Gender Ideology and Practice in Mande Societies and in Mande Studies

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In the thirty years since the early days of gender studies, our basic research questions have grown more complex and sophisticated. Hierarchy, stratification and the conditions in which they exist, are still central to both ethnographic and ethnological lines of research. Ideally, data and theory operate iteratively -- each ethnographic analysis offers further data to incorporate into our theories about how humans’ biological common heritage, everywhere largely the same, can coexist with social practices that are so varied, so distinctive, that humans can group themselves into ethnicities, tribes, nationalities, clans, lineages, with diverse forms of marriage and families. We’ve learned that, while all humans reproduce within families, what kind of family groupings, how they are structured, whether they emphasize the mother’s line or the father’s or both, combined with how we divide up the tasks of everyday life, including how we get our food, between men and women, have a great deal to do with the characteristics of how men and women relate to one another. Certain combinations of kinship, division of labor, and food-acquisition practices lend themselves to more egalitarian gender relations while others foster stratification and dominance of one sex over the other.

In the 1970s, the question was whether women were everywhere dominated by men. Now we look at societies to see where male dominance is pervasive and where it is merely stipulated in particular domains of social life. In no society do all women hold a completely subservient position relative to men; by implication, in no society do men totally dominate women. Even in the most clearly stratified cultures, women have been seen to dominate important spheres of social life: the productive and reproductive life of the family is almost always largely in the hands of women.

We have learned that there is everywhere a relationship between how people make their living and degrees of gender stratification, but that the “same” economic practices (e.g. pastoralism) that were once said to underpin male domination may contribute to extreme forms of male dominance in some pastoralist societies, such as the Wodaabe, but not in other, even neighboring pastoral groups such as the Tuareg (Rasmussen 2000). Gender, while integral to much of what is central to life in society -- kinship, religion, politics, labor -- is not necessarily all-encompassing: certain aspects of social life may be marked for gender while others are not.¹

Whether a particular cultural domain can be said to be gendered or not depends largely on how relevant the culture’s ideologies are to its practices. Ideology and practice are relationally-defined; one is understood to be in opposition to the other, but in reality they are inseparable in that ideology cannot be said to exist without some practices to offer evidence of it. Even then, ideology’s connection to practice is not always self-evident.

Practice is the easier of the two to document – it is much simpler to say what people do than to demonstrate why they do it. Ideology is harder to pin down: it may be expressed overtly through action (as in wife-stealing or female infanticide) or it may be articulated symbolically, as in verbal or plastic art, ceremonial or religious practice, in forms variously accessible to different

¹ In the US, for example, humor abounds about the differences between the ways men and women do just about everything, from talking to eliminating bodily waste. I’ve never heard a joke about gendered differences in tooth-brushing though.
members of the society. Whether those individuals attend to the symbolic messages about gender their culture affords them is another question, one that is particularly difficult to answer. I often wonder if this is part of the reason why gender issues have remained so largely unexplored in Mande studies. We who spend our professional lives studying and documenting the complexities of the societies whose origins lie in that region of southwestern Mali and northeastern Guinea known as the Mande(n) have had little to say to date about the intricacies of gendered ideology and practice in the diaspora of cultures the Mande(n) has spawned. The papers in this issue of *Mande Studies* , most of them products of panels on gender I chaired at the last two international Mande Studies conferences (The Gambia 1998 and Leiden 2002) offer insights into the interplay of ideology and practice and the relevance of the gendered messages of symbolic systems in mostly Mande societies in Mali, The Gambia, and the Casamance region of Senegal.

I begin with a discussion of some theoretical issues involved in distinguishing and analyzing gender ideology. The papers that follow further explore both gender ideology and practice from linguistic, anthropological, and historical perspectives. Kassim Kone examines linguistic usages that indicate a degree of interchangeability in gender roles incompatible with rigid gender stratification among the Bamana. An anthropological account of marriage among Bamana that demonstrates multiple levels of meaning and practice associated with a semantically unique event, getting married is offered by Rosa de Jorio. Clemens Zobel analyzes gender and the political roles of *jeliya* in Mali while Marloes Janson focuses on the interaction of economy, religion, and gendered *jali* practices in The Gambia. New data on gendered masking traditions among the Jola in the Casamance region of Senegal are the topic of Kirsten Langeveld’s paper. Kristina Van Dyke critiques the lack of exploration of both the constructed nature of gender and art’s role in producing that construction and calls for recognition of gender and art as politicized categories. Further questioning of androcentric bias is offered by Barbara Frank in her assessment of previous analyses of the Djenne terra-cottas. Eugenia Herbert, in her discussion of analyses of gender and smithing by the French school of Griaule and Dieterlen compared with the perspectives of McNaughton, Huyscom, and Brett-Smith, reminds us that the perspective of the observer affects what is observed. Together, these papers offer an overview of the state of gender studies in Mande scholarship today.

**Ideological Male Dominance: Real or Mythical?**

One of the central issues that needs to be discussed in Mande gender studies is that of male dominance. There is no question that male dominance exists in all Mande societies, from the Bamana to the Kuranko. But what do we mean by the term? Where is it an englobing phenomenon? Where is it limited and perhaps even counterbalanced with domains of women’s power and authority?

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2 Most of these articles began as presentations at the 4th International Conference of the Mande Studies Association in Serrekunda, The Gambia, 1998. Others began as presentations at the 5th International Conference of the Mande Studies Association in Leiden, The Netherlands, 2002. My contribution draws on my presentations from the 37th meeting of the African Studies Association in Toronto, Canada, 1994, the two conferences listed above, and research and teaching I’ve done on the anthropology of gender during the last decade.
For some time now, both the notion and the relevance of the universality of male dominance has been in dispute (Sanday 1981; Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Ortner 1996). Patterns of dominance have been seen to be tied to socioeconomic, political, and religious, and other prestige structures. The tendency for male domination to occur increases where the division of men's and women's labor is more rigid and where women are excluded from the most prestigious activities of the community. Highly marked divisions of labor and exclusion of women from public spheres of authority and power are regularly found in most, but not all, pastoral and agricultural societies. The question remains, however, whether the designation of this pattern of gender segregation is rightfully referred to as "male domination." Rogers 1975, Leacock 1981 and Sanday 1981 have indicated unease with the term, offering the label "mythical male dominance" as an alternative for those societies in which males demonstrate dominating behaviors against women, but women nevertheless hold social and economic power and/or political authority.

Sanday (1981: 80,181) makes a bold, but largely unexplained claim, that the Bamana constitute such a group, along with the Mundurucu of the Amazon, and the Kikuyu of Kenya. She derives this notion about the Bamana from the work of Viviana Paques, whose work suggests that there may be more for western-trained scholars to understand about Mande gender systems than appears at first glance.

This paper examines issues of male dominance and female power in the blended Mande societies of urban Bamako. It is based on field work conducted during a four and a half year period in the mid-1980s and several months of fieldwork in 1999-2001. The focus of that research—the relationship between social status and language use (Hoffman 1995, 1998, 2000)—and the methodology used (experiential, including apprenticeship as a griot), lent insight into the complexities of Mande notions of hierarchy, complementarity, and division of labor across a range of social statuses, including caste, age, and gender. Through the analysis of data presented here, Sanday's proposal of ideological male dominance as “mythical” appears to apply to Mande society. Examination of the evidence draws into question the pervasiveness of male dominance in Mande cultures and offers a more complex interpretation of what constitutes evidence thereof.

Gender Ideology in Mande Studies
The literature on the ideological underpinnings of gender relations in Mande societies is scant. While Mande gender practices have been the focus of a number of recent studies (Grosz-Ngaté 1989, 1994; de Jorio 1994, 2001; Hale 1998; Brand 2001; Janson 2002), Mande gender ideologies as such have received sparse scholarly attention, perhaps due to the fact that, upon initial examination, questions of dominance and power between the sexes in Mande cultures hardly seem problematic from an analytical point of view. From their kinship calculations to their acculturation to western practices such as formal education and nation-state governance, Mande societies seem at first glance to be inarguably male-dominated. Both customarily and juridically, men hold the positions of highest public authority in Mande societies and the few such positions that have always belonged to women, such as leader of Women's Associations or musotóm, are on one level or another publicly subordinated to male authority. There are increasing numbers of women in ministerial positions throughout the Mande diaspora, women attempted to run for president in the last elections in both Mali and Liberia, and there is a woman
currently filling the Vice Presidential office in The Gambia; nevertheless, the few women who have been elected or appointed to public office or to leadership of political organizations are more the exception than the rule. Whether the fact that they have achieved important levels of public authority significantly expands the opportunities for public power and authority in the lives of non-elite women is a subject for further research.

Evidence of male domination appears in the rare studies of Mande social structure that have substantially addressed issues of gender relations. One of the earliest scholars to comment at length on gender relations in the context of a broad study of social status is Sory Camara (1976). He explains the hierarchical gender relations of Malinké society as a result of intimidation of women by men via masculine initiation societies, which "maintained the uninitiated (children) and the uninitiable (women) in constant anxiety, which kept them in a state of subjection and submission." (p. 50, translation mine). This relationship is further evidenced by the fact that wives could not call their husband by the first name, which would be a sign of disrespect, using instead kin terminology such as "brother" or "uncle," and by the fact that wives were not supposed to speak directly to their husbands in public (ibid; see also Van Dyke, this issue). Additionally, Camara notes, women's exclusion from men's political and agricultural activities, coupled with men's exclusion from women's domestic activities, set the stage for a world divided into masculine and feminine spheres. (p. 51)

This perspective is developed further by Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1989) who points out that, while men's and women's labor activities are of "parallel importance,"

"for men to carry out the tasks of women would mean lowering themselves to their level and equally, for men and women to do the tasks of their caste counterparts would mean lowering themselves to the latter's level. The issue is not one of being able to learn or not learn those tasks. Only slaves or those who acknowledge their slave descent are not bound by any restrictions, they are free to do anything. This appears to be an indigenous theory of how hierarchy is manifested and maintained." (1989:171)

Grosz-Ngaté thus situates power and identity in her rural Bamana field site within a structure wherein dominance is hierarchically expressed along gender and caste lines. Men there hold ultimate power through classic structures of authority: age, caste, and gender. Every Bamana man may be influenced by his mothers and sisters, as long as their attempts to sway him are conducted in such a way that his public appearance of authority remains unmenaced. On the face of it, this would seem to support the view of the Mande world as male-dominated.

My experience with women during field research on the cultural differences between castes, however, has led me to believe that the assumptions of pervasive male dominance and power are worth a second look. Hierarchy and stratification, whether based on gender, caste, age or ethnicity, are constructed from the basic social building blocks of context, participants, and events, and as such are relational and relative, changing as new participants enter and old ones leave, playing out differently in changing times and places. The clear hierarchical relationship between clients and patrons as enacted in ceremonial contexts may disappear altogether in religious or other professional contexts. As with caste, notions of hierarchy are dependent on
concepts of power. I have found in my studies of structures of power in the Mande caste system that a comparison of the symbolic structures of ideology and power can be very revealing (Hoffman 1995, 2000).

Symbolic expressions of gender ideology

Common symbolic systems that offer evidence of gender ideology include verbal forms such as proverbs, folktales, and myths. In this section, I examine gender ideology as found in Mande oral literature. It is perhaps useful here to discuss the notion of "ideology" in the Mande scheme of thought. I use the term cautiously and etically, as I am not claiming that the notion of ideology as defined in western tongues exists in Mande semantic systems. The ideas about the rules of behavior that are touched on here are talked about in a number of ways: "laada" or "naame," (custom, tradition) "sariya," (law, custom, rules) "sira koro" (old path/way). All of these "rules" are supported by a cultural matrix of authority grounded in respect for age, for history, for ways of the past. But since they are not recorded anywhere for consultation, i.e., they are orally transmitted, they are particularly subject to interpretation and transmutation, and different authorities can have different ideas about what the rules are and how they should apply. And so, the term "ideology" as applied to these statements and ideas is an analytical label, an etic term, and not to be construed as a translation of an indigenous Mande concept.³

With that caveat in mind, let us turn to explicit statements of an ideological type regarding women's gender roles that are found in Mande proverbs (zana/sana) and stories (nzirin). These two types of literature, highly conventionalized, are typically used for the purpose of socializing children and for reminding adults of societal norms, and as such provide a corpus of ideological thought (Obelkevich 1994; Yankah 1994; Kone 1996).

Core values expressed in the form of proverbs (zana/sana), and folk tales (nsirin), support the notion that the Mande woman's most valuable roles are to bear and raise children, care for her home and obey her husband and that she is not suited for other labors because of her weakness, her unreliability, and her penchant for treachery. Disdain of the husband for the wife is common to these verbal art forms. Yet mothers and sisters are highly respected, even revered, in Mande societies.

Women characters in the Sunjata epic provide further evidence of the ambiguous position women hold in Mande ways of thought. They are often powerful figures whose position stems from their adoption of an anti-social lifestyle or behavior from which they might benefit for a short time, but whose deadly price they inevitably pay (cf. Conrad 1999). An inversion of these values is represented in the female deity of Mande origin myths, whose immense energies are depicted as the source of the expansion and diversification of life on earth but in a disorderly fashion, unleashing a dangerous chaos which could only be brought into control through the empowerment of a dual-gendered deity who brought to the world the balance of male and female principles.

These forms of oral literature – proverbs, folk tales, and epic – will be briefly sampled below. Then, drawing on the work of Rogers and Sanday, we will turn to Mande origin myths to

³ Etic = analytical, outsider’s point of view. Antonym: emic.
elucidate male and female roles and power in Mande society.

**Proverbs (zanaw)**

Mande proverbs about women run the affective gamut from praise of woman's child-bearing capacities to derision for her ill-formed, dubious character. At the same time, there is an admission of ignorance and in fact, of incapacity on the part of men to understand women, as expressed in proverb 1:

1. *Muso tE don ka ban.* [FS]
   
   **Woman can never be completely known.**

However, the ideology holds that she can be shaped, like clay, to conform to the directives of others, as in proverb 2:

2. *Muso ye b[kl] kEn de ye, n'i y'a m[n] k'a bila c[g] min, a bi ja ten.* [B]
   
   **Woman is fresh mud; however you shape her, she will dry that way.**

The ambivalence that Mande men feel with regard to women, their inability to reconcile their intense love for their own mothers with their sometimes disdainful sentiments about women in general is expressed in proverb 3:

3. *An baw ka yafa an ma, nyuman tE muso r/[. [B]*
   
   **May our mothers forgive us, there is no good in woman.**

From the masculine perspective, women are seen as little more dignified than children; they are equated with things of nature, untamed by culturally shaped rules of behavior, as in proverb number 4:

4. *K'i kalifa muso ma ani k'i kalifa baji tEnEml/ ma, a bEE kElEn.* [FS]
   
   **To confide yourself to a woman and to confide yourself to the passing river, is the same thing.**

Women are said not to adhere to masculine Mande core values such as strict honesty, unwavering loyalty in friendship, unbending obedience to the rules of social life, as in proverbs 5-7.

5. *Ala ye muso da janfa de kama.* [FS]
   
   **God created woman for treachery.**


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4 The proverbs in this study are taken from three sources: two field studies I did with a Mande-speaking informant, Harouna Bah, in Senegal in 1984, and with Kassim Koné in Mali (1984-1988), and from Koné's 1995 publication of Mande proverbs. Sources are indicated in brackets after each proverb: [B] for Bah, [FS] for the field study done with Koné, and [K] for Koné.
Even when straight, woman is a scythe. If you try to straighten her more, she will break.

7. Ni muso k\[n/na kalon banna don o don, a bE sa o don. [B]\n   The day the lies of a woman finish, that day she will die.

And, as further indictment, woman possesses only the intelligence of her body, not that of the refined and cultured mind:

8. Muso hakili dan ye a sinw ye. [B]
   The limit of woman's intelligence is her breasts.

If statements such as these about women's inherent incapacity for reason and integrity were limited to the realm of oral literature, their consonance with aspects of Mande gender ideology would be questionable. However, one can hear them echoed in people's discourse of conflict. For example, arguments between men and women may at times elicit comments from men such as "She's only a woman, anyway" and "Besides, a woman is just another mattress" while conflict between women can give occasion for one woman to say about the other "Her butt is bigger than her brain."

It should be recognized, however, that these are provocative words if spoken in hearing distance of the woman in question or her allies. Such directly-expressed sentiments do not go unmediated, representative as they are of a powerful ambivalence which pushes first toward adoration of mother and fondness of sister, then pulls toward disdain of sister-in-law and desire for mastery of wife. Strategies to counterbalance the sting of these verbal expressions abound.

In addition to ideology about woman's character, proverbs express ideology about women's roles in Mande society. Where women have the most power and authority is in the least public of contexts: in the home, woman's ideological and practical place in the Mande world. There, she is to devote herself first and foremost to bearing and caring for children, as expressed in proverbs 9-11.

9. Muso nakun ye den ko ye. [FS]
   A woman's reason for being is her child.
10. Muso masiri ye woloden ye. [K]
    A child is a woman's ornament.
11. Muso ni kolon de b\[E musoya k\[E m\[nE ye. Muso de b\[E faama banke. Muso de b\[E baana banke. Muso de b\[E waliju banke. [K]
    It's the worthless woman that makes womanhood regrettable. Women give

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5 Kassim Koné points out that there is an alternative way of saying the same proverb: Ni muso dabali/dalilu banna don o don, a bE sa o don. It is worth asking whether this equivalence suggests that control of information is power, the means of accomplishment for women (personal communication 1995).
birth to kings. Women give birth to the wealthy. Women give birth to the learned.

Conversely, the woman who will not or cannot have children is derisible, as in proverb 12:

12. Saga monen ka fisa ni borogE ye. [B]  
A castrated sheep is better than a sterile woman.

Consultants explained this proverb by saying that at least you can eat the sheep--a sterile woman is useless in Mande ways of thinking.

The principle of a woman's devotion to her ideological duty to reproduce is encapsulated in a proverb about the duty of brides:

13. Konyomuso nakun ye cEkO ye. [FS]  
A bride's reason for being is to have sex with her husband.

The consequences of the Mande woman's proper execution of her conjugal, reproductive duties are held to be far-reaching; her own character shapes the character of her children, as expressed in proverbs 14-16:

14. Muso nyalEn den tE tinya. [FS]  
The child of a good woman will not be spoiled.

15. Muso jugu den, a tEkEn fen ye. [FS]  
The child of a bad woman becomes nothing.

16. Muso min mana d/n[k]/r/kasi kE a cEkunnako kekekerele, a denkE bE shEmusokasi kE ko k[k]/k. [K]  
If a woman crows over her husband, cock-a-doodle-do, her son will cackle like a hen, ko-ko-ko.

The respect and obedience she offers her husband affect in turn the social destiny of her children, as expressed in proverbs 17-18:

17. Muso bara maloya a cEma, dinya bi maloya a den ma. [FS]  
If a woman feels shame before her husband, the world will feel shame before her child.

18. Muso min mana dan a cEla, dinya bi dan o den na. [FS]  
If a woman limits herself to her husband, the world will limit itself to her child.

However, it is recognized that not all of a woman's children will excel, as in proverb 19:

19. Muso ka denkE wolo bEE tE taarE ye, d/w ye to dun gansan ye. [K]  
A woman's giving birth to male children is not always fortunate, some will turn out to be no more than eaters of to.6

6 To eat, rather than produce, the staple of the Mande diet -- a cooked paste made from ground
The association of women with matters of the home such as cooking and cleaning is illustrated with proverbs 20 and 21:

20. *N’i y’a mEn ko nin so in n[k]len, kana musow ni m[k]jE o la, musow ta de ye n[k] ye.*
   *If you hear that a house is dirty, don't gather the women and others about it, women's lot is dirt.*

   *The old woman sitting idle complains that the balls of to are too big. The woman who died stirring millet powder to make the to would not say that.*

And, lastly, the limits of women's participation in matters of power and authority are expressed metaphorically in proverb 22:

22. *Muso de bE soma wolo n’o tE muso tEkE soma ye. [K]*
   *A woman gives birth to a person of wisdom, she does not become one.*

The gender ideology for womanhood expressed by this small corpus of proverbs is undeniably one of subordination, both to her husband and to the social requirement of reproduction – a woman who neither bears children nor marries has no respectable position in Mande society. Of course such cases occur – not all women marry, not all married women bear children – but the women in these cases are left in a monstrous position as incomplete adults who can never attain the full status of a respected elder within the family, lineage, clan or community. To do so requires adhesion to the norms of marriage and motherhood.

The ideology of the necessity of conforming to these social norms for women is also expressed in narratives in which female characters that follow the rules of behavior in a society where public deference to the elderly is demanded are rewarded while those who disobey are punished, sometimes mortally.

**Folktales (Nzirin)**

An example of Mande gender ideology as illustrated in *nzirin* is found in the story collected and translated into French by Veronika Gorog-Karady, *Les Deux Filles*. What follows millet – is considered shameful.

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[7] Conrad 1999 offers evidence that, in practice, this ideological admonition has been periodically ignored in that certain women in Upper Guinea have played important sociopolitical roles, including that of *soma*. In addition, in 1985 I recorded a song by Siramori Diabate at the gathering of griots in Kita urging everyone, men and women, to become *somaw*.

[8] It is also true that men who neither marry nor father children suffer social consequences, but just what those are, how they are expressed, whether childless and wifeless men are ranked above or below women of the same status, is a subject for further research.

[9] This ideology is now being expressed in film as well, e.g. *Finzan*, although it should be noted that the punishment of the disobedient female character in this film is framed critically by the filmmaker in order to draw the audience to question the cultural practice of female excision.
The Two Girls

This is the story of an orphaned girl who was of the age to marry. It was the custom in that country for girls who were to be married to go out in the bush to look for calabashes for their trousseau. When the orphan's age-mates were going out, they came by for their friend, but found she was busy working for her dead mother's co-wife. So the orphan asked her friends to leave branches to mark their path for her so she could join them later.

When she had finished her work, she followed the branches, but by that time the wind had blown them onto another path. This path led her to a stream where she found an old woman bathing.

The orphan girl greeted the woman politely and responded to her question about where she was going. The old woman asked the girl to come wash her back, which the girl readily agreed to do.

While washing the back of the old woman with wood fiber, the girl pierced the skin. Abashed, she asked for forgiveness. The old woman assured her it was not serious and asked her to take whatever she saw under her skin. The girl found there a pebble, a distaff and an egg. The old woman told her to take those things with her. Then the old woman sent her on her way with blessings.

The girl walked until she found many golden calabashes. There was one bigger and more beautiful than the others. She took it and left.

This calabash belonged to the head lion who grew enraged and gave pursuit when he discovered its loss. When the girl saw the lions, she threw the pebble behind her. It became a great mountain, which slowed the lions down considerably. However, soon they were gaining on her again.

So she threw the distaff behind her. It became a great bamboo grove full of vines, which slowed the lions down considerably. However, soon they were gaining on her again.

So she threw the egg behind her. It became a large river, which the lions could not cross because lions don't know how to swim.

So the girl arrived safely at home with her golden calabash.

The daughter of her dead mother's co-wife saw the calabash and was envious. She said she too would go find such a calabash for her own.

Again, the second girl's friends went before her and left leaves on the path for her to follow, but the leaves were blown away by the wind.

The path she took led her to the same stream as the first girl. There she saw the same old
lady, whom she greeted very disrespectfully, as a superior: "Hey, old lonely woman! What are you doing here?!" A respectful girl like the first would have called her "mother".

The old woman, however, greeted her respectfully as her daughter and inquired where she was going. The girl retorted, "Is that any of your business?"

Again, the old woman requested the girl wash her back. The girl resisted but finally capitulated when the old woman begged her, but she did so angrily. When the woman's back was pierced, she declared that the old woman must be a sorcerer.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the old woman offered her the contents of her back, the egg, the distaff, and the pebble. The girl laughed, saying she had no use for any of those things, but the old woman insisted she take them anyway, just in case.

When the girl came to the calabashes, she also took the biggest one. Again, the lions came and chased her. As did the other girl, she threw behind her the stone, the distaff, and the egg; however, this time, even though the egg transformed into a river, the lions reached her and ate her. Because of her impolite, haughty behavior, she lost both the calabash and her life.

The lesson of this nzirin is clear: conformity to the expectations of society leads to happiness and prosperity; non-conformity leads to destruction. In social life as well as in literature, there is widespread conformity to the duties of motherhood and marriage: of primary importance is having a child. Next important is being a wife: a Mande woman who chooses to remain unmarried sets herself up for social stigmatizing ranging from teasing to outright harassment and/or outcasting.¹¹

Not even highly educated and employed women are exempt from this requirement; a colleague of mine at an integrated rural development project sponsored by USAID and the Malian Ministry of Agriculture, a post-menopausal woman who had devoted many years of service to the National Functional Literacy program, had never married and yet went by the honorific "Madame" to spare herself some of the painful social costs of her true status. Those who knew her well tolerated the charade, understanding full well what her situation would be as a "Mademoiselle."

¹⁰ Although accusations of sorcery among peer can be play as well as criticism, it is very rude to apply such a label seriously to someone one hardly knows.

¹¹ The moral norms of Islam and of Mande society in general would reverse the order, both chronological and moral, of these actions. My analysis stems from observation of the social pressures brought to bear on unmarried, childless women, and the choices some make as all hope of marriage dwindles. Brand (2002) notes similar tendencies.
Gender Theory and Mande Gender Ideology

Mande gender ideology would thus seem to be a prime candidate for illustration of the theoretical positions of feminist anthropologists Rosaldo and Ortner as outlined in their 1974 papers in the volume Women, Culture and Society, a ground-breaking collection of essays, several of which have become classics in the anthropology of gender. Although the theories of Rosaldo and Ortner have undergone numerous challenges in the 30 years since which have reduced their applicability from cultural universals to generalizations, they remain powerful analytical tools of women's ideological status in numerous societies, including, I argue, those of the Mande. However, their conclusion that where there is public/private dichotomy and association of women with nature there is also male domination is overly simplified. Subsequent studies have shown that where genderization of public and domestic domains occur, there can be a variety of articulations of gender asymmetry, including near-egalitarian relations and the "mythical male dominance" evidenced in societies where women hold certain kinds of power, but act as if males were the dominant sex (Leacock 1981; Sanday 1981; Rogers 1975). Further investigation of Mande mythology, epic, and the social practices they inform, reveal that important aspects of Mande gender asymmetries fall in the category of mythical male dominance.

Rosaldo proposed that the dichotomization of public and private domains of social action is an integral factor in the universal subordination of women. Where kinship and politics are constructed by men, women are seen as sources of disorder, as social anomalies (1974:31). Among the patrilineal and patrilocal Mande peoples, women are indeed viewed symbolically as socially ambiguous persons, holding as they do the status of perpetual outsiders to their husband's descent group and at the same time playing only a partial, part-time, role in their father's. While the central task of women, bearing and raising children, is respected, women hold an ambiguous status, enjoying respect and reverence as mothers and elder sisters while enduring public and often private domination and lack of personal autonomy as individuals. Mande society generally reserves relatively little public acclaim for the bearer of the role of motherhood, and none at all for the woman who chooses to follow another destiny.

Ortner attempted to explain why this seems to be the case in many societies by comparing the conceptual position of women in society to the distinctions between culture and nature. Woman, she says, is to man as nature is to culture; that is, that woman as bearer of children, preparer of food and keeper of the home occupies an intermediate conceptual position between culture and nature, while man, as creator of "the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology) by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" is more intimately associated with culture (1974:72).

While the examination of the applicability of this assertion has revealed its reductionistic tendencies and more complex views of the relation of both men and women to culture and nature have since been proposed (MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Ortner 1996), several points of

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12 Public arenas where women are openly praised for being mothers and upstanding women are typically those attended almost exclusively by women: weddings (konyo) and naming ceremonies (denkundi).
Ortner's argument remain useful. In constructing the foundations for her thesis, Ortner asks first whether it is a universal fact that women are everywhere attributed second-class status culturally. She cites the following as kinds of evidence of this fact:

1. The presence of cultural ideology accompanied by informant's statements explicitly devaluing women, according them, their roles, tasks, products, and social milieux less prestige than that accorded men.

2. The presence of symbolic practices such as the attribution of defilement which makes an implicit statement of inferior valuation.

3. The presence of social structures that exclude women from participation in some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside. (Ortner 1974:69)

The presence of evidence of the first kind has been amply illustrated. With regard to Ortner's second form of evidence--symbolic practices such as the attribution of defilement which makes an implicit statement of inferior valuation--there is evidence that Mande women can be considered defiling to men under certain circumstances. There are moments in a Mande man's life when he is advised to abstain from intercourse with a woman. For Muslims, there is a mandate for avoidance of intercourse at certain periods of the day during the month of fasting, but this works both ways. In other words, it is just as defiling to a woman to sleep with a man as for a man to sleep with a woman during that time. However, Camara notes that avoidance of sex was traditionally thought to protect young virgin men from bullets:

"In the past, it was recommended that young men put off as long as possible the beginning of sexual relations with women: this abstinence was supposed to render the man invulnerable to bullets during battle. It was, in a way, the equivalent of a protective fetish." (Camara 1976: 93, translation mine)

Koné points out that "women are the tana [totem] for many religious objects and magic potions for power" and that some talismans are not to be permitted to be touched by a woman or to be worn when sleeping with a woman (personal communication 1995). Thus it seems to be the case that women are seen in some contexts and for some kinds of men to be sources of pollution or contamination; however, this is limited to specific situations and is not a pervasive way of thinking about women.

The third form of evidence Ortner cites--social structures that exclude women from participation in some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside--is abundant in Mande culture. Women are typically excluded from the chieftainship and the village council, they

13 Kassim Koné notes that the purification ritual that the transgressor of this rule must undergo is similar to that applied to a corpse and is referred to by the same term: janabako. (personal communication 1995)
cannot head households (*liw/duw*) or descent groups (*kabilaw*) and they are excluded from religious leadership by the teachings of Islam. This is not to say that women do not exert influence or even sometimes exercise socially sanctioned authority on the men who hold these positions of power; however, women may not hold such positions themselves.

Mande gender ideology for women is thus both rigid and specific: in order to be both honorable and honored, women must marry and have children. On the face of the evidence Ortner calls for, then, Mande society would seem to be male-dominated. However, once a Mande woman has married and had a child, there is considerable flexibility in her position. The ambiguity of woman's status grants her many possibilities, for the most part within the kinship structures of home and extended family, but increasingly also within public expressions of the domains of power and authority (De Jorio 1994, 2001).

*A Musoya ye dibi ye: Womanhood is Ambiguity*

Symbolic representation of the potential of this ambiguous status is exemplified by the women of the Sunjata epic. In that epic, the most powerful men are those who can wield the most occult power and one of the principal sources of that power is maternal inheritance. This subject has been amply treated by David Conrad in his exploratory article, “Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in Mande Epic Tradition” (1999). Rather than recapitulate Conrad’s thorough discussion of the numerous heroines of the epic, I turn here to a few examples from one version of the Sunjata epic, that of Fadigi Sisoko published by John Johnson.

Johns on notes the dependency of sons on the spiritual powers of their mothers: when the mother of Sumamuru, Sunjata’s enemy, disowns Sumamuru, she cuts off part of his occult strength and weakens him (1986:217). Sunjata also derived much of his occult power from his mother, Sugulun Konde, who was described as an ugly woman covered with warts, capable of turning herself into a giant with spikes projecting from her breasts to prevent being taken by a man who was not destined to be her husband. She was a seer as well, predicting accurately that her true husband awaited her in the Manden.

Both Sunjata, her son, and Sugulun Kulunkan, her daughter, inherited Sugulun Konde’s occult capacities. Sugulun Kulunkan was a sorceress able to conjure away the hearts and livers of the buffalo to avert a dishonor from Sunjata. Such powerful women are considered valuable in the epic, where Sumamuru, who had one hundred wives, stole the sole wife of his nephew, Fa-Koli, because she was a powerful sorceress (Johnson 1986:174-175, cf. Conrad 1992).

In discussing the role of ambiguity as indicator of occult power in women's social status, Michael Jackson notes that "...the animals most commonly associated with witches--palmbirds, lizards, toads, snakes, cats, vultures, owls--are also structurally ambiguous: they are of the wild, yet often enter and live within the village" (1989: 96-97) and that the notion of sorceress as a dangerous outsider on the inside is "grounded in the ambiguous social position of young married women, legally bound to their husbands yet emotionally attached to their natal families and 'sisters.'" (ibid.). In ordinary Mande social life, the attribution of occult powers to a woman is at once empowering and endangering; it is a capacity for which she can be both respected and reviled.
There is a striking similarity between this characterization of women's position in Mande society and aspects of the social position of griots and other nyamakalaw. It is not accidental that both women and griots are viewed by Mande h/r/n men with a kind of psychological ambivalence. Camara argues that in the Mande psyche there is a symbolic link between women, emotionality, weakness and impotence because a woman is free to express all emotions, especially tenderness, pity and fear from which a noble man must shield himself with bellicosity and anger. Anything which can release those emotions in him is forbidden. This includes, of course, the art of the griot which stirs up all kinds of emotions, an art form to which Mande people are particularly attracted, as Camara notes (1976:93) and as I have discussed elsewhere, and as Zobel notes (this issue).\(^{14}\) I summarize my arguments here.

Mande conceptions of the aesthetics of power are key to understanding the potency of the griot's art. For example, the masks of the Komo secret society are made powerful by the obscuring of their original form, which renders it ambiguous and agentive.\(^{15}\) The Komo mask, which is built upon a foundation of wood carved in a simple shape, is empowered by the matter that is added to it over time, a multiplication of horns and quills, layering of clay and blood, and the quantities of powerful and dangerous force (nyama) that these materials bring with them. The more imperceptible the original form becomes, the more hidden it is, the more forceful an object the mask becomes.

Similarly, much of the occult power ascribed to the griot's art derives from simple syntactic structure whose referential meaning is made obscure. Of all the performance genres griots master, praise is widely recognized to be the most powerful, the most empowering, and the most laden with nyama. The form which the griot uses to build this power language is simple and unelaborated, like the inner form of the Komo mask. The syntax of praise, unlike ordinary language, is largely comprised of simple and conjoined noun phrases, such as "Kala Jula Sangoyi," (a name) and "Kukumba ni Batamba" (name and name). There is no formal predication upon the subject, and therefore, to many listeners, the phrases have little referential meaning; this obscurity enhances the power of the words. Their meaning, and their potency, derives not from verbs and objects, but from the interaction of the griot and noble in the performance context.

The performance context of another powerful language, the language of divining, presents an inverted, but equally empowering example. A Mande word for this language is dibikan—the language of dibi. Dibi is a kind of darkness that is not restricted to the night—it is a word that can be applied to any physical or conceptual domain that is unclear, amorphous, uncertain. It is not empty, however; in divining, the obscurity of dibikan contains the power to transmit messages from the unseen world.

The performance setting of divining is usually a private, evening one, dimly lit. The seer speaks in a low, barely audible voice, uttering a series of conjoined nouns and noun phrases of the type

\(^{14}\) Hoffman 1995.

\(^{15}\) McNaughton 1979:44.
"musoya ni kele" (womanhood and combat), "jugu ni dimi" (enemy and pain). Although these nouns taken individually have a clear referential base, they are not heard as discrete semantic units, but as a barely distinguishable series of sounds whose meaning is only discernible as a unit of speech within the entire speech event of the divination. When the seer interprets *dibikan* for his client, he uses ordinary syntax, pace, intonation, and volume—he speaks "clear speech" (kuma *jΣ*). The client has no means of verifying his interpretation, however; the syntax of *dibikan* is impenetrable to the non-initiate. It is obscured by the darkness, by the quiet, by the power of ambiguous form and meaning.

The praise poetry of griots, formally composed of noun phrases similar in structure to *dibikan*, is distinguished by the structural components of its performance context: it is not whispered in nighttime privacy, but shouted and sung, most often during the sunniest hours of the day, in the midst of great crowds. This contextual inversion—for the words are considered to have occult power—contributes to its potency.

All of these symbolic elements—the aesthetic equation of simplicity of form with truth and the knowable, of elaborate form with ambiguity and the dangerous; the contrast between discourses of power, one belonging to the realm of night (*dibikan*) and the other to the life of the day (*jelikan*), both rendered potent by ambiguities in their production and use—point to a powerful cultural principle that informs Mande ways of thinking about relationships between beings, human and spirit, living and dead. It is unlikely that Mande gender systems would be immune to such a pervasive aspect of Mande culture.

I would argue in fact that they are not, that it is precisely this type of structural and symbolic ambiguity and the complex of responses associated with it that gives rise to the appearance of ubiquitous male dominance in Mande societies. Again, an illustration from the interactions between griots and nobles—another purportedly hierarchically structured relationship—may be revealing.

I have argued (Hoffman 1995, 2000) that the position of griots in Mande society is a powerful one despite the griots' public conformity to a hierarchy that places them in a subordinate position to nobles. This conclusion is founded upon observance of how the ideological hierarchy is in fact lived in practice: relations between griots and nobles are much more complementary than hierarchical. Griots have their spheres of influence and authority, nobles have theirs. The two do not overlap. Although the relationship between the castes is almost universally articulated as a hierarchical one, it is most often lived as a complementary division of labor between equals with different capacities and strengths. The view of Mande personhood as depicted in the creation myths offers support for a similar perspective on the relations between males and females.

**Ambiguity and Mythical Male Dominance**

According to the myths as recorded by Dieterlen and Zahan, the creator beings emerged one after another and each effected different types of creation on the earth. First was Ngala, a male deity, who sent an avatar to earth, Pemba. Pemba created a female deity, Muso Koroni, who became his wife. The creation they brought about as a couple and as individuals remained incomplete and unmanageable until a third deity, Faro, an androgynous being, came into power and began to install order on the face of the earth (Dieterlen 1988; Zahan 1974). Part of the chaos wrecked
upon the earth by the goddess Muso Koroni was embodied in the removal of the physical manifestation of the dual gender of the human’s natural state through the practice of circumcision and excision, which Muso Koroni is credited with instituting.

In the myths, we discern the tensions and interplay between the sexes that can be seen to invest their interactions through the ages. Neither male nor female is considered a complete adult human being without coupling with the other sex and reproducing. At the same time, that joining must be symbolically restricted and genderization is strict: all traces of the male sex are ablated from the female through clitoral excision; the feminine characteristics of the foreskin are cleansed from the male body through circumcision. The order established by the wild wanderings of the female deity must be respected. Yet, elements of both genders continue to exist in each sex, and the combination of both is at once necessary and healthy for the society. The refinements of order brought to society by the androgynous deity have their place as well.

This configuration of origin myth deities, Sanday suggests, is characteristic of societies where “mythical male dominance” prevails. In such societies, there will typically be a public norm of male dominance to which both men and women will seem to ascribe. However, women continue to wield considerable power in a number of domains, including economic, political, and sometimes religious. There is some evidence that, in pre-colonial Mande societies, exceptional women did indeed play prestigious political roles (Conrad 1999). The government of the first democratically-elected president of Mali, Alpha Konaré, offered more political opportunities to women than ever before. Rogers (1975) indicates that mythical male dominance tends to occur in peasant societies where there may exist parallel economic systems and a division of labor that effectively renders the male and female worlds separate.

The structural similarities between the roles of griots and the roles of women would suggest that a similar principle holds for women in Mande society: their acceptance of and submission to a public ideology of subordination gives them the cultural space in which to cultivate substantial quantities of actual power and effective authority. Many questions remain, however: is Mande society in transition from a state of mythical to real male dominance, or is it, with the influence of western feminism and rapidly evolving changes in women’s economic and political activities, emerging from real male dominance (which took over from a previous state of mythical male dominance) and developing more egalitarian relations along with its expanding economy?

It seems likely that actual configurations differ significantly depending upon the cultural context: the power relations of rural peasants and those of literate office workers will vary significantly and may represent a plurality of dominance and hierarchy configurations being enacted simultaneously. Much work remains to be done in documenting these various situations before the existence of mythical or real male dominance and the systems of classification and ambiguity that give rise to gender asymmetries in Mande society can be adequately understood.

However, the papers in this volume of *Mande Studies* take several steps toward documenting the specific asymmetries of both Mande society and studies thereof. Kone, in the next paper, presents an in-depth look at how the Mande ideology of male domination is challenged by sociocultural behaviors and in language use such that the distinction between the genders is not an absolute but a relative one. The ambiguities and polysemies of gendered practice appear in de
Jorio’s account of marriage among Segovian Bamana. Zobel’s historical account of gender, *jeliya* and power demonstrates how both caste and gender categories adapt over time in response to specific socioeconomic and political exigencies. More data on the interaction of economy, religion, and gendered *jali* practices are brought to light in Janson’s discussion of praise in The Gambia. Langeveld examines myth and masquerade for evidence of previously undocumented gendered practice among the Jola of Senegal.

Three art historians offer critiques of bias in gendered analysis of Mande art forms: Van Dyke critiques the unquestioning acceptance of male dominance as a given in studies of Bamana sculpture while Frank questions the pervasive androcentric bias in previous analyses of the Djenne terra-cottas. Herbert concludes with a nuanced historical overview of scholarly studies of Bamana and Dogon smithing and gender.

Together, these papers offer an overview of the state of gender studies in Mande scholarship today. It almost goes without saying that much more work needs to be done, that more Mande historians (as well as art historians), political scientists, economists and aid workers need to be paying attention to the below-the-surface gendered dimensions of Mande cultures. Above all, more Mande scholars themselves – whether from the Mande core or peripheries – should be participating in the evolution and documentation of this discussion.16

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16 The principal disappointment I encountered in undertaking this project was the lack of participation of Mande scholars from within Africa – all efforts to recruit such participation (both my own and that of the other authors here) failed. The reasons why might be the subject of another research project.
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21


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