp. 303-4, and Sundström, Trade of Guinea, p. 30. I am grateful to M. Jean Devisse of the Université de Paris for stimulating discussion on the subject of plants associated with gold.


23. Levtzion, Ancient Ghana and Mali, p. 154, states that Ca da Mosto secured his information from Wangara traders.

24. It must be remembered that the Portuguese made serious efforts to gather as much data as possible about the African coast and African trade. Information about the latter of Arab origin would not be difficult to obtain in the Iberian peninsula, and this may have been another way in which medieval Arab accounts of silent trade might have reached Ca da Mosto.

26. This would seem to suggest that Ca da Mosto’s informants used the Arabic word bahr, which can mean either ‘sea’ or ‘river’ but is more common in the former sense.

27. D. Pacheco Pereira, Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis, trans. and ann. R. Mauny (Bissau, 1956), p. 177n126: “Personne n’a pu encore identifier avec certitude à quel endroit se pratiquait ce commerce muet (frontières du pays lobi? du pays achanti?).”

28. Al-cUmarī, Masālik al-Abṣār, p. 45 (Arabic), pp. 58-9 (French), and citations in note 21 above. It is not unlikely that services performed by animist priests or “masters of the gold” were deemed indispensable to the productivity of the mines in the same way as rituals performed by animist “masters of the land” (representing the first occupiers of the soil) were thought necessary for agricultural productivity, even in certain long-Islamicized areas. See, for instance, Tringham, History of Islam in West Africa, p. 35n2, and idem, Islam in West Africa (London, 1959), p. 144.

29. On all this see M. Khadduri, War and Peace in the Law of Islam (Baltimore, 1955).

30. For the Nubian treaty see ibid., pp. 144-5, 259-61, and Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan, The Arabs and the Sudan from the Seventh to the Early Sixteenth Century (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 20-8. Ḥasan argues that this agreement was not a treaty but only a ḥudna or ‘truce’. The term attributed to mansa Mūsā regarding his relations with the gold-producing kuffār was nearly the same—muhādana, ‘agreed truce.’ Yet, as the Nubians were Christians, not kuffār, the policy followed by Mali was open to orthodox criticism. As a matter of expediency the arḍ al-maḥādīn (‘land of the mines’) had to be treated as dar al-muḥādā (‘land of alliance’).

31. Though they had been ready enough to criticize his sexual mores—see al-cUmarī, Masālik al-Abṣār, p. 58 (Arabic), pp. 72-3 (French).

32. J. Devissse, “Une enquête a développer: le problème de la propriété des mines en Afrique de l'Ouest du VIIIème au XVIème siècle,” forthcoming in Mélanges Charles Verlinden. To date this is the only study on the important question of the legal ownership of the west African mines. Devissse uses juridical evidence from Abū Yūṣuf Yaḥyā al-Anṣāri, Kitāb al-Kharājī, written in the ninth century (see Cairo edition, 1933-4); French translation as Le livre de l’impot foncier (Paris, 1921), and perceptively argues that the Sudanese Muslim rulers, on becoming aware of the prescriptions contained in such works as the Kitāb al-Kharājī, which legitimizes the appropriation by any Muslim of any mine he happens to find in the dar al-harb, resorted more and more to a policy of secrecy, and perhaps also to special agreements with the gold producers. I would suggest that, in the case of mansa Mūsā, a more radical solution may have been found, viz., to exclude the lands of gold entirely from the dar al-harb. I am grateful to M. Devisse for allowing me to consult his paper in typescript.

33. The passage of al-cUmarī’s Al-Tafriḥ cited above suggests that behind Mali’s mediation between north Africa and the gold mines lay the still older mediation of the king of Ghana, whose prestige may have survived on the basis of a priority of relationship with the soil. Furthermore, al-Dukkālī told al-cUmarī (Masālik al-Abṣār, p. 57 [Arabic], 72 [French]) that, contrary to mansa Mūsā’s statements, the ruler of Mali was not entitled to receive as tribute the totality of the annual production of gold, but only received part of it and that as a “favor”. This again suggests that the relationship between the gold producers and Mali was one of economic alliance rather than vassalage.


36. Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, pp. 64-7. The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese references to *Sutucco* or *Sutuco* should be compared to later references to *Setico*, e.g., R. Jobson, *The Golden Trade, or a Discovery of the River Gambia* (London, 1623), pp. 79-80, 102-3. *Sutuko* or *Sutukho*, in the Wuli region at the eastern tip of the Gambia, was from an early date an important center of the Diakhanke (Jakhankhe, Jaxanke) clerics and traders. However, the name ‘Sutuko’ has changed its position on the maps at least once. On the role of the town as a trading and/or clerical center see P.D. Curtin, "Pre-colonial Trading Networks and Traders: The Diakhanke,” in Meillassoux, ed., *Development of Indigenous Trade*, p. 231, and L.O. Sannah, “The History of the Jakhanké People of Senegambia: A Study of a Clerical Tradition in West African Islam” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1974), pp. 24, 133-4, map at p. 249.

37. The observation of ethnographic facts may have played a part in the construction of such descriptions; for instance, certain forest populations displayed filed teeth. See Mauny’s bibliographical notes in his translation of *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, p. 177n124.


41. Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, pp. 120-7, where reference is made to the coming of *Mandingua* traders to the Mina.

42. See J. Boulégué, ed. and trans., “Relation de Francisco d’Andrade sur les îles du Cap-Vert et la côte occidentale d’Afrique,” *BIFAN*, 29B (1967), pp. 67-87, esp. pp. 80-3. *Cofala* seems to correspond to *Sofala* in Mozambique, from which gold was exported. Sixteenth-century authors were seldom fully aware of the distance between the western and eastern coasts of Africa and tended to believe that regions such as the Gambia and Angola were comparatively near the Indian Ocean. On this see A. Teixeira da Mota, *A cartografia antiga da África central e a travessia entre Angola e Moçambique*, 1500-1860 (Lourenço Marques, 1964).

43. A. Álvares de Almada, *Tratado breve dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo-Verde* . . . . I am using the edition made by L. Silveira and published in Lisbon in 1946. An annotated translation of this work into French by Jean Boulégué (with some collaboration by myself in certain passages) has not yet been published. Boulégué’s annotations are very important; they are based on several years of careful research on the history of the Senegambian area.

44. Álvares de Almada, *Tratado breve*, pp. 31-3. Those interested in comparing Álvares de Almada’s information on gold weights and balances with that available on the ones used in the Akan areas may find it useful to consult B. Menzel, *Goldgewichte aus Ghana* (Berlin, 1968); A. Abel, “Utilisation des poids à peser l’or en Côte d’Ivoire,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 43 (1973), pp. 33-109. The word *bixirins* may be a Portuguese transcription of a word related to the Arabic root *bashara*, from which Arabic words with the sense of ‘preachers’ or ‘missionaries’ are derived.


47. G.F. Lyon, *A Narrative of Travels in Northern Africa in the Years 1818, 19, 20* (London, 1821), pp. 148-9. Lyon stated that “these traders in gold dust are by many supposed to be devils, who are very fond of red cloth, the favourite article of exchange.” Lyon traveled no further south than the Fezzan.


49. M. Hemmersam, *Reise nach Guinea und Brasilien, 1639-1645* (Nürnberg, 1663), pp. 55ff. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Marion Johnson for calling my attention to these passages in Brun and Hemmersam and for allowing me the use of her English translations. She also drew my attention to Allen and Thompson’s account mentioned in the following footnote.


51. See, for instance, Sundström, *Trade of Guinea*, pp. 23n4, 25.

