

*By: Joan Baxter*

*For a while, it looked like the Malian scholars would pull it all off without a hitch. They had converged on the southern town of Sikasso, hoping to get a bit of African history rewritten in a single day in May. The historic day dawned to the thudding boom of cannon fire. By mid-morning, the municipal stadium was full and the heat was building . . . and building. The much-feared hunters' societies had arrived, weighed down by home-made shotguns and enough fetishes to keep even brash journalists at bay. There were marching bands playing martial music, a little out of tune, but marchable all the same. Women's groups danced. Griots with balafons sang the praises of the great King Babemba Traore, who led the great battle of Sikasso exactly one hundred years earlier. The stands were full of venerable elders, the fiercely proud nobles descended directly from the king. Malian president Alpha Oumar Konare, author of a scholarly work about the historical importance of Sikasso, had (wisely it turned out) sent his Minister of Culture to sit in for him. And quietly, the historians who had organised the festivities to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Sikasso, assured me that by the end of the day they would have the information they were seeking. They would convince the noble Sikasso families to divulge at long last the whereabouts of Babemba's tomb. This would allow them to do the necessary excavation, analysis and eventually, to turn the tomb into a national—or international—historic site.*

*In another part of the world I suppose such festivities would have lured hordes of camera-touting, sun-hatted tourists. In fact, at first I was surprised not to see any there, snapping shots of their kids crawling about on the remains of the Great Sikasso Wall or perhaps haggling over the price of chunks of the wall with local entrepreneurs eager to sell off their history—piece by piece—for a bit of ready cash. But this was not Berlin or China. There wasn't an entrepreneur or a tourist in sight. It didn't take me long to learn that in Sikasso, history is not for sale.*

*Malian historians wanted to use the anniversary as a launching pad for their counter-attack on European versions of history that have Africans succumbing to colonial invasion without a fight. Sikasso was the perfect setting for that. In 1898, with 40,000 residents, it was the second largest city in West Africa after Kano. It was the capital of the Senoufo Kingdom of Kéné Dougou and a last bastion of African resistance to French invasion. The remains of the clay and stone wall that encircled the town—eroded and diminished by time—still speak volumes about that resistance. The wall's massive dimensions—it was 12 kilometres long, 6 metres thick at the base, 5 metres tall and 1 metre thick at the top—leave no doubt that the people of Sikasso and King Babemba Traore were willing to fight tooth and nail to keep out French invaders.*

*Alas, that was not to be. In May 1898 that bastion fell when the French, or rather the French cannons, ended a two-week siege by breaking through the great wall, called the 'tata' here. Sikasso was taken, opening the way for the French to*

*establish colonies that stretched from Chad in the east to Senegal in the west and lasted until their independence in the early 60s.*

*Mali's Director of Art and Culture, Téréba Togola points out that without their superior weapons—those heavy cannons—the French would never have been able to penetrate the wall and West African history might read very differently. 'We wanted to commemorate this battle to erase the myth that Africans offered no resistance to colonisation,' he says. 'African heroes like Babemba and Samory did fight and it is this that we want the world to know.'*

*Unfortunately, the people of Sikasso and the descendants of King Babemba Traore didn't see it that way. For them, the anniversary marked only defeat and death. Long before the actual battle, King Babemba had pledged that the 'tubabu' (white men) would take his kingdom only over his dead body. He kept his word. Descendants of Babemba claim that as the French poured into the city, the king had himself and his wife shot and buried where no tubabu would ever find him. French history books, on the other hand, contend that the conquerors themselves gunned down the king. The people of Sikasso aren't much interested in history books and they want their king to rest in peace in the tomb that they keep hidden from the world.*

*So, a few moments after the ceremony began and a descendant of Babemba's bodyguard took the podium to announce that his family had decided to reveal the tomb to the world, all hell broke loose. Instantly all the solemn old men in the stands—Babemba's own grandchildren and great-grandchildren—were on their feet, waving their fists and shouting that the whereabouts of the king's real grave would never, ever be divulged to anyone.*

*One of Babemba's great-grandsons seized my microphone to make sure that this message was recorded for posterity: 'His whole life, Babemba fought the tubabu. He detested them. What would he think if we let tubabu find his tomb? Tramp all over it? I'll tell you what will happen. Babemba's wrath will come down on Sikasso!'*

*Despite the fiasco that ensued and led to a quick and shaky end to the well-intentioned ceremony, Malian scholars say they are not giving up. Doulaye Konate, head of the Malian Association of Historians, says that historians have to be patient—when the elders are ready to divulge the secrets of their history, they will do so. Not for financial reward and certainly not for tourist dollars—those won't work here—but when they think their historical secrets will serve the greater interests of their people. And as for any would-be tourists who might be contemplating a pilgrimage to Sikasso to pay their respects to the great King Babemba or snap a shot of the kids beside the tomb of this African hero, his descendants told me they better wait a while—another hundred years or so.*