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978-0-521-10504-0 - Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers: Tradition and Invention in
Mende Story Performance

Donald Cosentino

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Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 4

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Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture

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Masks of Gondei (above) and Sowe (below); Sowe represents the Mende ideal of female beauty and grace, while Gonde is her antithesis (photograph by Rebecca Busselle)

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DONALD COSENTINO

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521105040

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First published 1982

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 81-15517

ISBN 978-0-521-24197-7 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10504-0 paperback

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But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*

It seemed to me that good and evil were probably as indefinable as right and wrong, and that the sole reality was the electricity of opposition. Alpha versus omega, and the two at pacific rest in a Creator who said he was both. He was the Creator of the Prince of the Power of the Air, but he must also be the Creator of an opposing prince whom we blasphemously called God. You were doomed to take sides, but did it matter which side you took?

ANTHONY BURGESS

Earthly Powers

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'We are dwarfs seated on the backs of giants', so the medieval philosophers assessed their own work, and so too must any scholar engaged in the essentially medieval tasks of studying an oral tradition. Particularly when his work consists of collecting, cataloging and analyzing traditional stories, the scholar must rely on the good will and good humor of many people. Above all he must rely on the story performers. In this respect, Bunny and I could not have been more fortunate. For one year we were the guests of the good people of Mattru-on-the-Rails who invited us onto their verandahs to witness the *domeisia* which are the subject of this work. Our gratitude and respect is extended to them all, and especially to Mariatu Sandi, Bobadeen Goba, Bobadeen Macarthy and Mos'ay Dubua who took such delight in delighting us with their amazing performances. I would also like to thank the people of Njayehun and Pujehun for their nights of entertainment, and to acknowledge the outstanding talents of their premier performers, John Aifa and Mama Ngembe. There is a final performer, perhaps the most famous in Mendeland, who deserves special mention. Lele Gbomba came to Mattru and performed epically for three nights. I have written of his *domeisia* elsewhere, but found them too gargantuan to be contained in this small work.

In order to fix Mende verbal art in a book of written English, I also had to rely on the assistance of others. I owe special thanks to Harold Scheub, first for revealing what wonders lay buried under the misnomer 'folktale', and then for criticizing this work with his unflinching candor during each stage of its development. Special thanks must also be given to our language informant, Mr Jonathan Pabai, for his patience while working with us on our tapes, and to Jo Lappia for introducing us to the Mende language in Madison. Thanks also are due to Mellonee Burnim for sharing with us her musical transcription of our tapes, to Neil Skinner and Joko Sengova for their thoughtful comments on the draft, to Rebecca Busselle for her photographs of Lele Gbomba, and to Ruth Finnegan for her encouragement and timely assistance. Finally, and most practically, thanks to the Fulbright program for making the year in Mattru possible, and to the Wisconsin Almuni Research Fund for supporting the following year of translation and analysis.

In a special category, alone and apart, I do homage to the ghost of my father who told me so many Sicilian tales, and would so much have enjoyed

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the storytellers of Mendeland, and to Bunny, always the other half of 'we',
with whom I shared everything, there and here. In typical Mende fashion
then, I divide the dedication of this book between the living and the dead:

TO BUNNY AND TO PA