

**CAMPAIGNING AGAINST EXCISION IN MALI :
GLOBAL AND LOCAL HIERARCHIES, HEGEMONY AND KNOWLEDGE**

by

Claudie Gosselin

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto**

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To my parents, Pierrette Lieutenant and Léo-Paul Gosselin

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CAMPAIGNING AGAINST EXCISION IN MALI : GLOBAL AND LOCAL HIERARCHIES, HEGEMONY AND KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a multi-sited investigation of the campaign against excision in urban Mali and of the responses to it. Fieldwork took place in 1997-1998 through feminist action-research with a local women's association that carried out programs against excision.

Part I situates the historical, structural and cultural contexts within which excision practices take place, focusing on the two largest ethnic groupings in the areas under study: the Fulbe and the Mande. Key Mande and Fulbe structural hierarchies are discussed, namely gender, age, class, and caste. In Mali, circumcisers have historically come from specific castes of artisans, in particular the Mande *nùmuw* ("blacksmiths"). However today non-*nùmu* health practitioners also perform circumcisions. A review of the ethnographic literature on excision in Mali reveals that for most Mande groups the practice has been constructed as a rite of passage. Other hegemonic constructs that present clitoridectomy as a form of ritual purification and female sexuality as dangerous are also present, and help to explain how the practice comes to be part of 'common-sense' (in the Gramscian sense).

Concepts borrowed from the sociology of knowledge are used in Part II to analyze the campaign against excision and responses to it. The discourses, fields of knowledge and practices of four competing categories of "experts" with regards to excision are presented: feminists, state agents, *nùmu* women, and Muslim leaders. An ethnographic examination of the Malian campaign against excision reveals that it is led by the educated elite, and sustained by global currents of

ideas and capital. The opinions of those targeted by the campaigns (obtained through a survey of 300 men and women) are presented next, as well as the motivations and difficulties of those among them who seek to become 'well-informed' on excision.

I conclude that the debates on excision in Mali reflect broader societal changes and ideological struggles concerning the future of the caste system, the role of the state, secularism, 'traditional' health care, female sexuality, the power of elders, modernity and individualism. I also draw implications of the findings for campaigners and their supporters, and reflect on the challenges of cross-cultural feminist solidarity.

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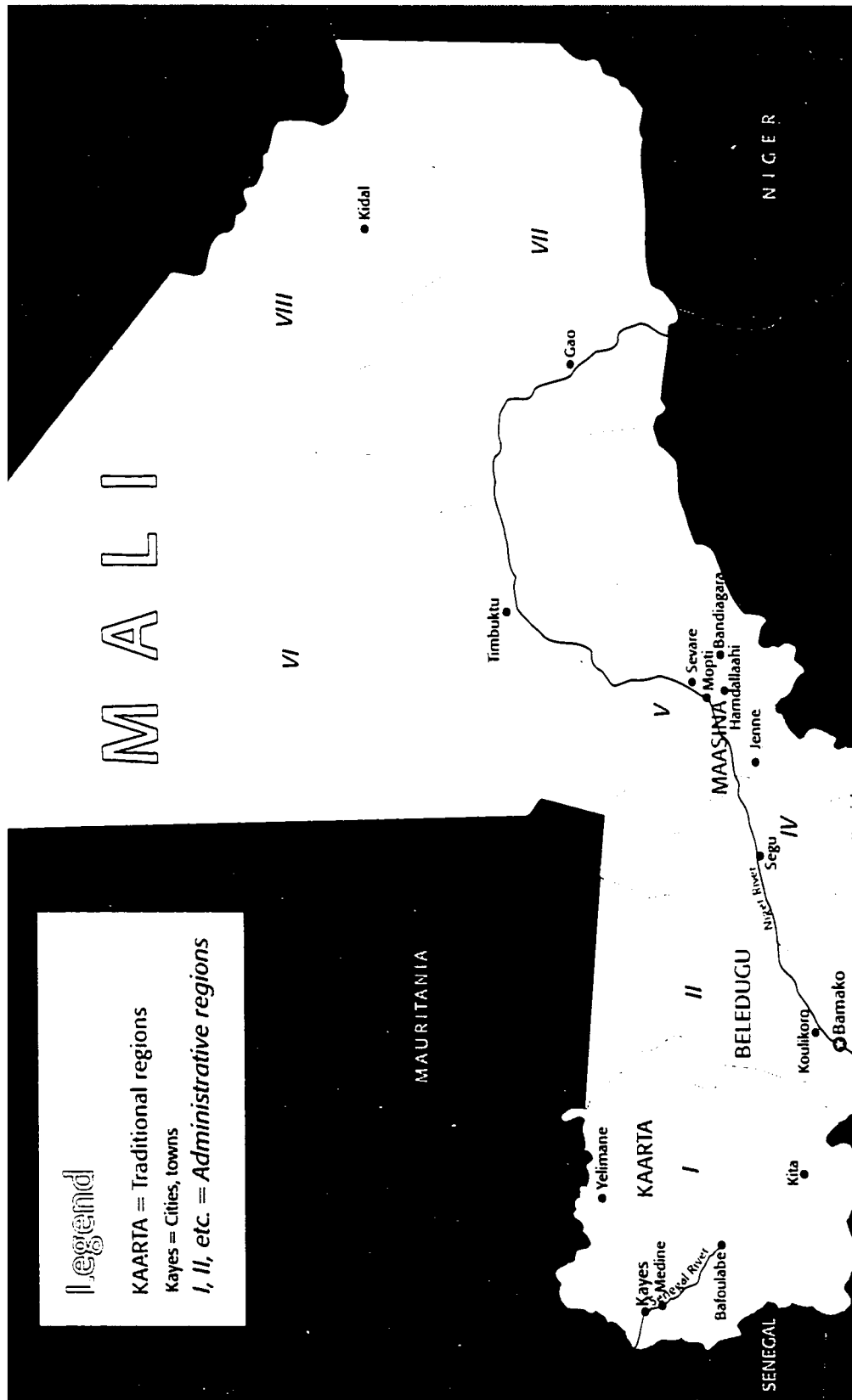
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADEMA	<i>Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali</i>
AEEM	<i>Association des Étudiants et Élèves du Mali</i>
AJM	<i>Association des Juristes Maliennes</i>
AMSOPT	<i>Association Malienne pour le Suivi et l'Orientation des Pratiques Traditionnelles</i>
AMUPI	<i>Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam</i>
CAFO	<i>Coordination des Associations et ONG Féminines</i>
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CMLN	<i>Comité Militaire de la Libération Nationale</i>
CMPF	' <i>Conseil Malien pour la Promotion de la Femme</i> ' (a pseudonym)
CNID	<i>Comité National d'Initiative Démocratique</i>
COMATEX	<i>Compagnie Malienne des Textiles</i>
CPF	<i>Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes</i>
CRN	<i>Comité de Réconciliation Nationale</i>
CTSP	<i>Comité Transitoire de Salut du Peuple</i>
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey [my translation into English of the title of the <i>Enquête Démographique et de Santé – (Coulibaly et al. 1996)</i>]
DNSI	<i>Direction Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Informatique</i>
DRPS-K	<i>Direction Régionale du Plan et de la Statistique – Kayes</i>
ENSUP	<i>École Normale Supérieure</i>
F. CFA	<i>Franc de la communauté financière africaine</i>
FGM	female genital mutilation
GDP	gross domestic product
GNP	gross national product
IAC	Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children

ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDIR	Mission of Decentralization and Institutional Reforms
MEPI	<i>Ministère de l'Économie, du Plan et de l'Intégration</i>
NGO	non-governmental organization
ODA	official development assistance
ODHD	<i>Observatoire du Développement Humain Durable</i>
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPS	<i>Parti Progressiste Soudanais</i>
RAINBQ	Research, Action & Information Network for Bodily Integrity of Women
RDA	<i>Rassemblement Démocratique Africain</i>
UDPM	<i>Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien</i>
UN	United Nations
UNAFEM	<i>Union des Associations de Femmes Musulmanes du Mali</i>
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFM	<i>Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali</i>
UNFPA	United Nations Family Planning Association
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNJM	<i>Union Nationale des Jeunes du Mali</i>
UNTM	<i>Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali</i>
US	<i>Union Soudanaise</i>
US-RDA	<i>Union Soudanaise - Rassemblement Démocratique Africain</i>
WHO	World Health Organization



GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN TERMS

This Glossary contains words in four foreign languages : Arabic, Bamanakan, French and Fulfulde. The language to which a given word belongs is indicated by the following abbreviations, in parentheses after the word : “A” for Arabic, “B” for Bamanakan, “Fr” for French and “F” for Fulfulde.

Included here are only words that appear more than once in the text and that are not defined within it each time. Note that the plural of words in Bamanakan is indicated by the letter “w” (pronounced approximately like the English vowel “u”). Here only the singular form is given. In Fulfulde, the plural and singular forms sometimes differ significantly, and for that reason while words are alphabetically listed in the singular form, I have also indicated the plural. In cases where the difference is such as to be beyond recognition (such as *dimo*, pl. *rimBe*), the plural form is also listed on its own and cross-referenced.

For Bamanakan spellings, my source is Father Charles Bailleul’s (1996) *Bambara-Français* dictionary. Father Bailleul himself follows the official Malian rules for transcription and orthography. When Bailleul offers different spelling variations, the official orthography (which he indicates by placing the word between two slashes, as in “/bamanan/” [Ibid., 22]) has been favoured. Note that there are two vowels used here that do not exist in English. The first one is “ɛ” pronounced like the vowel in the English word “bet.” The second vowel is “ɔ,” an open “o” like the vowel sound in the English word “bought” (examples from Bird, Hutchison, and Kanté 1977, 4). For the sake of simplicity, I have departed from Father Bailleul’s orthography in the case of two words, “nyama” and “nyamakala”: I have chosen not to use the Bamanakan letter “ɲ” but to follow common English usage (see for instance Conrad and Frank 1995a) and replace it with the letters “ny” that render its sound accurately. I have also omitted the tonal indications for those two words.

For the orthography of caste terms in Fulfulde, a language I have not studied, I have relied on Gardi's (1989) article on this topic; for other Fulfulde words I have used Riesman's (1977 [1974]) Glossary.

Finally, for Arabic transliterations I have used Catafago's (1980) Arabic-English dictionary.

Ardo (pl. *arbe*) (F): Chief (in the historical region of Maasina).

Arrondissement (Fr): An administrative division, regrouping several villages.

Ba (B): Mother.

BammbaaDo (pl. *wammbaaBe*) (F): A caste among the Fulbe, in which the men specialize in praise-singing, oral history, and music, and the women in music.

Bàràji (B): Divine reward.

Baramuso (B): Favorite wife (of a polygynous man).

Baylo (pl. *wayluBe*) (F): A caste among the Fulbe, in which the men specialize in smithing and jewelry-making (I was not able to ascertain the specialized occupation of the women).

Bilakòro (B): Uncircumcised.

Bolokoli (B): Circumcision (male and female).

Bouffer (Fr): Literally, "to eat"; in francophone Africa, used metaphorically to mean "to embezzle."

Buran (B): Group of affines to whom respect is due: father-in-law, mother(s)-in-law, and brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law older than ego.

Cercle (Fr): An administrative division, regrouping several *arrondissements*.

Chef de canton (Fr): County chief.

Commune (Fr): At the time of fieldwork, an urban administrative division (akin to a municipality).

Den (B): Child.

Diimaajo (pl. *riimaayBe*) (F): Second-generation slave or descendant of slaves.

Dimo (pl. *RimBe*) (F): Noble.

Dɔkɔɔɔ (B): Doctor, nurse.

Du (B): Enclosed living area, 'house,' and by extension, household.

Dutigi (B): Head of household.

Dùgùtigi (B): Village chief, or, in the city, chief of a neighbourhood.

Évolué(e) (Fr): Advanced, modern.

Fa (B): Father.

Fulajɔn (B): Slave of the Fulbe.

Garanke (B): A Mande caste. The men of this caste specialize in leather-work, and the women in gum and lip tattooing or indigo dyeing (Frank 1998, 4).

Haj (A): Pilgrimage to Mecca (one of the five pillars of Islam).

hɔɔɔ (B): 'Noble,' free person (as opposed to slaves).

hɔɔɔnya (B): The code of behaviour of the *hɔɔɔ*; the state or 'essence' of being *hɔɔɔ*.

Intellectuel(le) (Fr): An intellectual. In Mali, this generally denotes a member of the elite bureaucratic class, educated in the French language.

Jaawando (pl. *jaawambe*) (F): A special group of Fulbe 'nobles' (*rimBe*), who tend to engage in long-distance trade and own cattle.

Jèli (B): A Mande caste category, in which both men and women specialize in praise-singing and oral history (known as *griots* in the French literature).

Jèlimuso (B): *Jèli* woman (known as *griotte* in the French literature).

Jihād (A): A holy war, a war against 'infidels.'

Jinε (B): Spirit, super-natural being (from the Arabic *jinnī*).

Jɔn (B): Captive, slave, or today, descendant of slaves.

Jɔnmuso (B): Slave woman.

Jɔnya (B): Slave behaviour; the 'essence' or state of being a slave.

Jùla (B): Trader; in West Africa, typically a Muslim long-distance trader who speaks a Mande language.

Kɔmɔ (B): A Mande secret society for men.

Kɔɔmuso (B): Older (classificatory) sister.

Labbo (pl. *lawBe*) (F): A Fulbe caste, in which the women specialize in pottery and incense-making, and the men in woodworking.

Maabo (pl. *maabuuBe*) (F): A Fulbe caste, in which the women specialize in circumcising (girls), pottery-making and cloth-dyeing, and the men in weaving.

MaccuDo (pl. *maccuBe*) (F): Captive.

Médersa (Fr): In Mali, a primary school where the language of education is Arabic, and where Muslim religious instruction is provided (from the Arabic *madrasat*).

Mori (B): A man, knowledgeable about Islam, who acts as a healer, a diviner, a teacher, an adviser, and sometimes a 'magician' or 'sorcerer' (known in the French literature as *marabout*).

Muso (B): Woman.

Müsòkɔɔba (B): Literally, very old woman (a term of respect).

Nɔgɔ (B): Dirty or slimy thing; used by a few informants as a euphemism for the clitoris.

Numu (B): A Mande caste, in which the women specialize in pottery-making and circumcising (girls), and the men in circumcising (boys), smithing, and wood carving (known in the French literature as *forgerons*).

Nùmumuso (B): *Numu* woman (known in the French literature as *forgeronne*).

Nyama (B): A form of mysterious energy that is present in certain beings and in certain substances and that can cause harm, even death, if not handled properly.

Nyamakala (B): A member of one of the Mande castes of artists and artisans (including, principally, the *garankew*, *jèliw*, and *nùmuw*).

Nyeenyoy (pl. *nyeenyBe*) (F): A member of one of the Fulbe castes of artists and artisans (including the *wammbaaBe*, *wayluBe*, *lawBe*, *maabuuBe*, and *sakkeeBe*).

Patron(ne) (Fr): Employer, patron.

Pulaaku (F): According to Riesman (1977 [1974]), the community of the Fulbe, as well as the proper behaviour of Fulbe nobles and the 'essence' of being Fulbe; according to scholars having worked in Mali (see especially Breedveld and Bruijn 1996), only the community of the Fulbe.

RiimaayBe (F): See *diimaajo*.

RimBe (F): See *dimo*.

Sakke (pl. *sakkeeBe*) (F): A Fulbe caste, in which the women may specialize in circumcising girls, and the men specialize in leather-working.

Semamuso (B): Woman in charge of a group of newly-circumcised girls.

Sènènkun (B): Someone in a *sènènkunya*.

Sènènkunya (B): Hereditary relationship between specific kin, lineages or *siyaw* that involves stereotyped joking and teasing, taboos, and mandatory mutual assistance (usually known in the literature as 'joking relationships').

Shariat (A): Law, rule, custom.

Siya (B): Ethnic group or caste.

Tɛɛmuso (B): Father's sister.

Tɔn (B): In this work, age-association.

Tùbàbu (B): White, European, non-African.

Tùbàbùmuso (B): White, European, non-African woman.

WammbaaBe (F): See *bammbaaDo*.

WayluBe (F): See *baylo*.

Woloso (B): Second-generation slave.

NOTE ON ETHNIC APPELLATIONS

Concerning the designation of the main ethnic groups discussed in this thesis, where more than one term or spelling appear in the anthropological literature, I have favoured peoples' self-designation when I was able to ascertain it. For cases where there is more than one appellation (except where the variation is so minor as to be self-evident, for instance where the vowel "é" in a French text becomes "e" in an English text, as in Sénufo-Senufo), I provide below an alphabetical list of the terms I have chosen to use. Common variant appellations in the literature are indicated and, where warranted, an explanation and a reference are provided for the selected appellation.

- **Bamanan:** I am using the official Bamanakan spelling (Bailleul 1996, 22). Also Bambara. Bamana.
- **Dyula:** According to expert Robert Launay (1995, 75), "the Dyula are an ethnic minority in north-central and northeastern Ivory Coast, in southeastern Mali, and southwestern Burkina Faso...." Confusion often arises because "dyula" is also a Mande word (more correctly orthographed *jùla*) meaning "traders," and in West Africa "... typically referring to ... Muslim long-distance traders who speak one or another dialect of Manding [Mande]" (Ibid.).
- **Fulbe** (sing. **Pulo**): The Fulbe are also known as "Fulani," which is a variant of the Hausa name for them (Fage 1969, 35). The singular of Fulbe is "Pulo," whence came "Peul" (also spelled Peulh), the name by which the Fulbe are usually designated in the French literature and in spoken French in Mali.
- **Mande:** Also Manding, Mandingue, Mandingo, Mandinko. My main sources are Dwyer (1989), McNaughton (1988) and the *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (1995, s.v. Mande).
- **Mandinka:** Also Mandinga, Malinke. Niane (1960, 12 n.1) explains that "Malinke" is the Fulfulde word for "Mandinka."
- **Marka:** Also Maraka. A minority ethnic group in the Mopti region. My sources are Gallais (1967) and Sanankoua (1990).
- **Minyanka:** Even though the Minyanka people call themselves "Bamana" (Jonckers 1987), I follow the convention in the literature and use "Minyanka" to avoid confusion.

- **Songhay:** Also Sonray, Sonrai, Songhoy. Jean Rouch (1954, 5, my translation) explains: “Local people call themselves *Songhay*, which is pronounced *Songhoy* near Timbuktu, and *Sonray* among the Zerma and in the Dendi [region].”
- **Soninke:** Also Sarakolé, Sarakolle. According to the main ethnographers for this group, Éric Pollet and Grace Winter (1971), who use the word “Soninke” (in fact Soninke, but for technical reasons I have replaced the letter “ŋ” with a standard “n”), the term “Sarakolle” is used by the Wolof (Jolof) and Tukulors (Toucouleur) to designate the Soninke. (In Bamako, the Soninke are usually – and most confusingly – called ‘Marka.’)
- **Tamacheq:** Also Tuareg, Targui. Susan Rasmussen (1995, 366) explains that “Tuareg” is a term of foreign, possibly Arabic origin, and that many people from this group call themselves “Kel Tamacheq” (people of the Tamacheq language). According to Rasmussen (Ibid.), “currently, there is a disagreement regarding which term to use to refer to these peoples as a group.” Here I have decided to use the term I most commonly heard in Mali, that is, “Tamacheq.”

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is an investigation of the campaign against excision in Mali, primarily conducted from within. From April 1997 to April 1998 I volunteered with a Malian women's association that has as one of its objectives the elimination of the practice its leadership variously calls, depending on the audience, 'female genital mutilation,' 'excision,' or '*holokoli*' ('circumcision,' in Bamanakan). The anti-excision work of my host association, which I call the *Conseil Malien pour la Promotion de la Femme* (CMPF, a pseudonym), as well as the Malian campaign against excision in general, are linked to global efforts against, and discourses on, what has come to be popularly known as "female genital mutilation," often shortened to "FGM."

Western feminist writers such as Americans Fran Hosken (1976; 1978; 1979), Mary Daly (1978), Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem (1979), and, in France, Benoite Groult (1975), were among the first "... to group together conceptually all the different surgeries performed on female genitals across time and space and therefore to *create* 'female genital mutilation' as a *global, unified issue*" (Gosselin 2000a, 49). There were, however, antecedents to the outcry of the women's liberation movement: the Europeans who colonized Africa also condemned practices which they considered dangerous for health as well as "... uncivilized, barbaric, and unacceptable in the eyes of Christianity" (Shell-Duncan and Herlund 2000, 24). For instance, public pressure back home led the British to introduce a modified form of female circumcision in the Sudan in the 1920s and 1930s, and to outlaw infibulation in 1946 – a law that has been notoriously ineffective (see also Boddy 1998a; 1998b, 82, 83; El Dareer 1982; Gruenbaum 1988). Colonial efforts in Kenya were also spectacularly unsuccessful, in fact turning the practice into a symbol of resistance to colonialism (Browne 1991; Pedersen 1991; Thomas 2000). The French, who colonized the area that is now Mali, were less emboldened, preferring to let religious orders

combat the practices through individual efforts, without, as far as I have been able to establish, explicit state support.

After a hiatus during decolonization in Africa, female circumcision practices were again targeted for intervention not only by individual writers and activists but also by the United Nations (UN), in a series of conferences related to the Decade for Women (1975-85), including the follow-up world conference held on the tenth year anniversary of the end of the decade in Beijing. By the mid-1970s, explicit references to 'barbarism' had faded, and the central argument supporting opposition to the modification of female genitalia for non-medical purposes was that such 'traditional practices' were 'harmful for the health of women and children.' Female circumcision became a pathology, an epidemic, a 'public health problem' to be 'eradicated' like a disease (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000, 24) – a biomedical, technological approach typical of the modernization strand of development discourse (cf. Ferguson, 1994).

Around the same time and into the 1980s and 1990s, feminists were starting to use another strategy: that of framing demands for equality between women and men as an issue of 'human rights' – the 'women's rights are human rights' movement (see, amongst others, Kerr 1993). A re-orientation took place: female circumcision became a 'mutilation' which not only endangered women's and girls' health, but also deprived them of their *right to health*. Over the years, activists have also argued that 'female genital mutilation' deprives children and women of the specific rights conferred upon them by UN treaties, as well as of their right to bodily integrity and, less commonly, of their right to be free of torture (Boulware-Miller 1985, 165-176; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000, 27-38). While such arguments have had mixed reception by African feminists, with some resenting the focus on sexuality as opposed to economic aspects of African women's oppression, by 1996 when I started to look for a West African non-governmental organization (NGO) with whom to engage in 'action-research' on female circumcision, there were several who were receiving funds from international aid donors to conduct programs against 'female genital mutilation,' and were considered 'experts' on the topic.

I was first exposed to information about a form of female genital modification, infibulation, in Janice Boddy's 1989-1990 course on the Anthropology of Women and Gender at the University of Toronto, in which we read her famous "Womb as Oasis" article (Boddy 1982). It was not until three years later, however, that I became personally interested in the topic. During the course of my MA program, I conducted interviews with Somali immigrants in Toronto, with a focus on clan and gender. It became clear that *they* wanted to talk about infibulation. This was at a time when the issue was debated in various media in Canada, often in sensationalistic and even racist tones, and several Somalis, women and men, were anxious to have their voices heard. Even then, while I became familiar with the debates around the legality and medicalization of female genital surgeries amongst immigrant and refugee populations in various Western countries, I did not realize the extent to which "female genital mutilation" *in Africa* had become an object of concern and debate at the UN and in most development agencies of the Western world.

This realization occurred in 1994-1995, while I worked at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and was asked to write an 'issues paper' on female circumcision for internal use. During that exercise I surveyed the activist literature as well as statements issued by such agencies as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. Because of my training in anthropology, I realized that there was a need for more cultural studies of the situated meanings of female circumcision. More pragmatically, I also realized that this was an area of research that was likely to receive financial support – and I was right, as I was able to find funding for my Ph.D. proposal to research the cultural meanings of the practice in Somalia, the home country of my original informants. The political situation there, however, prevented me from pursuing this plan, and, amongst other reasons out of a desire to work in my mother tongue, French, I turned my attention to West Africa for fieldwork.

It was while she was on a tour in Canada in 1996 giving talks on women's rights that I met the president of CMPF, and she accepted my offer to come and work with her organization in

Mali. At the time of fieldwork, CMPF's main anti-excision activities were similar to other such initiatives on the continent (see Shell-Duncan, 2000, 30-37), including public education (using various media such as television, radio, and public debates, presentations and seminars), programs to provide economic compensation to circumcisers who pledged to stop operating on girls, and lobbying the government of Mali to enact legislation forbidding all forms of female genital cutting.¹ In Chapter 3 below I discuss the motivations behind my choice of feminist action-research as a methodology, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. Here I will only note that one contribution I hoped to make was to show that African women were not passive victims of 'tradition,' but that on the contrary some of them were taking the lead in campaigns to effect social change.

Research Questions and Organization of the Thesis

The questions I set out to answer when leaving for Mali can be divided into two broad areas of investigation. First, I proposed to document and analyze the campaign against excision in Mali, and second I wanted to outline the context in which the struggle of campaigners was embedded. With regards to the campaign, I wanted to know the characteristics of feminist activists: their class, ethnicity, caste, age, religion and educational level. I was interested in discovering their motivations for resisting the norms of their culture, and in analyzing their discourse – in particular, its links to and divergence from the global discourse on "FGM." Another set of questions related to the outcome of the campaign: was it successful? To what extent? Who was responsive to the activists' educational campaigns, what were the activities that worked and did not work, and why? It occurred to me early on that such an evaluation exercise might be useful for the organization itself, and indeed during the year I designed and conducted

¹ At the time, neither the leaders of CMPF nor any other Malian anti-excision activist, to my knowledge, were interested in using another strategy outlined by Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund (2000), that

an internal evaluation study in collaboration with CMPF, in the form of a survey administered to 400 respondents chosen at random in the cities of Kayes, Mopti, Segou and Sikasso.² Finally, I was interested in the reception of the campaign by various groups within Malian society. Who is most opposed to the campaign, who has most at stake in the continuation or abandonment of excision? Based on the literature review I conducted before leaving for Mali, I anticipated resistance to the campaign from Muslim leaders as well as from circumcisers, who in Mali traditionally belong to a specific caste, that of the *nùmuw* (potters and blacksmiths). As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, however, my ethnographic location within a secular women's association severely limited my access to the first group, but allowed me to interview a few excisers of the *nùmu* caste.

By studying the campaign from within, I wanted to show that African women had agency. Yet, as Sherry B. Ortner (1996, 2) recently discussed, good anthropology must always comprise not only agency – "... the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world" – but also "...careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their 'agency,' and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity." The first part of this dissertation, entitled simply "Contexts," gradually paints a picture of the lived reality – the culture, the structure – of Malian actors in the areas where I conducted research. Culture is evidently the product of history, and in Chapter 2, after situating Mali geographically, I review its historical trajectory. Of particular interest here is the formation of the Mande caste system, the slave trade and the particular forms of political domination that Malians have exercised and experienced. In the third chapter, after discussing my research methodology, I present the various sites where I conducted fieldwork. Chapter 4 provides ethnographic context, focusing on the two largest ethnic groupings in Mali, the Mande and the Fulbe. Both are important to my work, but because I learned Bamanakan, the

of providing alternative initiation rituals for girls ("ritual without cutting") (for a discussion see Hernlund 2000).

language of the Bamanan (a sub-group of the Mande) and the current lingua franca of southern Mali, I am more familiar with the Mande cultural sphere. After reviewing some current debates in the literature on ethnicity in Mali, I approach the discussion of structure amongst Mande and Fulbe through an analysis of the main axes of power in those societies: gender, age, caste and class. These different structuring systems are separated for analytical purposes, but in reality they are intertwined in complex ways.

After having set these parameters, in Chapter 5 I turn to a discussion of the particular phenomenon under scrutiny here, the circumcision of girls, which French-speaking Malians call “excision,” whether it involves clitoridectomy only, or along with the removal of the inner labia, or, much more rarely, accompanied by the sealing of the labia in a way that resembles infibulation. I first provide the reader with basic facts, such as how many and which Malian women have undergone which procedure, who performs the operations, and what changes to the practice have recently taken place. Next in Chapter 5 I review the ethnographic literature on excision in Mali, gradually building a picture of an operation originally structured as a rite of passage.

In the next two sub-sections of that chapter, entitled “Producing Women” and “Coercion and Rewards,” I attempt to outline the various explicit and implicit factors at play in the reproduction of the practice of excision. The facts that the quasi totality of women comply with the demand that the girls in their care be excised, and that some of the most vocal proponents of the operation are elderly women, should not be unquestioningly interpreted to mean that women are the ‘agents’ *of men* in their own oppression, nor that all men benefit from the practice. There is no doubt that Malian society is patriarchal, and that the ideologies that validate excision play a hegemonic role in sustaining gender inequality. However, as Boddy (1998b, 97) elegantly put it in her most recent discussion of female circumcision, “... the issue is not so much how men oppress women, but how a system of gender asymmetric values and constraints is internalized by

² For reasons discussed in the main body of this text, the Sikasso data are not presented here.

both, with their active participation, and as such becomes normalized, self-sustaining, and indeed unself-consciously 'real.'" Part of this internalization, for Malian as for Western women, has to do with their "embodied cultural aesthetics" (after Boddy 1998b), and more particularly here, with the meanings associated with the clitoris; different body disciplines and practices; and the culturally-specific experience of sexuality and fertility. Should these diffused and embodied techniques of power fail, however, coercion mechanisms do exist; but it is important not to underestimate the appeal of the rewards (psychological, social and economic) for compliance.

Part II of this work investigates the campaign against excision in Mali with the help of analytical tools originally developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Alfred Schutz (1964). These tools are presented in Chapter 6, in which I review Schutz's concepts for analyzing the social distribution of knowledge in society, especially his typology of "expert," "man on the street" and "well-informed citizen." Following Michael Lambek (1993) and Gavin Smith (1999, 228-270), I enter power into the Schutzian model, making use primarily of Gramsci's concepts of 'hegemony' and 'common-sense.' The rest of the dissertation is organized according to Schutz's typology, with chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 presenting competing experts on excision (one group leading the anti-excision campaign, the others responding to it), revealing not only their specific fields of knowledge but also how they evaluate those of the others. Finally, Chapter 11 examines the perspectives of the 'people on the street' and of 'well-informed citizens.'

PART I

CONTEXTS

CHAPTER 2

MALI

Geography³

With an area of 1, 240, 192 km², landlocked Mali is the second largest of the West African states after Niger. It shares borders with seven countries: Mauritania to the north-west, Algeria to the north-east, Niger to the east, Burkina Faso to the south-east; to the south, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea to the south-west, and finally, Senegal to the west. The total population at the 1998 census was 9,790,492 people, 82 percent of whom lived in rural areas (DNSI 1998a. ii). The population density varies from less than 5 inhabitants per square kilometre in the Northern saharian regions to 90 per square kilometre in the central Niger river delta (Amin and Coulon 1985). The 1998 census found that 91 percent of the population is concentrated in 30 percent of the country's territory, with the three large administrative areas of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, which cover the upper triangle of Mali that points into the Sahara desert, having only 9 percent of the total population (DNSI 1998a. ii).

One day when I was studying the Mande language in Ottawa in June of 1996, the sun was resplendent after a week-long rainfall. Coming into the classroom, I cheerfully asked my Malian instructor how to say "today is a beautiful sunny day." He smiled and tilted his head with this expression of his that to me meant 'this one is a slow learner,' and explained, "Claudie, for us a beautiful day is a *rainy* day." I remembered this poignantly when I arrived in Bamako nearly a year later, on a dry dusty morning in April, the hottest month of the year with temperatures commonly in the 40s °C. It felt like a genuine miracle when the short annual rainy period started on schedule in June of 1997, the rain drops cleaning the red-dust covered tree leaves and

³ The main sources for this section are Amin (1985), Robinson (1988), Stamm et al. (1998), and Udo (1978).

appearing to quench the thirst of a scorched soil that had not received a drop of water for eight months.

The coming of the rains is a matter of life and death in Mali. The entire country, being located north of the tropical forest zones of West Africa, is potentially at risk of drought. It is only during the short rainy period (from June until October) that the majority of the population involved in agriculture can grow the food it depends on for subsistence (millet, sorghum, rice, etc.) or for trade (cotton, peanuts, tobacco). The years 1970-1974 saw a period of low rainfall, drought and famine during which in the sahelian region of the country agricultural production fell by about fifty percent, and about one-quarter of the livestock died. Pastoralists in the north and east were affected even more, with many human deaths and entire camel and cattle herds being wiped out. The survivors had to leave the area, many of them moving south to seek refuge in agricultural areas and cities; most have yet to recover their losses. In February of 1998 my husband and I took a camel ride outside of Timbuktu, and our Tamacheq⁴ guide and host explained that he was earning some money working with the tourists in order to rebuild his camel herd, lost in the drought of the 1970s. Abhorring sedentary life, he had spent the worst years in the Algerian desert. So far, he only had one camel, and his wife a few goats. Drought struck again in 1984-1985, this time affecting most of the country, even the southern agricultural regions (Imperato 1989, 6).

Desertification is a serious problem in Mali, where it is linked to the pressure put on the fragile sahelian environment by human and animal populations. The sahel is one of the three ecological zones that cross Mali in a pattern of latitudinal bands, situated between the Sahara desert to the north and the savanna region to the south. The sahel is a plain that receives between 250 and 500 mm of rain annually (Udo 1978, 19). On its northern limit it passes just below the Mauritanian border in the west and includes Timbuktu and Gao in the east. Vegetation includes

⁴ The Tamacheq (or Tamashek) people, as they are known in Mali, appear more commonly as "Tuareg" in the literature.

thorn shrubs, gum-producing acacias, baobabs, and a few other sparse trees such as the African myrrh, the tamarind, the sausage tree (*Kigelia africana*) and a type of ebony (Udo 1978, 201). Agriculture is difficult, and livestock plays an important role in subsistence strategies in this band. The Niger river valley, located within this zone, is cultivated and irrigated in some areas to produce rice, cotton, peanuts, millet and sorghum. While technically located within that zone, the inland delta of the Niger is a floodplain that forms a micro-climate where it is normally possible to produce two crops per year.

The sahelian steppe is progressively replaced by savanna towards its southern edge, where it meets with the 'sudanese' (or sudanic) zone. Nature is more amenable to agriculture in this region, which receives more plentiful and more regular rainfall. The landscape consists of grassland with occasional clumps of trees, and the area is forested at the country's southernmost tip, bordering with Côte d'Ivoire. The sudanese ecological zone can be subdivided into two sub-zones: the south-sudanese region, which receives between 1300 and 1500 mm of rain per year, and constitutes roughly 6 percent of the country; and the north-sudanese sub-zone, covering approximately 18 percent of national territory, receiving 700-1300 mm annually (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 1). Most of the sudanese ecological zone is located within the Sikasso administrative region, site of the nineteenth century kingdom of Tieba⁵ Traoré and homeland of the Senufo and Minyanka (or Minianka) peoples, an area which this study does not cover.

The data which I discuss in this dissertation come from the sahel zone, which is traversed by two principal rivers, the Niger (locally known as the *Joliba*) and the Senegal. Both originate in the Guinea highlands, but while the Senegal flows north-west through the Kayes administrative region to eventually form the border between Mauritania and Senegal and reach the Atlantic ocean at St-Louis, the Niger meanders in the other direction. Veritable lifeline of Mali, the Niger flows north-easterly for 960 km from the Guinea border to Timbuktu, where it turns east for 320 km, to finally veer south-east to enter the country that sports its name after having passed the

Songhay city of Gao. The most densely populated areas of the country, including Bamako, the capital city, are located in the valley of the Niger, which provides water, fish and a means of transportation, as it is navigable to sizable boats from approximately August until January between Koulikoro (immediately east of Bamako) and Gao.

History up to Independence (1960)⁶

All history is partial. Mali offers perhaps an extreme case of this, as little archaeological work has been done in the country, and written history up until very recently was produced by Arab and European travelers, invaders and crusaders, who looked upon the “Blacks” with all the prejudice of their age and of their imperial agendas. Revealing in this regard is the recent retelling of the story of the Umarian and French occupations of Segu by Malian historian Sundiata A. Djata (1997), who relied heavily on the narratives of contemporary elders and oral historians to provide “the Bamana[n] point of view.” Yet Djata himself (1997, 37) admits that this point of view tends to depict Bamanan actors in a suspiciously heroic light.

Oral history is made of a stuff significantly more pliable than written texts and, where it has been preserved by *jèli* (pl. *jèliw*)⁷ lineages, is blatantly linked to power. *Jèliw* are the praise-singers, messengers, musicians, genealogists and oral historians of Mande nobles, and up until the coming to power of the current government (1992), the various African men who have governed the territory now known as the Republic of Mali regularly used their oratory art in an effort to legitimate their rule (see Schulz 1997). While some argue that *jèliw* played a role in establishing limits to totalitarian rule by conveying subtle criticism when rulers squeezed populations beyond what was considered legitimate (Schulz 1997), they remained clients of the powerful, and the stories they tell are those of the victorious side. Nambala Kanté (1993, 54-68) a Malian scholar

⁵ Also spelled Tyeba or Ceba.

⁶ The information in this section is summarized in table format in the Appendix.

⁷ In Bamanakan the letter “w” marks the plural; it is pronounced as a soft sound approaching the English “u.”

from a *nùmu* (“blacksmith,” pl. *nùmuw*) family, provides a nice illustration of this when he gives two versions of the history of the founding of his village: the hegemonic version of the *jèliw*, and the counter-hegemonic one of the *nùmuw*, imagined descendants of the great blacksmith-king, Sumanguru⁸ Kanté, defeated in war.

While recognizing the contested nature of Malian history (all the more so the further one goes back in time), I find it necessary to provide a sketchy chronology of the events that form part of the collective imagined past of the Malian people. Since the main focus of this dissertation is the present and not the past however, I have relied on a few secondary sources to construct this overview. As much as possible I have indicated conflicting interpretations – but to give a full presentation of these would have exceeded the limits of space appropriate in this case.

Particularly important for our purposes is the development of a caste system under the Mali Empire, because the social status and role of the people put in charge of circumcising girls and boys, the *nùmuw*, became codified within that system.

The Earliest Known Polity: Ghana

The early historiography of the area that is now the Republic of Mali consists of Arabic geographical and historical writings concerning *Bilad al-Sudan*, the ‘land of the black men’ (Fage 1969, 1). In 773-4, the Arabic author al-Fazari wrote that south of the Sahara from Morocco existed a polity called Ghana, ‘the land of gold.’ Al-Yaqubi, writing in the ninth century, again mentions the existence of gold-rich Ghana (Ibid.). More details are available from the Spanish Muslim geographer al-Bakri, who wrote on the Ghana kingdom in 1067-8 (Fage 1969, 2).⁹ While this area is now desert, at the time of al-Bakri’s writing pasture was available. Al-Bakri’s description of the capital of the kingdom has been corroborated by archaeological findings. It

⁸ Also appears in the literature as Soumangourou, Soumaworo and Soumaoro.

⁹ In fact Al-Bakri believed that “Ghana” was a title given to the king, not the name of the kingdom. In a recent children’s book on the history of the kingdom based on the Soninke oral tradition, Modibo Sidibé

consisted of two distinct parts: the royal palace and a Berber merchant town with twelve mosques (Fage 1969, 2-3). The wealth of the kingdom originated, it is believed, in the export of gold dust and the taxing of imports from North Africa, and was sizable enough to allow the king to hold court with splendour and raise an army to conquer surrounding peoples and states. From an unnamed "local sixteenth-century source," we know that the capital was called Kumbi, and that the Soninke¹⁰ Mande-speaking people were dominant in the predominantly animist kingdom (Fage 1969, 2, 3).

The emergence of the kingdom of Ghana is clearly linked to the economic benefits obtained from the control and taxing of trans-saharan trade in the area. While it is not known when the North-South trading routes across the Sahara desert were first traveled, there are accounts from ancient Greek and Roman sources (including Herodotus) of expeditions across the Sahara from North Africa and of trade in stones, gold and slaves with West Africa (Fage 1969, 14).

Around year 990, the Ghana kingdom conquered Awdaghost to the north, a southern trading depot of the Sanhaja people, Berber desert nomads (Fage 1969, 18, 2). This, in Fage's reading, led to the kingdom's decline and fall, upsetting the balance of power between southern gold traders and northern salt producers. However, Sanhaja reconquest of Awdaghost would not take place until c. 1054, once the warring Sanhaja tribal units had been united under the leadership of a Moroccan Muslim reformist, Ibn Yasin Abdallah. His followers became known in Western historiography as the Almoravids (Fage 1969, 19). The Almoravids became a large and successful imperialistic army, conquering parts of Morocco, Spain and the Ghana kingdom, where they induced many of the conquered to convert to Islam. While it was only a few years until the various tribal sections amongst the Almoravids were again disunited and lost control of

(1999, 2) informs us that the empire called "Ghana" by Arab writers is known as "Ouagadou" in the Malian tradition.

Ghana, enabling the old Soninke dynasty (now Muslim) to regain power, the years of Almoravid conquest had greatly affected the area. An important Saharan trade route was disrupted, and the invaders' "... plundering and, even more, perhaps, the demands made by their herds on the available grazing, had upset the delicate balance between [hu]man and nature on which agriculture depended in a region so close to the desert" (Fage 1969, 19-20). A process of political and ecological decline ensued, until Kumbi, the old capital, could no longer support a large population and what was left of the kingdom was conquered by Sumanguru Kanté in c. 1200.

The Sosso – Mandinka War and the Establishment of the Mali Empire and the Mande Caste System

Sumanguru Kanté was the blacksmith-king of the Sosso (or Susu), a southerly Mande-speaking people who are now predominantly located in the border area between northern Sierra Leone and Guinea.¹¹ Fage (1969, 20) reports that "Sumanguru seems to have been the son of a Soninke soldier," while Tamari (1991, 236) speaks of the "Soninke state of Sosso." There is no doubt in Fage's mind (1969, 20) "... that, by Sumanguru's time, there was intensive competition to assume the heritage of ancient Ghana among a number of the Mande clans of the upper Niger valley." Achieving supremacy in the area meant controlling the lucrative trade on the upper Niger river, and soon after Sumanguru's conquest of Ghana, he and his followers were engaged in a lengthy war with the Keita Mandinka, a Mande clan. The Mandinka eventually defeated Sumanguru c. 1235 (Fage 1969, 20), under the leadership of Sundiata¹² Keita.

While the origins of the kingdom of Mali go back to the tenth century (Amin and Coulon 1985, 588), it was Sundiata who was successful in transforming the polity into a large empire in

¹⁰ Also Sarakole (various spellings); to add to the confusion, my informants in Bamako generally used the terms "Maraka" or "Marka" to design this ubiquitous population (see the discussion on the Marka in the section on Mopti).

¹¹ Core location of the Sosso/Susu people found on McNaughton's (1988, xx) "Mande diaspora" map; also, Fage (1969, 37-38) indicates that the Susu migrated south to Sierra Leone after their defeat at the hands of the Mandinka.

the thirteenth century. His victory over Sumanguru in the Sosso/Mandinka war was decisive in this development, and according to Tamari (1991), was at the origin of the Mande caste system which was eventually diffused among numerous neighbouring peoples. While the thesis that the Mande caste system developed in the thirteenth century with the founding of the Mali empire is not new (see McNaughton 1988), Tamari's work confirms it. She spent over 10 years (1979-88) working on the problem of the origin of West African caste systems using historical and anthropological methods. The medieval Arabic texts Tamari consulted confirm the occurrence of an "extremely violent" (from the Mandinka point of view) war with the Sosso, its conclusion in favor of the Mandinka and the subsequent founding of the Keita dynasty in the early to mid-thirteenth century. Tamari (1991, 235) concludes on the basis of an analysis of over twenty versions of the Sundiata Epic¹³ that as a result of these events, "... vocationally specialized groups that would rapidly develop into endogamous bard and blacksmith groups first appeared among the Manding [Mande]."

Tamari points out that while the mythic Sumanguru is explicitly portrayed in the epic as being a caste blacksmith, his behaviour as reported in the epic "... is totally incompatible with caste status." While "caste persons are not allowed to exercise political power ..., may not bear arms, and may not marry *hòron* [*hòron*, i.e. free, noble] women," Sumanguru "... not only rules a state, but also victoriously leads military expeditions and marries Mandinka princesses before he is finally defeated" (Tamari 1991, 237). Tamari explains this contradiction by proposing that the "caste" element is a later addition, and that Sumanguru "... was a blacksmith only in the sense that he had formed an alliance with divinities associated with ironworking" (Tamari 1991, 238).

¹² Also Soundiata, Sunjata, Son-Jara, Sonjara, Sunjara.

¹³ The *Sunjata fāsa* (praise song in honour of Sundiata), which relates the struggle between the Mandinka and the Sosso state led by Sumungourou, is of considerable historical value: it is known to all Mande-speaking populations, and over twenty written versions of it have been published, all of which agree on the chronology of events and differ little in the representation of key events and characters (Tamari 1991, 236). See for instance Kanté's abridged version (1993, 47-54), or Niane (1960) or Johnson and Sisòkò (1986) for the full version. Kanté (1993, 54) tells us that children in Africa read Sundiata's epic in their school

After Sumanguru's defeat, the power that he and his allies owed to iron-working would have had to be contained. In the epic, "...iron, ironworking and certain iron objects were for [Sumanguru] both symbols of – and means to – mystical and political power" (Tamari 1991, 238). In Tamari's thesis, while Sumanguru's descendants and allies maintained their special relationship to iron-working and were allowed to retain their symbolic and religious power, they were henceforth forbidden to access political power and their social status was modified so that they no longer represented a threat to Mandinka hegemony. As Tamari (1991, 238) indicates, the association of power and iron is common in sub-Saharan African history in general. Indeed, Eugenia W. Herbert (1993, 152), who has devoted a book to this topic, states that the problem of the division of power "... is well-nigh universal in polities encompassing an important iron industry and aspirants to centralized authority."

Nambala Kanté (1993), himself a Mandinka *nùmu*, reminds us that we know Sumanguru's and Sundiata's story from the perspective of the victorious side. In the epic, the blacksmith-king is said to have been so cruel as to rip fetuses out of mothers' wombs, and he is portrayed as wearing clothes and shoes made of human skin (Kanté and Erny 1993, 43-44). Able to master the wind and kill his opponents simply by uttering a three-word incantation while pointing a finger at them, Sumanguru is said in Mande country to have been, with his sister's son Fakoli, the propagator of African magic and sorcery (Ibid. 1993, 49). While Kanté (1993, 53, 54, 62) mentions that many contradictory versions exist explaining the defeat of the great blacksmith-magician, and that today's *nùmuw* tell stories different from the versions of the *jèlìw*, he unfortunately does not provide us with the alternative tale of the battle between Sumanguru and the man that elderly *nùmuw* of his acquaintance call Sonjara ("the lion thief") Keita.

manuals. The epic's popularity is not unrelated to the fact that the first leader of the modern Republic of Mali was a Keita (see Schulz 1997).

After Sundiata's reign, the Mali empire continued to grow, and reached its apogee in size and probably in wealth under Kankou Moussa¹⁴ in the fourteenth century. Kankou Moussa entered Arabic historiography majestically: he is reported to have gone to Mecca for *haj* (pilgrimage) in 1324-25, traveling through the Sahara with a court of 8,000 people and with so much gold that the value of this metal is said to have fallen by 12 percent on the Cairo market (Fage 1969, 22). At its peak in the middle of the fourteenth century, the Mali empire's political power extended east beyond Gao to the frontier of Hausaland, north to the Sahara, south into the Guinea forested mountains, and west to the ocean. However, the empire declined after that period, most likely because of succession disputes (Fage 1969, 24-26). By the early 1400s, the polity was collapsing within and peoples at its periphery were reclaiming their independence.

Songhay Kingdom of Gao (~1460-1591)

Among those who reasserted their independence from the Mali empire were the Songhay of the Niger river bend. This gradual process, difficult to date precisely, has been interpreted as the fatal blow to the Mali empire, "... for Mali was utterly dependent on the Songhay boatmen for its vital line of communication along the Niger beyond Jenne to the all-important trans-Saharan trade routes and to Hausaland" (Fage 1969, 26). In about 1464 the Songhay animist king Sonni Ali Ber came to power and eventually gained control of the three major cities in the area's trading network at the time, first Gao, where he established his capital, then Timbuktu (1468) and finally Jenne (1479) (Fage 1969, 27).

By 1492, the year of Sonni Ali Ber's death, "the Mali emperors had been reduced to their original status of petty Mande kings in the upper Niger valley" (Fage 1969, 27). A year later, a Muslim Soninke general, Muhammad Ture, took the leadership from Sonni Ali's son, and established his own dynasty on the throne, the Askia. Askia Muhammad continued to enlarge the empire until he was deposed by his sons in 1528 (Fage 1969, 27). However, his successors were

¹⁴ Also known as *Mansa* (king) Musa, or Kankan Moussa.

not able to maintain their hegemony over the animist Songhay people, presumably resisting being governed by a Muslim Soninke lineage (Fage 1969, 28). Succession crises, revolts and usurpation marked the last sixty years of the empire, until its invasion by Moroccan soldiers in 1591.

The Moroccan Occupation (1591-1618)

The king of Morocco's expeditionary force would remain in the area until 1618, occupying Gao, Timbuktu and Jenne. During their 27-year occupation, Moroccan soldiers intermarried with local women and their progeny were called the *Arma*. The Moroccan and eventually *Arma* rulers did not succeed in maintaining hegemony over the area nor its trade, nor in eliminating the Songhay kings, who simply retreated into Dendi, their homeland. In historians' interpretation the Moroccan invasion marked the end of the period of the large empires in the region that is now the Republic of Mali (Fage 1969, 30; Robinson 1988, 175). There were in the seventeenth century "... several competing rivals: the *Arma* themselves, increasingly weak and divided; the remnant Songhay kingdom in Dendi; and the remnant Mande state on the upper Niger, which in the later seventeenth century began to revive and expand again as the Bambara kingdom of Segou" (Fage 1969, 30). While the Bamanan (Bambara) kingdoms of Segou and later Kaarta were being formed, the political vacuum on the northern limits of the old Mali empire allowed the Tamacheq and the Moors to raid their southern neighbours for slaves.

The Bamanan Kingdoms of Segou and Kaarta¹⁵

A historical legend¹⁶, reported by Djata (1997, 12), dates the founding of both the Segou and Kaarta polities to the seventeenth century, with the migration of two Bamanan brothers.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, the source for this section is Djata (1997).

¹⁶ For Malian historian Sundiata A. Djata (1997, 12), this and other stories of Bamanan mythical oral history are "historical legends," because "... while many of the developments involved actual events, they are intermingled with supernatural occurrences."

Niangolo and Baramangolo Kulibali, coming from mountains in the east. After a dispute while crossing the Niger river at Segou, Baramangolo continued north where his descendants are said to have founded Kaarta and Beledugu, while Niangolo remained in Segou. Fage (1969, 155) however, reports that it was during the first half of the eighteenth century that the Bamanan monarchy split into two halves. Again, Sanankoua (1990, 31) tells us, the split occurred when heirs fought over succession. Eventually one branch, the Massasi emigrated west and founded the kingdom of Kaarta, Segou's rival. In Imperato's (1977b, 58) view, Kaarta never achieved Segou's political and administrative cohesion.

It is another Kulibali, Mamari also known as Bitòn, who is recognized by oral history as having established the Bamanan state of Segou in 1712. Bitòn achieved power through his control of the *ɓɓ*, a military age-grade association for young men, originally created by local village leaders to protect against raiders. As the *ɓɓ* came to wield control in the Segou area through campaigns of terror (in one story they are said to have attacked a village celebration and "... cracked the heads of 100 free men"), they started to acquire captives, the *ɓɓjɓw'* (Djata 1997, 14-15). These captives eventually became a professional army, lead by the original members of the *ɓɓ* and their descendants, the *ɓɓdenw'*¹⁸.

Bitòn died in 1755; after his death, his sons ruled rather unsuccessfully for a short while, followed by a series of *ɓɓ* leaders, until the arrival on the historico-legendary scene of the next important character, Ngolo Jara. Ngolo "... would break the control of the Tònden, and reduce all Tòn members to Tònjònw status" (Djata 1997, 15). Ngolo was a slave himself, having been given to the royal family in lieu of tax payment. In the myth, he narrowly escapes death at the hands of Bitòn, thanks to the latter's favorite wife. Once Ngolo took control, "the throne

¹⁷ Literally, "captives/slaves of the *ɓɓ*."

¹⁸ Literally, "children of the *ɓɓ*."

remained within the Jara family, and was no longer given to a Tòn member based on his seniority, or his bravery in battle" (Djata 1997, 16). The dynasty founded by Ngolo Jara would rule until the end of the Bamanan state of Segou. It is under Ngolo's successor Mònzòn (1782-1808) that the Bamanan kingdom reached its apex, extending its sphere of influence as far north as Timbuktu, south to Odienné (in today's Côte d'Ivoire), west to Bure Guinea, and east to the frontiers of present-day Burkina Faso (Djata 1997, 22, 2).

The Bamanan state at Segou was based on a strong, professional army, and on what Djata (1997, *passim*) has called a "system of contract" with local populations. Bamanan millet farmers, the majority of the population, provided surplus grain; Marka (also Maraka) people, who specialized in trading, provided the commercial infrastructure; and the Fulbe, most of whom were pastoralists, as well as Bozo and Somono fisherfolks, paid taxes and/or performed services for the Segou rulers in exchange for the state's protection. The army (*tɔn*) protected trade routes and water ways. It also engaged in constant raiding: "the Bamana farmers produced surplus grain, and the Bamana soldiers produced slaves and booty" (Djata 1997, 2). Smaller political units at the periphery of the state were allowed considerable autonomy provided that they paid tribute. While the rulers of the empire were not Muslims, they allowed those who had converted (particularly the traders) to practice their religion, as long as it did not interfere with the administration of the state (Djata 1997, 23). The kingdom fell to al-Hajj Umar Tall in 1861, after a brief alliance with its southern neighbour the *Diina*.

The Fulbe *Diina*¹⁹

In 1818 Aamadu Hamman Lobbo²⁰ founded a new polity in the fertile region of the inland delta of the Niger river, usually known in the literature as the Fulbe kingdom (or empire)

¹⁹ The main source for this section is Bintou Sanankoua (1990); see also Fage (1969, 154-5).

²⁰ Aamadu's birth name was Aamadu Hammadi Buubu, but he was better known as Aamadu Hamman Lobbo, after the name of the uncle who raised him (Sanankoua 1990, 33).

of Maasina,²¹ named after its largest province. The leaders of this Muslim theocracy called their state *Diina*, meaning “state ruled according to Muslim principles” (Sanankoua 1990, 9, my translation from the French). With the *Diina*, the Fulbe of Maasina – the dominant ethnic group in the region – created their first independent state, having previously been under the overlordship of, successively, the Songhay empire, the Arma of Jenne and Timbuktu, and by the eighteenth century, the Bamanan kingdom of Segu. This effort must be interpreted in the context of the larger West African Fulbe revival movement under the banner of Islam, started in the eighteenth century in the Fuuta Tooro (Senegal) and continued in Hausaland (Northern Nigeria) in the nineteenth. Despite the distance, contacts were continuous between the various Fulbe groups. Maasina pilgrims, for instance, making a halt in Sokoto (in today’s Nigeria) on the way to Mecca. Fulbe revolutionary ferment was also nourished by orally transmitted poems in Fulfulde,²² inciting Muslims to overthrow pagan leaders (Sanankoua 1990, 41).

Aamadu Hamman Lobbo, who after the founding of the *Diina* was known as Seeku (*Shaykh*) Aamadu, had modest beginnings as a shepherd. Gone to Jenne to pursue his religious education, he provoked the ruling Arma by publicly criticizing loose Islamic practices and leadership in the holy city. He recruited followers amongst those opposed to Arma leadership, and was eventually expelled from the city. In 1816 he sent a delegation to Sokoto to receive Usman Dan Fodio’s blessing for his *jihad*, which he launched by commissioning the assassination of a man who had offended him, the son of the Fulbe leader (*ardo*) of Maasina, a non-Muslim and member of a rival clan. In 1818 the avenging father, with allied Bamanan troops sent by Segu, attacked Seeku Aamadu and his followers. The *Ardo*-Bamanan coalition was so much stronger militarily that Seeku Aamadu’s victory was seen by many as the result of divine intervention, and tremendously increased his following.

²¹ Also Masina or Macina; for the most part in today’s administrative region of Mopti.

²² The Fulbe language.

The *Diina*, with a capital built on virgin ground to symbolize renewal and named Hamdallaahi to express thankfulness to God,²³ quickly and brutally extended its territory to the Fulbe-dominated areas of the Niger inland delta. The state was ruled according to the *shariat*, with most executive, legislative and judiciary powers concentrated in the person of Seeku Aamadu, who was also Imam of the sole mosque of the city, where all men were required to go for the five daily prayers. The Imam was assisted by an Assembly of forty learned men over the age of forty (most, but not all, Fulbe). The most important instrument of power was the large state army, fed by the agricultural work of the state's numerous war captives.

The army was also instrumental in Seeku Aamadu's most revolutionary project, the forced sedentarization of his Fulbe subjects. From nomadic pastoralism their socio-economic organization was shifted to seasonal transhumance, with only unmarried young men traveling with the herds and following pre-established paths and calendars (Sanankoua 1990, 95-6). Sedentarization made Islamization easier, and helped to solve the problem of chronic conflicts between herders and the various groups of sedentary farmers in the region (of various ethnic groups including Bamanan, Marka,²⁴ Bwa, Songhay and Dogon). An effort was also made to Islamize and sedentarize the original inhabitants of the region, the Bozo (or Sorogo)²⁵ nomadic fisherpeople, many of whom rebelled and were enslaved.

As with several of the older empires of today's Mali, it was dissent over succession issues that marked the decline of the *Diina*. While Seeku Aamadu designated his eldest son Aamadu Seeku as his successor, he did not establish succession rules for the future. When Aamadu Seeku died unexpectedly in 1853 after a short eight-year reign without having chosen his successor, disagreement in the Assembly ensued. In the end, Aamadu Seeku's eldest son, Aamadu Aamadu

²³ From the Arabic *Al Hamdu-l-illah*, meaning "praise to God."

²⁴ Sanankoua (1990, 9 n.1) calls them Nooron, which she says is "the Bozo name for the Nono, better known as Marka."

²⁵ While Sanankoua (1990, 9 n.2) writes that Sorogo is the name that the Bozo use for themselves, another Malian historian, Adame Ba Konaré (1993, 470, 473) considers the Bozo and "Sorko" to be two distinct

was selected, but the twenty-year old new Imam never rallied unanimous support. By the time the *Diina* was threatened by the advancing armies of al-Hajj Umar Tall, Hamdallaahi had been weakened.

Al-Hajj Umar Tall's Conquests²⁶

Umar Tall was born ca. 1796 in present-day Senegal, in a Fulbe Tukolor clerical family. In 1825 he departed for *haj*, and he spent some years in Mecca studying the doctrine of the Tijaniyah Muslim brotherhood. The Tijaniyah, a Sufi order, was founded around 1782 by an Algerian, Ahmad al-Tijani (b. 1737 – d. 1815) (Willis 1995, 225-8). The order grew in the Maghreb under the patronage of the Moroccan ruler Mawlay Sulayman, and its association with the Moroccan government lasted until 1912. The Tijaniyah competed with other Sufi organizations active in northern West Africa, including the oldest of them, the Qadiriyyah. Tijanis "... prided themselves in their devotion to Sunni practices," and their prayers and daily office "... were characterized by a streamlined simplicity" (Willis 1995, 226). According to Fage (1969, 148), compared to the other Sufi orders that played a part in the Islamization of West Africa, the Tijaniyah "... tended to be more militant in outlook [and] more willing to expand the world of Islam by force...." By the time Umar Tall left Mecca, he had been appointed Khalifa of the order for Sub-Saharan Africa.

On the long march back to West Africa, al-Hajj Umar spent years in Cairo and in the Muslim emirates of Sokoto and Bornu (present-day Nigeria). In the latter two cities he made alliances by marrying daughters of the ruling families. Eventually he established himself at Dinguiray (in present-day Guinea near the border with Mali) where he acquired arms and horses and recruited disciples, preaching the Tijaniyah. In the early 1850s Umar launched a *jihad*.

groups (and because of the frequent alternation between "k" and "g" in Mande dialects, I am assuming that the Sorogo and Sorko are the same people – whether they are Bozo is another question!).

²⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, this section is based on Djata (1997, 27-53), Fage (1969, 155-6), and Klein (1998, 49-52).

successfully moving northwards. In 1855 he defeated the Bamanan kingdom of Kaarta, but in 1857 his advance was blocked by the French when he failed to take their fort at Medine (near Kayes). His armies retreated east and started to assail the Bamanan kingdom of Segou, which they took in 1861. Umar appointed his eldest son, Aamadu Seeku to rule Segou, and turned his attention to the problem of Maasina.

Djata (1997, 41) argues that Umar needed to conquer Maasina in order to join Segou and Timbuktu under his aegis. The kingdoms of Segou and Maasina had been adversaries, but now under the threat of al-Hajj Umar's invasion the exiled Bamanan leadership joined forces with Aamadu Aamadu in an alliance that "...was both anti-Umarian and anti-Tijani" (Djata 1997, 38), the Maasina Muslims being Qadiri. Despite this alliance Umar was successful, destroying Hamdallaahi in 1862 and taking Timbuktu in 1863. The victory, however, was precarious, and continuous revolts troubled the new Umarian territories. Umar died in 1864 at Degembere on the way to Bandiagara.²⁷

While Umar was a successful conqueror, the administration of his territories after conquest proved more difficult. Resistance by the Maasina Fulbe, the Bamanan and other groups was almost constant, and Umar's own designated successor, his son Aamadu Seeku, spent "much of his 30-year reign ... trying to establish his authority," not only over his subjects, "but also against other sons and kinsmen of Umar's whom the latter had appointed to provincial governorships, who were jealous of his power..." (Fage 1969, 156). Instead of what Umar's hagiographers have described as an empire, historians now generally speak of a series of disjointed Umarian states at Dinguiray, Kaarta, Segou and Maasina.

Local populations experienced much hardship during the Umarian conquest and occupation. Klein (1998, 49) has argued that it is the fact that after victory, "Umar's hungry armies imposed themselves on conquered peoples," that led to revolts. There was discontent

among the soldiers who, having taken ample booty during the wars of conquest, now found themselves living in relative poverty. "Occasionally," writes Djata (1997, 51), "Ahmadu would send them to raid villages in order to calm them, but the raids depopulated villages and created more hostility toward 'Umarian rule; it also destroyed tax bases." In trying to unite and govern his father's conquered territories, Amadou Tall soon faced yet other problems as two other groups of imperialist invaders approached from the west: the French, ultimately victorious, and another African Muslim leader, Samori Touré.

The Empire of Samori²⁸

Samori's was a Mande empire based on *jùla* commercial expansion. Samori was born around 1830 in a Mandinka village in present-day Guinea. He first traveled as a *jùla* trader and then joined the army of the king of Wasulu (Konaré, 1993).²⁹ His master eventually appointed him ruler of the small political unit within which his birthplace was located, and Samori Touré began building his power base in the 1860s. By the 1870s he had established a capital at Bissandugu (in present-day Guinea), and his polity was expanding through warfare. By 1881 he controlled most of the Mandinka area, and in 1884 he was at war with Aamadou Seeku. Samori's empire-building also involved proselytizing: around 1874 he had taken the title *almami*, and in the late 1880s he began to build mosques and impose Islam on his subjects.

According to Klein (1998, 52), Samori was "a more effective state-builder than Umar," and Fage (1969, 157) goes as far as to say that "left to himself, Samori, controlling the gold resources of Boure and keen to extend his conquests to the Niger [river] ..., might have created a new empire of Mali." However his ambitions were thwarted by the French, whom he first encountered in the early 1880s. Early skirmishes were inconclusive, and the two powers

²⁷ Although the exact cause of Umar's death remains mysterious, one of my Dogon friends, the son of the Imam of Koro, told me that it was a group of Dogon who killed Umar, and that the location of the execution is now a site of pilgrimage.

²⁸ Main sources for this section: Fage (1969, 157) and Klein (1998, 52-3).

negotiated a treaty establishing boundaries. However the French, able to summon greater resources, started to gain ascendancy a decade later. In Klein's (1998, 53) analysis, Samori was also hampered by internal contradictions: "The demands of warfare constantly created strains as raiding ravaged the population base on which he depended. Subject populations and those threatened by conquest often sought French protection, and when the French began chipping away at the empire in the 1890s, Samori found himself ruling a wasteland." In 1891, the French occupied Bissandugu; Samori escaped east.

French Conquest and Colonization (~1880 - 1960)³⁰

Early European Trading: Gold and Slaves

The first direct European contact with West Africa took place in the mid-fifteenth century, when explorers from Portugal and Castile sailed along the coastline and established trading stations. They and their sponsors aimed not only at circumnavigating Africa to have direct access to the Indian ocean trade, but also at bypassing the merchants of North Africa in order to purchase gold directly from West African producers. Once Europeans reached the southern coast of West Africa, the trade in gold, produced inland (notably in Mali), was mediated by coastal African peoples. The Portuguese made at least one early attempt to reach inland by sending a diplomatic mission to the empire of Mali in 1534.

French and English merchant sailors were active along the West African coastline from the early 1530s, and by the end of the century they, along with the Dutch, were anxious to establish their own trading bases on shore and break the Portuguese monopoly. By then, they were interested in West Africa as a source of slaves for the plantations in the 'West Indies' and other tropical parts of the Americas. It was the Spaniards who first turned to West Africa for a

²⁹ She uses the French spelling Ouassoulou.

supply of slave labor to work on their colonial plantations and in their mines. "Thus," writes Fage (1969, 64), "in about 1530, commenced the trans-Atlantic slave trade ... which was to be the most important single external influence on the life of West Africa for the next three and a half centuries."

In the seventeenth century the demand for slaves in the Americas was greater than the supply, and eventually other Europeans joined in this lucrative exploitation of African men, women and children. The first viable French West Indies Company was formed in 1664 with as its main objective the provision of African slaves to the Caribbean. Men, women and children were offered for purchase on the West African coast by African merchants who bought or captured most of them in the interior, as far inland as today's Mali (see Klein 1998). The majority of people sold in the Atlantic trade were men, preferred by plantation owners, while African slave-owners preferred to keep women and children (Klein 1998, 4, 41).

In West Africa French merchants and their royal sponsors concentrated their efforts in the area of the mouth of the Senegal river, where they established a post in the 1630s. From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, European forts and trading posts on West African shores multiplied and frequently changed owners, but by 1713 the French had established supremacy along the upper western coast from St.-Louis at the mouth of the Senegal to present-day Sierra Leone. Between 1697 and 1720, French traders and government agents penetrated inland along the Senegal river, reaching as far as the area (Bambuk) where today's border between Senegal and Mali is located. While a trade in slaves, gum, wax, ivory and hides was developed, the commercial results were disappointing, the profits being insufficient to sustain the efforts of maintaining French interests over the territory. Successive French West African companies did not fare well, partly because of competition for a relatively small supply of captives from long-established Mande and Fulbe slave-traders in the Senegambian region. As a

³⁰ The main source for this section is Fage (1969, 47-95, 111-31, 160-206); other sources are indicated in the text.

result, French merchants began to go further, buying people on the coasts of today's Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin, as well as in the Congo and Angola. Soon however, events in France would halt their activities: during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars of 1793-1815, French trade with West Africa was brought to a standstill.

French Conquest

With the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, French merchants were eager to resume business in West Africa, where Britain had become dominant. It was not until about 1879 that France emerged as a serious rival to Britain in these parts. In 1817 France re-occupied St.-Louis and Gorée in present-day Senegal, and two posts on the Senegal river and one on the Gambia. However "exploratory journeys up the Senegal soon revealed that the peoples of the Sudan were for the most part organized in comparatively strong states, much of whose external trade was with North Africa Only military conquest was likely to bring these states under French influence and turn their trade towards the Senegal" (Fage 1969, 161). Since Paris was reluctant to embark on such a conquest, for a while French agents concentrated on establishing trading posts in areas of the West African coast where the British were not dominant (today's Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo).

In 1848, there was a change in policy: Napoleon III's government announced that France would develop the trade of the Senegal and extend its influence into the interior along that river. Under the leadership of Governor Faidherbe (1854-1865), this plan started to be implemented. Forts were established at Matam and Bakel (in today's Senegal) and at Medine within the Khasso kingdom. Medine, near Kayes where some of my research took place, was the first French post in the territory of today's Mali; it served to stop the westward advance of al-Hajj Umar Tall. According to Fage (1969, 163), Faidherbe's "... conquests were inspired principally by the economic purpose of extending his administration over a sufficiently large area of territory to

secure prosperity for the French traders based at St.-Louis.” The French-sponsored development of groundnut cultivation for export had the same purpose.

For about fifteen years after Faidherbe’s departure in 1865, French imperialist advance in the area stagnated, only to revive with vigor in about 1879. By that time, consequent to political developments in Europe, European nations had embarked on what has become known as the ‘European scramble for Africa.’ In West Africa, France was very successful: “... in the last twenty-one years of the nineteenth century, the French swept swiftly across the whole Sudan from the Senegal almost to the Nile, engaged in the conquest of the Sahara from Algeria to Lake Chad, and linked up these new conquests with their trading-posts on the coasts” (Fage 1969, 163). In 1880, Commandant Supérieur Borgnis-Desbordes built a fort at Kita. Captain J.S. Gallieni occupied Bamako in 1883 and in the following years, treaties were negotiated with Samori to keep him south of the Niger river. There was a lull between 1884 and 1887, but this was to change in 1888 with the appointment of Louis Archinard as Commandant Supérieur (Klein 1998, 84, 89).

While Fage (1969, 163-5) attributes the French West African conquest mostly to diplomatic and economic rivalries emerging from the struggle for power in Europe, Klein (1998, 78) argues, in the case of Mali (the French Sudan), that “if there was a logic to the conquest, it lay in the desire of peacetime soldiers to practice their craft and win promotions.” In support of this view are Colonel Archinard’s campaigns: in the early 1890s, he invaded the Umarian kingdoms of Kaarta, Segou and Maasina (by then under the fragile leadership of Umar’s son Amadou Tall), for the most part without Paris’s approval (Fage 1969, 166; Klein 1998, 89-91). In Klein’s (1998, 89) reading “Archinard was more than any other the conqueror of the French Sudan [i.e., Mali].” He fought not only against Amadou Tall and Samori but also against governments in Paris that were unwilling to finance these wars. As a result of this lack of metropolitan support, Archinard’s armies were largely African armies, recruited amongst groups opposed to Amadou

Tall and Samori and amongst local mercenaries such as the Bamanan *ɓɓɓɓɓɓ* (see also Djata 1997, 115-7). There were no resources to provide these soldiers with salaries, so they were rewarded with part of the booty they ruthlessly seized – mostly war captives to be sold or kept as slaves. The result of the French conquest was, in Klein's (1998, 93) analysis,

... a bloodier and more horrible period than the Sudan had ever known. If the French were brutal, so too were their rivals. Amadu [Amadou Tall], Samori, Tieba and the French were all caught in a resource squeeze, in which they financed increasingly costly ways of making war with the bodies of a servile mass of women and children.

By 1893, the Umarian states of Kaarta, Segu and Maasina had been conquered. Amadou Tall fled east into Sokoto, where he died in 1898. To the north, the French occupied Timbuktu in 1894. Meanwhile, the war against Samori continued. The French had taken his capital of Bissandugu in 1891. Moving east, Samori reached the Senufo kingdom of Sikasso, led by his main rival Tieba Traoré. Samori kept Tieba's walled city under siege for fifteen months, but eventually, with the French advancing, he moved further east. Tieba made an alliance with the French which came to an end in 1898 when the French-African army sacked Sikasso (Klein, 1998:119). The same year, a French unit caught Samori by surprise in a vulnerable situation and easily made him prisoner. It was anti-climactic, to borrow Klein's (1998, 121) phrase, and the French's greatest rival in the French Sudan died in exile in 1900. With Amadou Tall, Tieba and Samori defeated, the large states were under French control, and only smaller political groups at the desert fringe and in the southern savanna remained to be subjugated.

Colonization and "Development"

Now that France had been militarily successful, it found itself with an enormous territory to administer. Maps of Africa from the early 1900s, Fage (1969, 175) tells us, showed France "... as the mistress of a vast empire of some 1,800,000 square miles (about nine times the area of France herself)." But, as Fage immediately stresses, there was a large gap between this paper ownership and actual political authority. Rulers of smaller polities were holding on to power,

particularly unwilling to comply with the invaders' requirement that they stop slave trading – a metropolitan policy that local French administrators were now reluctantly applying. Djata (1997) provides us with a case in point in his analysis of the early French occupation of Segou.

For Djata (1997, 101), if the French were able to occupy Segou in 1890, it was because Amadou Tall's rulership had been weakened from thirty years of rebellion by his Bamanan subjects. After the Umarian defeat, the French attempted to rule the region through the Bamanan leadership, but the Ngolosi (the Segou Bamanan dynasty founded by Ngolo Jara in the late eighteenth century) refused to cooperate. While the reign of the head of the Ngolosi at the time, Mari Jara, had been reaffirmed by a public ceremony organized by the French, once he understood French motives better he rebelled against the curtailment of his powers, and shortly afterwards he was killed by French authorities (Djata 1997, 124, 126). French military officers in command then enthroned Bojan, a Massasi Bamanan from Kaarta, more cooperative but lacking legitimacy in the eyes of the population. For many years henceforth there was continuous armed rebellion and various resistance strategies to colonial rule: refusal to pay taxes or to host visiting administrators, for instance. Djata (1997, 175) also sees the conversion to Islam of large numbers of Bamanan individuals during this period as resistance to Christian proselytizing by French missionaries. Bamanan elites also resisted enculturation by refusing to enlist their sons in French schools, sending their slaves' or *nyamakalaw*'s children instead.

In the early French colonial rule, villagers in the Segou region attempted to go about life ignoring the European colonial administrators. Djata (1997, 175) concludes that for the early colonial period, "the lives of common folk seem to have been less affected than those of the upper class." Early colonial administrators were greatly dependent on African collaborators, men and women, servants and elites, some of whom (for instance interpreters and informants on 'traditional' law) were quite influential. This actual African influence in colonial administration occurred despite the official colonial doctrine of assimilation into French culture for the ultimate 'progress of civilization' in Africa.

During the early years of colonial expansion in French West Africa, the newly conquered territories were governed autocratically through the Governor's office at St.-Louis, a regime in the style of the imperial metropolitan government of Napoleon III. The populations in the areas outside of the communes were not considered citizens but "subjects," allowed, within certain limits, to retain what French colonial ethnographers reported to be their 'traditional' laws and 'customs.' Nevertheless, the rhetoric was that as French civilization progressed in Africa, it would eventually turn the colonized into French citizens, able to participate in their own government.

The 1879-1900 expansion took place so rapidly over such a large territory "... that at first the French were unable to find enough administrative officials [and] for a time they were forced to use the native governments as their agents" (Fage 1969). Headmen who submitted to French authority were confirmed in office, while those who rebelled were deposed or exiled (or even killed, as we saw in the case of Mari Jara) and replaced with collaborators. A few years after conquest however the number of French officials recruited for work in the colonies grew, and the only Africans allowed to retain power were leaders at the canton and village level (Imperato 1989, 46). Eventually the system of government that was put in place for the Federation of West Africa (which in 1895 included Senegal, Sudan, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire) was pyramidal. At the top was the Paris-based Minister for the Colonies; below him, the Governor-General of French West Africa, based in Dakar (Senegal); and under him the Governors of the individual colonies – in our case, the French Sudan (briefly called Upper Senegal and Niger)³¹ – and finally, their subordinates, the provincial and district officers, all of whom were French citizens. The African canton headmen were appointed by the district officers to whom they were subordinate.

Fage (1969:179) dates at about 1920 the death of the myth of assimilation; by then, he writes, "... the French had been forced to realize the failure of their plan to convert Africans into

Frenchmen [and women] and to govern French West Africa as though it were a part of France.” While official colonial policy moved towards a more conciliatory standpoint, encouraging the preservation of African institutions and the transition to some forms of local self-government, in practice local French administrators were often tyrannical, especially in the interior parts of the empire such as today’s Mali that were far away from the Parisian or Senegalese gaze. Klein (1998, 77) points out that unlike in Senegal, there were no concrete economic interests nor civilian French community in the Sudan in the early years of colonization, and “the exercise of power was thus unrestrained by either political opposition or civilian morality.” Early administration was in the hands of the military, and the young lieutenants, captains and sergeants were often brutal and promiscuous, keeping slave women as concubines.

As Klein (1998, 92) puts it, “conquest necessitated ... some kind of development policy.” Archinard had encouraged Senegalese merchants to come to the Sudan. Most of them were based in Medine (near Kayes), and linked to St.-Louis trading houses. Until the 1890s, it was mostly slaves that they bought, in exchange for a range of commodities (Klein 1998, 92). Another early project was the railroad. Since the mouth of the Niger was in British territory (in today’s Nigeria), the French planned to link the navigable stretches of the Niger under their control to those of the Senegal river – in this way opening up the trade and resources of today’s Mali from the west – by constructing a 320-mile railway from Kayes to Bamako. In fact, it was this project which began the French conquest and occupation of the Sudan (Mali), when in 1879 Captain Joseph Gallieni was sent to make surveys for the railroad and establish relations with the Mandinka (Klein 1998, 59, 78). Shortly afterwards he was sent on a second mission to negotiate treaties with Bamako and Segou, where Amadou Tall made him wait ten months for his signature. Construction of the railway, completed in 1924, caused enormous suffering to Malians. French colonial administrators dealt with the shortages of labor and funds for the project by instituting forced labor camps. Klein (1998, 129, *passim*) believes that this call fell largely on slaves, sent

³¹ The name and borders of the colony that has become today’s Mali changed frequently.

by their owners to fill quotas. This redirection of labor meant that fewer hands were available to cultivate fields, and when this situation was coupled with drought in the first years of the twentieth century, famines occurred. Forced labor was used throughout the colonial era for various public works, and in my experience is still bitterly remembered in Mali today.

Completion of the railway did not turn the French Sudan into an economically profitable colonial enterprise. The trans-Saharan trade had become relatively insignificant, largely overtaken by the European-driven coastal trade, south of Mali. The climate and poor soils set serious limits upon agricultural production, and the low population density meant a scarce supply of laborers for export-oriented development schemes. While cotton and peanut cultivation for exports were encouraged, and an irrigation scheme belatedly set up in the Segou area for rice and sugar cane cultivation (the *Office du Niger*, begun in 1928), none of these projects was very successful. Generally, the French Sudan proved "... poorly organized for production for export, and lacked both the earnings and the population to provide a good market for European goods" (Fage 1969, 188). French investors were much more interested in groundnut production in Senegal; cocoa, timber, coffee and banana production in Côte d'Ivoire; palm exploitation in Benin; and banana plantations in Guinea. The consequent imbalances between Mali and its neighbors to the south and west are still apparent today, as they were during the struggles for independence.

Where Are the Women? "Herstory." Part I

The chronology of events just given is for the most part HIStory – stories of kings, soldiers, empire-builders, explorers, colonizers and administrators, all of them men. Noticing this bias in the historiography of Mali, Malian historian Adame Ba Konaré (who is also, by "divine complicity" in her own words (Ba Konaré 1993, 15), the wife of the current President of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konaré) set out to put Malian women back into the story by publishing, in 1993, a

dictionary of famous Malian women. Here I make extensive use of the first part of her work, an essay on the role and image of women in Malian history (Ba Konaré 1993, 25-85).

Ba Konaré stresses that two of the Arabic authors who wrote on the Soninke empire of Ghana described matrilineal imperial succession (the chosen heir being the king's sister's son). In the case of the Mali empire, the Moroccan Ibn Battouta, who visited its capital in 1353, reported that the senior wife of the emperor, who was also his cousin, was actively involved in governing and even tried to overthrow her husband. According to the same source, the wife of the emperor was given the province of Jenne to administer and taxes were paid directly to her.

In Mande oral history, two female archetypes recur: the powerful and loyal mother or sister, well-versed in the art of occult practices, and the treacherous wife, well-versed in the arts of seduction. The Sundiata Epic features them quintessentially: Sundiata inherits his occult powers from his mother, while his sister, married to his enemy Sumanguru, discovers her husband's weakness and reports back to her brother, allowing him to defeat his opponent (Herbert 1993, 151). While heroic women thus are more audible in Mande oral history than they are visible in most European historiography, it is only through their male relatives that they are famous, as Ba Konaré (1993, 26) stresses.

Ba Konaré (1993, 29) postulates that it is with the growth of the "warrior societies" of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the status of women in Mali diminished. She particularly blames the Bamanan kingdom of Segou for this degeneration, having, in her opinion, reduced women to sexual objects. She then contrasts this with her own society, the Fulbe, initially matrilineal. However with Islamization Malian Fulbe societies adopted patrilineality (Sanankoua 1990, 106-7), and clearly the *Diina*, as described above, was a patriarchal gerontocracy. Nevertheless, the influential role of mothers over their sons is evidenced historically in the person of Adya, one of Seeku Aamadu's widows, who by interceding with her son during the succession crisis following Aamadu Seeku's death, prevented a civil war in Hamdallaahi (Ba Konaré 1993, 40; Sanankoua 1990, 123-4). Bintou Sanankoua

(1990, 124, my translation) concludes that civil war was avoided "... thanks to the weight of elderly women in political affairs and to the influence of mothers over their sons in Fulbe society."

The *Diina*'s conqueror, al-Hajj Umar Tall, used marriage and concubinage to seal political alliances. Fifteen of his wives and concubines are known to history, the mothers of his twenty-two sons (Ba Konaré 1993, 43). French emissary Mage, who visited Segou a few years after the death of Umar Tall, reported that his widows lived in seclusion with nearly eight hundred other women, the daughters of conquered rulers. Adding to Aamadu's problems, his "mothers" revolted during Mage's stay, stealing cowry shells from a royal storage room. When he threatened to whip the guilty ones, they claimed hunger as their defense.

Samori Touré, who is said to have had over eighty wives was, according to Ba Konaré (1993, 48), particularly close to one of them, his *baramuso*. The *baramuso* is another archetypal Mande character, who still today provides a cultural model for Malian women: she is the favorite wife. Samori's *baramuso*, Sarankenyi Konaté, is reported to have been directly involved in the management of the territories conquered by her husband.

Despite the underlying sexism of Catholic French colonial culture (which took peculiar forms when coupled with racism), Ba Konaré (1993, 50) deems the colonial period to have been in the final analysis beneficial for Malian women thanks to some legislative measures and to access to formal education (for a select few). These positive measures, however, came late in the colonial period. At first, under military administration, African and European gender stereotypes colluded, and the very few girls and women who were educated trained to be nurses, midwives, and teachers. Some of these early professional graduates, most famously Aoua Kéita (1975) would play important roles in the struggle for the French Sudan's independence.

From Independence to the Third Republic

Introduction: Poverty and Dependence

While ancient Mali with its legendary empires remains an inspiration,³² the current situation is for many a source of despair. By any standard, Mali's experiment with state socialism was an economic failure, and since the 1980s International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment programs have been in place. While macro-economic indicators have shown recent signs of improvement, there has been little discernible amelioration in living conditions for the majority of the population.

As measured by conventional socio-economic indicators, Mali is one of the poorest nations of the world. It ranked 171st out of 174 countries in the 1998 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index (UNDP 1998, 130). The country's gross national product (GNP) is estimated at 260 US\$ per capita (Max and Horricks 1999, 125), and life expectancy at birth is only 48.7 years for women and 45.4 years for men (UNDP 1998, 133). As many as thirty-six per cent of the total population are not expected to survive to age forty (Ibid.). Access to basic services is problematic, with over a third of the population not having access to safe water and as many as 60% without access to (modern) health services (Ibid., 147). The adult literacy rate, despite recent improvements, is still amongst the lowest in the world, estimated at 31% for the population as a whole (Max and Horricks 1999, 125). Literacy levels are even lower for women: only 19% of girls were enrolled in primary schools in 1995 (UNDP 1998, 153). Of those girls enrolled, nearly 75% finished the first cycle (6 years) of primary education; however, a 1993 study found that over half of Grade 5 students did not understand what they were reading (ODHD 1998b, 49, table 11, 56).

³² Upon hearing about my fieldwork plans, several African and African-Canadian acquaintances exclaimed something along the lines of "Ha! Mali! The heyday of African history! The great empires!"

Caution must be exercised however when reading these numbers. A large portion of the Malian economy operates underground, evading national statistics. One must also bear in mind the ethnocentrism of the contemporary capitalist notion of “poverty” and of many of its indicators, particularly the GNP (see Rahnema 1992).³³ For instance, I do not think that enrollment in Qur’anic schools is taken into account in the “literacy” figures – same with access to traditional health practitioners. Yet, poverty in Mali is often visceral, translated into what Amartya Sen³⁴ (quoted in Rahnema 1992, 160, italics in original) has called the “irreducible core of *absolute deprivation*”: hunger. Feeding oneself and one’s dependents is a very real problem for a large number of Malians. The UNDP (1998, 147) reports that 27% of Malian children under the age of five are underweight. Among adults, according to data published by the Malian government (ODHD 1998b, 41), nearly one woman out of five (19%) and one man out of six (14.5%) show signs of chronic malnutrition.

In this context of absolute and relative poverty, foreign official development assistance (ODA) is an important source of capital, and the international development industry is ubiquitous in the country, particularly in Bamako, where most quality vehicles sport a donor’s logo. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the Malian economy is an “extreme reliance on foreign financing of official budgets” (Brigaldino 1997, 129). In 1996, Mali received US \$ 505 million in net ODA (OECD 1996, 140), while its gross domestic product (GDP, real) was estimated at US\$ 2.61 million by the World Bank (1997). The economy continues to be dependent on one main export crop, cotton, the price of which has been falling, although recently exports of gold have brought in some capital. The current regime, like its two predecessors, continues to be utterly dependent on ODA. How this came about is the issue I turn to next.

³³ Incidentally, Rahnema was once the UNDP’s Representative in Mali.

³⁴ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 1714.

Toward Independence

In August 1945, France allowed Africans in its colonies to participate in the elections for the First Constituent Assembly of the French Fourth Republic (Imperato 1989, 53). Among the individuals who ran in the following October elections were Fily Dabo Sissoko, a *chef de canton* (“canton” chief) from a leading aristocratic family in the Khasso (Kayes region) who enjoyed the support of the French colonial administration; Mamadou Konaté, who had founded one of the first teachers’ unions in the country and enjoyed trade union backing; and Modibo Keita, supported by the local *Groupes d’Études Communistes* and the French Communists (Imperato 1989, 52-53) (Meillassoux 1970, 109 n.11). After Fily Dabo Sissoko’s victory, Mamadou Konaté and Modibo Keita joined forces under the banner of the *Union Soudanaise* (US) which became affiliated with the West Africa inter-regional *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), led by Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d’Ivoire, forming the US-RDA. Meanwhile, Sissoko and his supporters formed the *Parti Progressiste Soudanais* (PPS).

In 1956, the PPS lost its dominance to the US-RDA in the National Assembly elections because the implementation of the *loi cadre* (framework law) granting universal suffrage to men and women over twenty-one (Ba Konaré 1993, 52), gave the US-RDA expanded support (Imperato 1989, 53-54). The party, now under the leadership of Modibo Keita after the death of Mamadou Konaté, had achieved mass appeal by encouraging anti-colonialist sentiments and setting independence as its objective. It obtained merchants’ initial backing by promising, among other things, to eliminate their rivals, the French trading houses and the Lebano-Syrian businesspeople (Amselle 1985a, 249-50). The mass of the peasantry also rallied, responsive to promises to end forced labour and raise prices paid to farmers for their produce (Ibid.). Eventually the PPS joined the US-RDA, “... setting the stage for the French Soudan achieving independence as a one-party state” (Imperato 1989, 54).

After de Gaulle's 1958 referendum on the future status of France's overseas territories, Mali, then known as the *République Soudanaise* and led by Modibo Keita, federated with Senegal, to form the Mali Federation, which obtained its independence from France in June 1960. The Federation was extremely short-lived: a mere two months after independence, on 22 August 1960, the Senegalese police forcibly sent Modibo Keita and his advisors in a sealed train from Dakar to Bamako, resulting in declarations of independence in both Senegal and the Soudan, which then adopted the name 'Mali.'

The First Republic: the Regime of Modibo Keita, 1960-68

The first Malian political parties were class-based. After independence, the PSP represented the interests of the merchants, supported by the local rural aristocracy (Amselle 1985a, 249-50). The US-RDA, on the other hand, had a leadership composed of civil servants (teachers, unionists, clerks – many of whom were from non-*hɔɔni* families), and "... fundamentally represented those who would eventually constitute the state bourgeoisie" (Amselle 1985a, 250, my translation). Once in power, Modibo Keita and his government set out to establish a Soviet-style communist state, minus the atheist component. In accessing state power, the *petite bourgeoisie* of civil servants became a "nomenklatura,"³⁵ that is, "... a new privileged class whose political power came not from ownership of the means of production and exchange," but rather from its control of the bureaucratic state apparatus (Amselle 1985a, 250), inherited from the colonialists.

When this bourgeoisie took power in 1960, it had virtually eliminated its main rival class in the bid for power, the landed aristocracy, through the suppression of the PPS and of the *chefferie de canton* ("canton" chiefdoms). It was now in competition with the merchants. The

creation in 1962 of an inconvertible Malian franc, which Diarra (1986) sees as symbolically important to nationalism but ultimately economically devastating, led to an open confrontation between the state and the merchants who protested in the streets of Bamako. The Keita regime repressed the revolt by arresting and executing the leaders, Fily Dabo Sissoko and two others (Diarra, 1986; Amselle, 1985, 252). Following this manifestation of state power, merchants as a group largely withdrew from formal politics, but maintained considerable control in the rural areas through the continuation of unregulated and untaxed trade. This informal trade eventually proved detrimental to Keita's economic program (Diarra 1986).

As economic conditions worsened, the Keita regime gradually lost most of its legitimacy, and became more and more repressive. The creation of a brutal *milice populaire*, modelled after Mao's Red Guards, and the program of 'Cultural Revolution' particularly enraged Malians. In 1967, the devaluation of the Malian franc, imposed as a condition for re-entry into the Common Franc Zone led to the lowering of the standard of living of the bureaucracy, further eroding support for Keita's regime. Discontent also grew within army ranks (Amselle 1985a, 253-54).

The 1968 Coup d'État and the Moussa Traoré Regime (1968-1991)

By late 1968, there was widespread discontent with Keita's regime, and massive street demonstrations took place in support of the 19 November 1968 bloodless coup led by young Lt. Moussa Traoré (Imperato 1989, 63). According to Imperato (1989, 63), who was in Mali at the time, people shouted "Down with Modibo! Down with the militia!" but significantly, not "Down with socialism!", "... because so many urban dwellers were the beneficiaries of the secure employment afforded by Keita's socialist policies." Traoré formed the *Comité militaire de la*

³⁵ After M. Voslensky, *La Nomenklatura: Les Privilégiés en URSS* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1981).

libération nationale (CMLN), which was to rule until 1979. The army gained control of the entire state apparatus, and Malian citizens at first enjoyed more freedom (Imperato 1989, 63-64).

Moussa Traoré would end up leading the country for 23 years, providing an example of the common African model of personal rule at the head of a one-party state. Frequent cabinet shuffles -- twenty in twenty years (Diarrah 1990, 43), continued control of the army, armed repression, and National Assembly elections which allowed Malians a certain degree of political participation within the single-party system, helped Traoré strengthen and maintain his power. He favored closer ties with France and the West, and slowly veered towards those sources of foreign aid and away from the Eastern block. Traoré's early economic policies continued to provide for the welfare of an urban elite, guaranteeing employment in the state bureaucracy and making imported consumer goods available (Imperato 1989, 65).

When Traoré's CMLN first took power, it promised to eventually return the country to civilian rule. Initially, a small team of military officers inexperienced in administration, and according to Imperato (1989: 64) "of modest intellectual ability," set out to correct the 'flawed economic policies of the Keita regime.' Early policies had mass appeal: the CMLN provided greater individual freedom than had been allowed in the last years of the Keita regime: it encouraged private traders; abolished certain taxes, the much hated militia, and compulsory Marxist political education; and in an effort to gain the support of the peasantry, it dismantled the collectivized agriculture implanted by the Keita government (Imperato 1989, 64-65). However, the state-run economy was kept, "... not the least," according to Imperato (1989, 64), "because so many urban dwellers were employed in it."

Early opposition to the regime came from students, teachers, and the unions, who had been supporters of Modibo Keita. There were also internal dissenters: between 1969 and 1981, there were five coup attempts and eleven high-profile political trials (Diarrah 1990, 38-39). Internal dissenters in general were sentenced to life imprisonment (Imperato 1989, 65). The first student strikes in 1969 were crushed by the CMLN. In 1968 Traoré had dissolved the *Union*

Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali (UNTM), the only union that was allowed to exist under Keita and that had represented, since independence, all salaried employees in the country. The UNTM had been supportive of the socialist orientation of the First Republic. In 1970 the UNTM was allowed to reconvene and it held a congress during which it openly challenged the military regime. Response was unequivocal: the union was dissolved again and thirty unionists were jailed (Imperato 1989, 66). According to Diarra (1990, 53-55), over the years the dictatorship succeeded in dividing and decimating the trade union movement in Mali.

In 1974, a new Constitution provided for a single political party, election of a president for five-year terms, and a National Assembly with members elected for four years (Imperato 1989, 67). Rule by the CMLN was also extended for another five years, during which the party was to prepare the military-sponsored return to civilian rule. Moving toward that objective, in 1976 a new party was created by the regime, the *Union démocratique du peuple malien* (UDPM). Organized along Marxist-Leninist lines, it was greeted with little enthusiasm (Imperato 1989, 68). The next year former president Modibo Keita died, and many suspected he had been secretly murdered by the regime. His funeral was the site of large-scale anti-CMLN demonstrations by teachers, students and former Keita supporters – hundreds were arrested (Imperato 1989, 69). In Diarra's opinion (1991, 70), the suspected assassination of the nationalist leader played an important role in radicalizing the opposition to the military regime. In that same year, UDPM elections established the party apparatus, and Traoré became its secretary-general. In 1979, general elections were held in which Traoré was formally elected President, and all UDPM candidates – the only party allowed – were elected. This development represented Traoré's successful elimination of his political rivals within the CMLN; from 1979 onwards, he would occupy the front of the political scene alone (Diarra 1991, 68), building a regime of personal rule. After the 1979 elections which marked the end of eleven years of military rule, the CMLN was formally dissolved, and Mali entered an era of military rule in civilian clothing.

In 1979 and 1980, strikes by students and teachers represented a serious political challenge for the Traoré government, and led to violent confrontations. By that time, the public sector could no longer absorb graduates, and the regime tried to limit access to higher education. Teachers were angered over their low salaries which were chronically late in being paid. However, after the disruption of classes for two academic years, the strike ended in a failure (Diarrah 1990, 55). Students and teachers failed to gain the support of other civil servants and other salaried workers (Bertrand 1992, 10; Imperato 1989, 77).

Following these challenges to the regime, Traoré announced that the UDPM had to be “revitalised.” The 1981 extraordinary congress of the party saw the official adoption of a neo-liberal economic strategy: there were calls for the liberation of the economy and for the abolition of various parastatals (Imperato 1989, 73). This strategy, representing an active courting of Western donors and international financial institutions, would be reaffirmed in various other forums until the regime’s downfall. In the 1980s, salaries had come to represent 80% of the state’s budget (Imperato 1989, 71). By the mid-1980s, the Malian state had become totally dependent on foreign funding by France, the World Bank, the United Nations and other donors (Imperato 1989, 73).

In 1985, Traoré was re-elected President, and afterwards engaged his country in a structural adjustment program designed in collaboration with the World Bank and the IMF. The usual diet of private enterprise promotion, privatization and reduction of the size of a state now perceived as obese was applied to Mali. In Imperato’s (1989, 74) view, “there was significant political risk in this course of action, given Mali’s low standard of living and the fact that privatization collided with the vested interests of an overinflated bureaucracy, parastatals, and educated youth....” Indeed the system of redistribution of wealth upon which the Party was based was crumbling, and the budget cuts would create a breach between those close enough to power to maintain their privileges, and the lower echelons of the state’s chains of clientelism, who found themselves excluded (Fay 1995, 22).

Almost half of incumbents were turned out in both the 1985 and 1988 National Assembly elections, indicating a high level of voter dissatisfaction (Imperato 1989, 71). The 1984-85 drought aggravated an already difficult economic and social situation. Already in 1980 there was such disillusion with the regime that the UDPM could only mobilize 200 people to march under the protection of the military in a state-sponsored show of support for Traoré (Diarrah 1990, 43). For a month in 1987, Traoré traveled through the country to meet with angry local sections of the UNTM, and of the youth's (UNJM)³⁶ and women's (UNFM)³⁷ branches of the party. True to his machiavellian style, Traoré publicly decried corruption in the party and the state, but without implicating himself. That year and the following, the government's inability to pay its employees and to give student scholarships became a major political liability, and led to another teachers' strike in Bamako in 1988 (Imperato 1989, 75, 77). At the March 1988 UDPM Congress, Traoré blamed the country's economic crisis on external causes: mainly the fall in cotton prices and the cost of debt servicing.

While these external pressures no doubt played an exacerbating role, the system was fundamentally collapsing from within: with the shortage of funds, less wealth was redistributed to clients and fewer jobs were available through nepotism, while at the same time people had to endure more and more extortion from the underpaid lower echelons of the civil service, notably military and police officers (Fay 1995, 23). It is largely in this sense that the anti-corruption demands of the opponents to the regime must be interpreted – as a crisis of redistribution.

The End of the Traoré Regime and the Establishment of the Third Republic

In March 1991, Lieutenant-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly known in Mali as "ATT") arrested Moussa Traoré after an urban civil insurgency during which 106 people lost

³⁶ Union Nationale des Jeunes du Mali.

their lives (Ba Konaré 1993, 78; Imperato 1991, 24). This popular uprising, though encouraged by the “wave of democratization” that swept through Eastern and Central Europe and then through certain parts of Africa at the time, represented the culmination of years of growing discontent within Mali. External factors, such as aid conditionality and a desire to court the United States also played a role in the move towards multipartism, since the regime in its last years relaxed its control of civil society, allowing for a freer press and tolerating the formation of new associations.

In May of 1990, the national union (UNTM) had delivered the regime its most serious blow since the 1979-80 student strike by issuing a declaration in which it formally supported multipartism (Diarrah 1991, 81). This was significant indiscipline, as the UNTM was formally under the wing of the state party (UDPM). A month later, at the Franco-African Summit, French President François Mitterrand declared that France would make its bilateral aid conditional upon efforts towards democratization. This sparked a debate on multipartism in the free press in Mali (Diarrah 1991, 80). Public demands for multipartism were then made in August 1990 by the Malian judiciary and by over two hundred citizens in an open letter to President Traoré.

Supporters of multipartism within the UDPM debated the issue with pro- status quo allies of President Traoré at the Extraordinary Council of the party that was called at the end of August 1990. However, the main issue on the agenda was the “Tuareg crisis” which had erupted in June (Diarrah 1991, 83-84). In October 1990, pro-democracy associations were formed: the *Comité National d'Initiative Démocratique* (CNID), the *Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali* (ADEMA), and the *Association des Étudiants et Élèves du Mali* (AEEM). The latter stressed its independence from the state-sponsored youth organization, the UNJM. December 1990 saw the beginning of large-scale street demonstrations which would eventually turn into riots and succeed in toppling the dictatorship.

³⁷ Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali.

In the first month of 1991, the Traoré government signed a short-lived peace agreement with Tamacheq leaders, and signaled its desire to crush internal opposition through a cabinet shuffle. On 8 January, the UNTM called for a 48-hour general strike, which was massively followed (Diarrah 1991, 90). The third week of January saw violent street confrontations between the supporters of pro-democracy organizations (mostly youth) and security forces. On 3 March 1991, thousands demonstrated in Bamako and in several other cities in support of multipartism (Diarrah 1991, 92); the response was brutal repression. Events reached their bloody climax between the twenty-first and twenty-sixth of March. On the twenty-first, one person was killed and several wounded during a youth demonstration. The next day, youth in all of Mali's regional capitals attacked the armed forces, using stones and molotov cocktails against machine guns and armoured cars. By noon, there were a hundred dead and a thousand wounded (Diarrah 1991, 92). That night, Traoré declared a state of emergency, but did not succeed in stopping civil unrest. On March 23, 24 and 25, workers, women, and the urban unemployed joined forces with youth against the army and the police forces, culminating, after many deaths, in the arrest of Traoré on 26 March.

The young military officers who arrested Moussa Traoré under the leadership of Amadou Toumani Touré formed the *Comité de Réconciliation Nationale* (CRN). After Traoré's arrest, the CRN negotiated with the newly-formed democratic organizations and the two groups were joined in the *Comité Transitoire de Salut du Peuple* (CTSP), charged with managing the state until democratic elections could be held, and with organizing those elections. Touré, at the head of the CTSP, successfully managed the transition, piloting a national referendum in January 1992 by which the new Constitution was adopted. In June 1992, with the election of the ADEMA presidential candidate, Alpha Oumar Konaré, power was returned to civilians, and the "Third Republic" was installed. When I arrived in Mali in April 1997, Alpha, as he is locally called, was seeking a second mandate. He was re-elected that year despite a boycott of the presidential elections by most opposition parties.

“Herstory,” Part II

In most of the academic and journalistic accounts and analyses of post-colonial national politics in Mali, women are nearly invisible. When one combs the texts, women appear here and there as supporters, electors, wives, and status symbols to be sexually consumed, but only rarely as free political agents and even more rarely as political leaders. For instance, we find an allusion to the political clout of Traoré’s wife, and a mention that chasing women was part of the hedonism characteristic of CMLN leaders between 1968-78 (Diarrah 1991, 82,69). However, it is possible to start to discern Malian women’s political agency by using other types of texts, such as autobiography and Adame Ba Konaré’s Dictionary (1993).

Aoua Kéita and the US-RDA

As Jane Turriffin (1993) has pointed out, Aoua Kéita’s autobiography, *Femme d’Afrique* (Kéita 1975) is an important social document. Aoua Kéita was one of the first women in the colony to become literate in French. She studied midwifery in Dakar in the 1930s, and came back to French Sudan to practice in various regional outposts. She was an early militant of the US-RDA, and used her position as a respected midwife to organize women politically, most successfully in Gao. She presents herself as a politically astute, fearless and incorruptible woman who became known as the “little midwife from Gao” (Kéita 1975, 360). Because of her pro-independence political activities, she became a threat to the French colonial administration and was regularly disciplined through frequent changes in her posting, forcing her to relocate and rebuild her networks numerous times. She was even exiled to Senegal for one year. Her leadership and her devotion to the party were rewarded by her election in 1958 to the Political Bureau, the highest executive level in the party’s bureaucratic structure, as Commissioner for the organization of women within the US-RDA (Kéita 1975, 377-78). In 1959, she became the first elected woman Member of Parliament in the French Sudan (Kéita 1975, 386-91).

Aoua Kéita's autobiography portrays women as active political beings. In 1951 in Gao for example, after all the male representatives of the US-RDA employed by the colonial administration were re-located to other regions in an effort to sabotage the US-RDA organization prior to the elections, women, led by Kéita, took over and very successfully managed the electoral campaign (Kéita 1975, 109-26). One woman became a local hero when she made it to the polling station after a long trek in a very advanced state of pregnancy, voted, and gave birth at the hands of Aoua Kéita a few hours afterwards (Kéita 1975, 123-4).

Such public militancy for a political cause as facilitated by Aoua Kéita in Gao however, seems to have been rarely conducted by women. According to Turriffin (1993, 77), "in the French Soudan, militant activity by women in support of the independence movement rarely extended beyond the actions of a small number of elite women, such as Aoua Kéita, and wives of Union Soudanaise party leaders." Ba Konaré (1993) confirms this assessment for elite women, naming only Aoua Keita and Mariam Travélé (Modibo Keita's wife) as examples of women actively involved in the US-RDA. However Ba Konaré (1993, 53-5) distinguishes between the involvement of "illiterate women" (98% of women) and that of the literate women of the time, who thought of themselves as the *évoluées* (advanced ones). She argues that the majority ("illiterate") women enthusiastically joined the independence movement not only as voters but also as party organizers. Male politicians used influential women (elders, women from aristocratic families, and leaders of traditional women's associations) to recruit followers (see also De Jorio 1997). They also had their praises sung by *jèli* and *jɔn* (slave) women (Ba Konaré 1993, 53; see also Schulz 1997).³⁸ Meanwhile the *évoluées* were mostly involved in the newly formed unions, creating women's sections, and in the panafrican movement of the time, with the first conference of the West African Women's Union held in Bamako in 1959 (Ba Konaré 1993, 54-5).

Turritin (1993, 74) further notes that the prevailing gender ideology, which claimed "... that men were morally superior to and jurally responsible for women," made public political action illegitimate for women. This becomes apparent in parts of Kéita's narrative, for instance when her husband recommends that she avoid discussing politics and rather support the party behind the scenes (Kéita 1975, 65-66), and in the following speech addressed to her by a village chief during her 1959 electoral campaign:

Get out of my village, you bold woman! You are not only bold, but shameless to dare to compete with men by accepting a man's position ... Koutiala, a country of brave warriors, of great hunters, of courageous veterans of the French Army, would have a little nothing of a woman at its head? Impossible! I have three women just like you who scratch my back every night! (Kéita 1975, 389-90, my translation).

Shortly before independence, Aoua Kéita and Mariam Travélé became responsible for the organization of the US-RDA national women's organization. The *Commission sociale des femmes*, as it was called during Modibo Keita's regime, had as its mandate the organization of political activities of interest to women, as well as leadership with regards to sexual equality (Bazin-Tardieu 1975, 116; Diarra 1986, 47). While Québécois feminist Bazin-Tardieu gives an overall positive evaluation of the *Commission*, she deplores the fact that it concentrated too much on party politics. Ultimately, the containment of the women's movement within the US-RDA resulted in a diminution of women's influence (Diarra 1986, 47). However, the party's policy of having women's representatives – *Commissaires aux femmes* – at all but the highest levels of party organization did encourage the inclusion of women into political life (Bazin-Tardieu 1975, 115-6; Diarra 1986, 47). While the party had announced as a principle that women were to be integrated at all levels of the party, during her research Bazin-Tardieu found that women were most active at the local level. In village and neighbourhood party organizations, women, at least theoretically, participated in all the discussions (Bazin-Tardieu 1975, 115).

³⁸ In 1945 some of these praise singers organized a women's march on the Bamako jail to demand the liberation of two pro-independence journalists (Ba Konaré 1993, 53).

The *Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali* (UNFM)

The UNFM was created in 1974 under military rule. First and foremost, it was an instrument of politics, closely monitored by the regime (Ba Konaré 1993, 67-77) (Simard 1993, 82). In a review article on African women in politics, Jean O'Barr and Kathryn Firmin-Sellers (1995, 203) stated boldly: "In Mali the National Union of Malian Women (UNFM) cannot engage any issues that the government does not endorse." The UNFM was the only formal women's association that was legally allowed to exist under the Traoré regime. In the state schema, there was a UNFM committee in each village in Mali which included 13 elected members, although in some villages the members were in actuality nominated by the chief (Simard 1993, 83). In the Bamanan villages where Simard did research, the committees were very close to village elites, and generally organized women's new collective activities, especially those dealing with outside organizations (Simard 1993, 83). Evaluating the political power of the UNFM, Imperato (1989, 89) concluded: "In some respects, the UNFM is akin to the women's auxiliary unit of a male-dominated organization, confined to a set agenda of issues and deprived of equal access to power sharing. This group focuses on women's concerns, has a voice in relevant political issues, but exercises little real power." The UNFM was abolished in March 1991 when the Traoré government was toppled.

Women in the Streets: 1977-80 and 1991

Urban women appear as political actors in Diarra's account of the 1979-80 students and teachers' strikes in their role as mothers: "Women, feeling hurt to see their children so savagely attacked, armed themselves with pestles³⁹ and other utensils to confront the police. They took part in the battles under the astonished eyes of their husbands" (Diarra 1990, 42, my translation, also 49). It is hard to reconcile this image of women fighting in the streets alongside the students

with Imperato's portrayal of women as "innocent" victims during the 1991 riots. He himself reports that on 23 March 1991, there were "... bloody clashes ... between troops and 2.000 women demonstrating in front of the ministry of defense," yet later writes that "the killing of innocent women and children outraged the urban public and placed him [President Traoré] in an untenable position" (Imperato 1991, 24). I heard from a visitor to Mali shortly after the 1991 events that those "innocent" women in Bamako were reported to have thrown boiling oil at the soldiers.⁴⁰ Ba Konaré (1993, 78) depicts women as courageous and aggressive street demonstrators in the protests of 1977, 1978 and 1980 as well as during the events of 1991, supportive of their children. Indeed, students and unemployed youth made up the mass of the protesters (Fay 1995). Fourteen women died during the 1991 unrest, out of a total of 106 victims (Ba Konaré 1993, 78).

In Diarra's (1990, 42-3) opinion, the participation of women in the 1979-80 street confrontations disrupted the Malian family structure, as the authority of male heads of households over their sons and wives was questioned. In his view, there was unanimous disapproval of the behaviour of several fathers who delivered their sons to the authorities. Wives then used various resistance tactics from Malian women's repertoire: some openly jeered at their husbands or altogether stopped speaking to them; others engaged in sex strikes; and "the most determined" returned to their father's family. The perceived cowardice of fathers later found expression in a popular song (Ibid.).

Conclusion

While the whole history just outlined is relevant to contextualizing the socio-historical and political terrain upon which the campaign against excision is deployed in today's Mali, certain aspects are more salient to the discussion. First, it is important to stress that because of its

³⁹ These omnipresent tools of everyday life in West Africa are made of solid wood and those for pounding cereals are roughly one meter long – big enough that being hit by one could seriously harm a person.

⁴⁰ Deborah Adelman, cooperant, personal communication.

geographical location in an environment that is for the most part extremely arid, Mali is a country where agriculture and pastoralism provide a very meager source of livelihood. This is one of the reasons why the successful empires and kingdoms of the past did not achieve wealth primarily through farming, but rather through trade or its taxing.

Of major significance is the fact that for centuries a large portion of this commercial activity was trade in human beings – slavery. While French colonial administrators took reluctant steps to outlaw slave-trading a century ago (as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4), the history of slavery is still very relevant to an understanding of the Malian culture(s) within which excision can make “common-sense” (in the Gramscian meaning of the term). First, the concept of wealth *in people* is still very much an implicit meaning in Mali – a meaning relevant, for instance, to the emphasis on the social control of reproduction, and to the organization of the patriarchal household. Further, at the ideological level the slave is the antithesis of the noble, a polar opposition that forms the frame of the Mande caste system that originated in the aftermath of the Sosso-Mandinka war. The interest here resides in the facts that first, as explored more thoroughly in Chapters 5 and 9, a certain category of people within the Mande caste system, the *nɔmɔw*, had until recently a monopoly on excision and circumcision practice; and second, public expression of an interest in sexuality is still associated, I argue below, with slave-like (non-noble) behaviour, especially for women.

Another important aspect to tease out of the history outlined in this chapter is that of Malians' relationships to state power and to dominant classes. At the risk of overly simplifying matters, let us recall that in pre-colonial times, merchants (who were, amongst other things, slave-traders), and the landed aristocracy (slave-owners) shared dominance in various – and perpetually changing – configurations of power. Because of the frequent wars for the control, not so much of territories, but of trade routes and of populations, a common strategy for the powerless was to attach themselves to a ruler (sometimes a military and/or religious leader), thereby gaining security but losing autonomy and status. This historical strategy is still (in a modified form) at

the heart of the current social architecture in Mali where power, resources, knowledge and prestige travel through chains and webs of kinship and clientelism that are crucial to the functioning of current leadership – be it within the women’s associations that campaign against excision, or within the state bureaucracy for whom the issue of female circumcision is a political “hot potato.” Maintaining one’s place within one’s kin group and with regards to one’s patron(s) is often a question of not only social but also economic survival for the poor in Mali.

Another economic strategy adopted by various populations in Mali since the earliest known history of the area is that of migration: permanent (involving whole groups), and temporary (usually involving young men). Population movements are referred to throughout this dissertation, from the Soninke diaspora that resulted from the fall of the Ghana empire to the current pattern of young men seeking work in, amongst other places, France as well as in more industrialized neighbouring countries such as Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal. As briefly explained above, these regional economic patterns can be traced back to French colonial policy. Pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary population movements have contributed significantly to the particular construction of ethnicity in Mali – its “mestizo logic” (after Amselle, 1998 [1990]) – an aspect of social organization discussed in Chapter 4. In turn, it is this particular hybrid construction of ethnicity that allows me to argue that in urban Mali, excision is to be understood in relationship to a (southern) “Malian” culture – as opposed to for instance a “Bamanan,” “Mandinka” or “Fulbe” culture. The crystallization of differences that is enshrined in the latter approach is more of an inheritance from a colonial administration that had a need to classify in order to govern more firmly, than an accurate reflection of a historically fluid socioscape.

Among other impacts, French colonialism in Mali created a new class vying for hegemony, that of the French-speaking literate elite on which colonial administration depended. This bureaucratic class has been in control of the state apparatus since Mali’s independence. Yet until the last decade (arguably) this change in the composition of the dominant group did not fundamentally change people’s relationship to power. Through French conquest, colonial

administration, and the first two administrations after independence – the political formations headed by Modibo Keita and Moussa Traoré that Malians call, in French fashion, the “First” and “Second” “Republics” – most populations in Mali (particularly in rural Mali) experienced state domination, at times brutal. This is the context in Alpha Oumar Konaré, head of the “Third Republic” is trying to implement the institutional reforms promised by his party. As will be seen in Chapter 8, in these efforts state agents face what they themselves term a crisis of legitimacy, and this is partly what explains their cautious attitude towards the campaign against excision.

Another aspect of the history presented in this chapter that is important to note is the antiquity of the introduction of Islam in certain parts of Mali – recall the Muslim merchants’ quarters in the capital of the Ghana empire. Such early penetration makes it impossible to find amongst contemporary informants manifestations of a “pure,” “pre-Islamic” Mande or Fulbe religion (cf. Amselle, 1998 [1990], 117-35), and this will become apparent in the forthcoming discussion on excision (particularly in Chapters 5 and 10). While the Kayes region (where parts of the Ghana empire would have been located) has been Islamized for at least a millennium and, it would seem, in a gradual fashion, in other areas of Mali, notably in the Segou and Mopti (Maasina) regions, Islam was brought in much more violently by reformists such as al-Hajj Umar Tall and Seeku Aamadou. In fact the history of Islamic reformism in Mali, as seen above, goes back to the eleventh century with the Almoravid conquest. It is in this context that the current discourse of Muslim leaders – a discourse that promotes the “purity” of Islam and of bodies, as discussed below in Chapter 10 – needs to be situated. Knowledge of these historical events will also allow the reader to understand the extent to which history is being re-written in the development discourse on democratization produced by Malian state agents and international donors and discussed in Chapter 8 (cf. Ferguson 1994).

One last aspect that I wish to highlight here is the fact that, with the exception of the Centre Djoliba, the Malian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women’s associations that led the campaign against excision at the time of fieldwork in 1997-98 were extremely young

formations. It was not until 1991, with the downfall of Moussa Traoré and his single-party regime, that formal civil society organizations such as registered women's associations were allowed to exist. Not only are such organizations in an institutional infancy, but they are utterly dependent on financing from abroad – as is the Malian state, for that matter.

It is from within one of those organizations created after the events of 1991, a women's association, that my ethnographic work took place. In the next chapter I turn to my fieldwork project, starting with the methodology chosen, feminist action-research. This choice had a significant impact on the manner in which I conducted participant-observation, on the types of data that I was able to collect, as well as on my physical and social locations as a researcher. The sites in which I conducted research were multiple, and I discuss the methodological impact of this multi-sitedness before describing my various sites one by one. There again, the general historical review just presented will assist the reader, as relevant historical information will be presented for each site, that is the cities of Bamako, Kayes, Mopti and Segou.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD SITES

It is customary in an ethnography to provide the reader with a description of the site where fieldwork took place. There are sound reasons for this discursive convention, and my purpose here is not to critique this practice – only to point out that in my case, the task is complicated by the multi-sited character of the research. It is not one, but six “fields” of work that I present here. In Bamako, the capital city where I spent most of my stay, participant-observation took place in a work environment (the office of a women’s association), as well as in two residential locations. Descriptions of these three sites are provided in this chapter, where I depict not only physical but also social environments, including the structure of the women’s association with which I worked. In these three sites I gradually developed an understanding of Malian urban culture and improved my knowledge of the language spoken by most in Bamako. Bamanakan.

While participant-observation in the office and in my places of residence provided me with valuable contextual ethnographic data, a significant part of the information I was able to collect specifically on excision and on the campaign against it came from outside of Bamako. This dissertation builds upon data collected using a relatively large survey (300 respondents) as well as open-ended structured interviews with approximately eighty key informants, in the cities of Kayes, Mopti and Segou.⁴¹ In order to allow the reader to situate and evaluate these data when they are analyzed in the rest of the dissertation, in this chapter I present the three survey sites as well as the survey methods, instruments and populations.

Before outlining the profiles of respondents and informants in Bamako, Kayes, Mopti and Segou and describing their cities however, it is necessary to explain how the decision for me to

carry out such a multi-sited, large-scale survey was made. This decision resulted from my political and ethical commitment to a specific methodology, that of feminist action-research. It is this methodology which I discuss next, starting with a definition, then explaining why it was chosen and how it shaped my fieldwork, leading to its multi-sitedness, amongst other aspects.

Feminist Action-Research

How can we define feminist action-research? Mary Rebekah Richardson (1994, 256) gives us this definition, succinct but vague: “research that/which, in the case of feminist studies, must be useful and serve women’s interests.” Shulamit Reinharz (1992, 180), in her encyclopedic book *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, specifies that in action-research, action and evaluation of the impact of this action proceed simultaneously. Numerous other definitions of action-research exist,⁴¹ but the one I used in order to prepare my dissertation fieldwork is from Diane L. Wolf (1996, 26):

In practice, action-research is one kind of participatory research, with the greatest participation stemming from engaging in a joint activity that has a social, economic, or political goal.... Action-research does not necessarily include joint participation in analysis and writing up, although it may include aspects of participation in those processes.

I quoted this definition in an August 1996 letter to the president of the women’s association that I worked with in Mali and which I call the *Conseil malien pour la promotion de la femme* (CMPF), a pseudonym. I added:

I am sending you this definition so that you understand the parameters of my work for your association. It is not usual, in my department, to combine research with a work placement with an NGO. In order to obtain approval from some professors, I have to preserve a certain autonomy from CMPF at the thesis-writing stage.

⁴¹ Another 100 survey respondents and twenty other informants were interviewed in Sikasso, but for reasons discussed in the text below, these data are not analyzed here.

⁴² Action-research has been used a lot in the field of education. In fact, when I earned a B.Ed. at the University of Toronto in 1990-91, this was the methodology that was encouraged for our research projects. Action-research also owes an intellectual debt to Marxism, and particularly to Gramsci (1971,200), who wrote: “One may term ‘Byzantinism’ or ‘scholasticism’ the regressive tendency to treat so-called theoretical questions as if they had a value in themselves, independently of any specific practice.” But here I am concerned specifically with feminist praxis.

In the rest of the letter I explained the ethical motivations behind my methodological choice: “The reason why I insist in working with a women’s association is that it is absolutely fundamental for me to give something back to the people who take the time to give me entry into their culture. I am therefore at your disposal to do work which should, ideally, be as useful to you as it will be to me.”

The controversies around excision provided me with another reason to choose action-research.⁴³ While some ethnographers have done eminently useful and remarkably sensitive research on female circumcision from the point of view of the women who accept and sometimes promote these practices – one thinks of Janice Boddy’s work (1982; 1989; 1998b) for instance – I did not believe that I would be able to do the same. My entire socialization in a feminist middle-class Quebecois household had trained me to condemn excision, and I worried that I would not be able to control my revulsion and disapproval should I be invited to attend a girl’s excision. While I was acutely aware of the neo-colonialism of direct intervention by Western women in the campaign against excision, I wanted to support local campaigners, especially because of the potential negative health consequences of excision on women and girls.

I hoped that joining an organization like CMPF would allow me to study the discourses around excision in Mali as well as the point of view of those Malian women and men who are against excision. This I would do while contributing to their cause, and ultimately and ideally, to the improvement of Malian women’s lives. I thought such a research project could counter the impression that African women were passive victims of “tradition,” by focusing on women who are active agents of change. At the same time, I hoped that my work could help improve the design of local programs against excision.

There was one last reason for me to choose feminist action-research as my methodology. My undergraduate studies in International Development have left me with a

keen interest in processes of social change. Further, I am convinced that to work with a group that aims at changing a cultural practice allows the researcher, through the study of resistance to the group's efforts, to discern the social structures and the power relations that underlie the practice and allow it to be reproduced. This argument has been made by Gail Omvedt (1979), a feminist anthropologist working with a women's group in India, and more recently by Francesca M. Cancian (1992, 633), who said in a guest lecture on feminist methodology: "In many research situations, one of the best ways of getting good information about a social pattern is to try to change it." I am convinced that working in collaboration with an organization that aims at social change, while it certainly closes some doors, does not prevent good ethnographic work. Feminist theory, long before the "post-modernist turn" in anthropology, had taught us that there is no possible "objective" location from which to carry out social research (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen 1989).

The Program Evaluation: Collaboration and Compromise

As we have seen above, evaluating the impact of a political action in favour of women is a type of feminist action-research. Reinharz (1992, 189) specifies that the goal of this type of research is to "...evaluate the effectiveness of different types of actions in meeting needs or solving problems." She adds (1992, 190) that NGOs frequently request this type of research in order to improve their practices and to create model interventions – or else, as was more the case with my host association, because their funders encourage it.

Aware of this perceived need for independent evaluation of anti-excision programs from my review of the literature and from my contacts with Western donors, I had already suggested to the president of CMPF, when we first met in Canada in 1996, that I could carry out such an evaluation for them. I had an opportunity to present this idea to her again

⁴³ I have written at length about this elsewhere: see (Gosselin 2000a).

in June 1997, two months after my arrival in Bamako. During that month I attended, on behalf of CMPF, two donor-sponsored seminars on excision in Bamako. During these two seminars, presenters deplored again and again the lack of “scientific data” that would allow an evaluation of the impact of anti-excision activities in Mali. This did not surprise me since, at least in Canada, public concerns about the effectiveness of aid, coupled with years of budgetary reduction of ODA, have led to a focus on “results-based management” in development agencies, which they then impose on their partners.

At the time, the only long-term CMPF project against excision that was active was an “economic reconversion” project for traditional female circumcisers, that is, female circumcisers acting outside of the Western health system, most of whom are *nùmu* women. The project was in Segou, a small city a few hours from Bamako. I suggested spending six months there to carry out ethnographic research. The president thought this was a ridiculously lengthy period of time that would keep me away from the office in Bamako – where I could really be useful, she said – for too long. After numerous delays and discussions, it was decided that I would administer questionnaires and carry out interviews not only in Segou, but also in three other cities where CMPF had held workshops on women’s rights and excision three years earlier (Kayes, Mopti and Sikasso). I would spend two weeks in each city, assisted in my work by the presidents of the local CMPF branches, whom I also hoped would host me and my friend-turned-assistant, Mariam.

While this type of research represented a compromise for me in the sense that it diverged from the long-term, community-based ethnography normally encouraged in social and cultural anthropology, it allowed me to collect useful data on knowledge and opinions on excision and on the campaign against it. This research also allowed me to fulfill my action-research commitments, for while I am not sure to what extent the CMPF leadership has made use of the resulting data, it is available to them in the form of a specially-prepared report, including recommendations for action and program amelioration. Further,

the funders of the association, when informed of this evaluation study, viewed the exercise very favourably. Through this project, I felt that I had finally found a way to contribute something useful to the association, especially since they did not have the resources to hire a consultant to carry out an external evaluation. However, I am not certain that through my action-research I truly contributed to a *feminist* project, that is, to the “fundamental transformation of gender relations ... in order to achieve a fair and egalitarian society,” to use a definition by anthropologist Huguette Dagenais (1994, 260-61). The reasons for my doubts will become apparent through the rest of this dissertation, but for now I want to turn to another characteristic of my dissertation research, its multi-sitedness.

Multi-Sited Ethnography

Fundamentally, my research project was concerned with the intersections of cultures; it was a “multi-sited” ethnography of the type that George E. Marcus (1998) has recently advocated. On the one hand I myself had multiple locations, participating and observing in the office during working hours, conducting interviews with a wide range of people in four towns during the evaluation research, and exchanging with friends, neighbours and host families during my free time. Another “site” was that of Western international development agencies for, while I did not ethnographically investigate them in Mali, they were part of my “research imaginary,” to borrow Marcus’s phrase. For one thing, I had the memories of my intermittent work at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in 1994 and 1995; secondly, for most of the time that I was in Bamako I lived with a Canadian UNICEF employee and as a result was invited to several social gatherings of development cooperants; third, undergraduate studies in International Development have given me both a familiarity with development discourse

and lasting friendships with its practitioners; and lastly, my life partner is himself employed in international co-operation.

On the other hand my main field site, the Bamako office of CMPF, was transcultural, as the association's leadership was in regular interaction with both the international feminist movement and the international development industry. Additionally, what I was ethnographically probing, through the campaign against excision and informants' reactions to it, was the circulation of globally-produced ideas. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7, the feminists who lead the campaign against excision in Mali both borrow from and contribute to analyses of "female genital mutilation" that are produced in various forums around the globe. Ideas on how best to "eradicate" the practice, while modified to suit local realities, can often be traced to international women's conferences and feminist literature produced outside of Mali. Such analyses and strategies enter the country through a network of elite Malian women (and sometimes, men) who are in contact with feminists from around the world but especially from Europe and North America.

Multi-sited ethnography has emerged in anthropology as one of the responses to the 1980s critique of ethnographic representation that challenged the discipline. Marcus himself has been closely associated with this critique, as co-editor of both *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Both these volumes were required reading during my MA coursework in 1992-93, and the anxiety generated in the discipline by the "post-modern critique" was still palpable. While this internal impetus to the development of new approaches to research and writing is important, multi-sited ethnography, as Marcus (1998) notes repeatedly, has also emerged because of factors extrinsic to the discipline: in short, because of the realities of a post-modern world where transnational movements of people, ideas, capital and commodities have accelerated to an unprecedented level and speed.

In my case, I did not set out to do multi-sited ethnography in order to test its appropriateness as a methodology in a post-modern, global context. Instead, as discussed above, the methodology grew out of my commitment to feminist action-research and as a result of the transcultural nature of my chosen object of study, that is, the encounter of a discourse largely produced outside of Mali – the discourse on “female genital mutilation,” with its attendant “eradication” program – with local socio-economic realities and cultural representations (cf. Ferguson, 1994). Marcus (1998) notes that it is common for graduate students who come from interdisciplinary programs – in my case, development studies strongly influenced by feminist studies – to bring multi-sited projects to anthropology. This is not surprising as the study of “development,” in the sense of *aid*, is transcultural by definition, while the feminist movement is conceived of, and striving to operate as, an international movement. Further, feminist critiques of the ethics and practices of social science research have long encouraged experimentation both in research and in writing.

In the passage where, to my mind, Marcus (1998: 14, emphasis in original) most clearly and succinctly describes what multi-sited ethnography attempts to do, he writes: “In short, within a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate *is* ethnography’s way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance.” Part II of this dissertation is a modest effort in this vein, based on research carried out in several sites – various geographical sites, such as Bamako, Segou, Mopti, Kayes and Sikasso, and also various social sites such as workplaces, national seminars, street gatherings and individuals’ homes. In Chapter 6 I trace the origin of the discourse on “female genital mutilation” in global feminist forums, notably at United Nations conferences. Secondly, I look at the cultural translation of this discourse by Malian feminists at the national and local levels. The next three chapters present the impact that this discourse has on three different categories of “experts” on excision – state agents, *nùmu* women and Muslim

leaders – exploring evidence of resistance and accommodation, and presenting examples of unintended local consequences of a discourse developed in, among other places, Vienna, New York, Paris and Bamako. Finally, the last chapter probes popular reception, interpretation and impact of the campaign against excision and of the counter-discourses it has generated.

As Marcus (1998, 6, 97-99, 120) notes, multi-sited ethnography alters the nature of fieldwork relationships as the ethnographer moves between sites and in so doing develops cross-cutting and potentially contradictory personal commitments. This is intensified when sites researched lie "... across contested and conflicted social ground" (Marcus 1998, 6). The ethnographer must re-negotiate identities at the different stops in her peripatetic research, in some sites working in collaboration with subjects, in others not. I experienced these contradictory pulls in various ways. First, I was pressured to take sides in open and submerged conflicts between the staff and the leadership of the association, and at one point, during a crisis within the leadership itself. Second, my visits to the four provincial towns were ambiguous, as some local CMPF leaders seemed to conceive of me as a spy from the head office, while others used me as a spokesperson to carry their concerns and complaints back to Bamako. Third, there were dilemmas caused by my personal links to some of the funders of CMPF; for instance, through my Bamako housemate I had contacts with UNICEF, which funded CMPF. I also had more indirect contacts with a Canadian funder, an NGO based in my city of residence. Just how much should I reveal of the results of my internal evaluation and close observation of CMPF's programs? I had knowledge which I knew would not please donors, especially concerning the failure of projects presented as successful. In the end I decided not to report directly to CMPF's donors, but to discuss my findings solely in academic publications such as this one, while using pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of my informants (individuals and institutions), as I am required to by the research guidelines used by the University of

Toronto at the time that my research proposal was approved (Dickens 1979). The exception to this procedure is in the case of those informants who insisted that I use their names in my publications (these cases are indicated in footnotes).

The most common ethical critique (including much of the feminist critique) of fieldwork practices is articulated around the unequal relationships of most research experiences, with the researcher being advantaged by her wealth, association with Western (post)-colonialism, class position, or affiliation with the university, an elite site of knowledge production. However this relationship can be reversed in the study of elites or in multi-sited research when one or some of the sites are located in social spheres where the ethnographer is at a structural disadvantage. This was my case with regards to the CMPF leadership, and particularly in my relationship with its president. First, by the standards of Malian society, she was my senior through age, marriage and motherhood.⁴⁴ Second, in the office, she was the *patronne* (in the double senses of “employer” and “patron,” as in “patron-client relationship”) and I the trainee, a hierarchical relationship which I discuss in more detail below. Finally, in international feminist forums I was simply a student while she is an award recipient and a world-wide recognized feminist on the global conference circuit.

In the end, she and I negotiated, in unspoken ways, an ambivalent relationship of complicity rather than the warm sort of ‘rapport’ I had originally hoped for. For Marcus (1998, 105-31), who proposes this distinction between ‘complicity’ and ‘rapport,’ the former is more common than the latter in multi-sited ethnography. For him, complicity in this type of ethnography “... rests in the acknowledged fascination between anthropologist and informant regarding the outside ‘world’ that the anthropologist is specifically materializing through the travels and trajectory of her multi-sited agenda” (Marcus 1998,

⁴⁴ My standing did improve after my fiancé and I celebrated our marriage in Bamako in February 1998; however, at that time there were only two months left to my stay.

122). While in my case, the president traveled more frequently and further afield than I did, regularly going to other African countries, Europe and North America, it was our common relationship to the world outside Mali – particularly the worlds of development and feminism – that was at the basis of this complicity. The power relationship between us was eventually balanced as I acquired more knowledge about the day-to-day work of her organization, knowledge which could have potentially tarnished the international image and persona on which her success depended.

This complicity, necessary for me to continue work with the association, came at the cost of circumventing other relationships. While the association's three staff members were my day-to-day peers and main informants, they did maintain a certain distance as they realized that my privileged relationship with the *patronne* would make it difficult for me to take their side in conflicts. So while they warmed up to me as the months went by and shared a lot of personal stories, two of them never invited me to their homes nor family events in Bamako (one of those two did, however, host me at her father's house in Kayes for two weeks). It is not unrelated that the two closest friendships I developed with Malians were with my assistant, Mariam, who was not associated with CMPF at all, and with a young trainee, Djénéba (a pseudonym), *after* she had left the association.

I now turn to a presentation of my various fields of work, starting with a description and a short history of Bamako. Next I present the physical and social characteristics of the office of CMPF, where I spent most of my time. I then briefly introduce my two living arrangements: the first, with another young Canadian woman in a relatively affluent neighbourhood of Bamako, and the second with a Malian family in one of the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. A description of the methods used for the evaluation survey that I conducted and a brief description of three of the four sites in which it was done closes that section of my 'fields.' While Mariam and I spent two weeks in Sikasso conducting interviews, those results (with a few exceptions) are not discussed here

for reasons of space, time and depth. as Sikasso is located in an area of Mali that is geographically and culturally different from the Mande/Fulbe core in which my work is concentrated.

Field Sites

While the bulk of the data discussed in this dissertation comes from the surveys and interviews conducted outside of Bamako for the purposes of the CMPF evaluation study, my daily fieldsites in Bamako and Kalanban Koro were extremely important in providing me with the ethnographic context in which to situate that data. My interactions with work colleagues, friends, neighbours and host family provided me with the fieldnotes and what Simon Ottenberg (1990, 144) has called “headnotes” – notes in the mind, notes in the head, memories and other such “incorporeal property” – from which my understanding of Malian (particularly Mande) culture incrementally developed. This ethnographic understanding – needless to say, a partial one – allowed me to feel personally (if not statistically) confident that my intuition helped me interpret the results of an admittedly small survey sample (Bernard 1995, 79).⁴⁵

Bamako

Although the majority of the population of Mali lives in villages in rural areas, urbanization has been steadily progressing since Independence in 1960, with internal migration routes converging onto Bamako, the capital city. Eighteen percent of the Malian population, (that is, 1,727,599 people) live in urban centres, the majority of them in Bamako, which had a population of 1,016,167 in 1998 (DNSI 1998a, iii). Currently the rate of growth of the city is 4%

⁴⁵ A sample of 400 respondents *per city* would have been necessary for a confidence interval of 5% in interpreting results (Bernard 1995,79).

per year, compared to 2.2% for the country as a whole (Ibid., 59,ii). While living conditions generally are considered better in the city than in the rural areas, they are still difficult for most: to give an indication, only about 17% of households in Bamako have running water (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 22). While in the 1970s the majority of migrants to Bamako were men, since the 1980s more than half have been women, 87% of whom are less than 31 years old (UNICEF 1989, 87). Recently there has been a significant increase in the numbers of rural young women migrating to Bamako to work as domestics for minute wages (Ouédraogo and Piché 1995, 44; UNICEF 1989, 87) during the dry season (November-May).

The rate of unemployment in Bamako is high: the *Enquête Démographique et de Santé* (Demographic and Health Survey, henceforth “DHS”) in 1995-96 found that nearly 25% of men and a little over 45% of women surveyed had not worked in the previous twelve months (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 32-33). This compared with 6.6% and 43.5% of rural men and women, respectively.⁴⁶ The overwhelming majority of those who work in Bamako do so in what economists call the “informal” sector: 78%, according to a 1989 study (Ouédraogo and Piché 1995, 19). As shown in Table 1 below, the large majority of women and men who are employed in Bamako work in the tertiary sector (sales and services). Next comes, for men, manual labour, and for women, domestic work. Around 10% of the employed in Bamako have white-collar jobs (11.6% of men and 8.1% of women). While in the rural areas, 18.9% of employed women work for a relative, only 4.3% of women in Bamako do (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 34-5). For men, the difference in the respective percentages is even more striking: 35.1% in the rural areas and 3% in Bamako work for a relative (Ibid.).

⁴⁶ The DHS researchers state that they defined “employed” broadly, explaining that every person who declared an activity, whether in the formal or informal sector, whether or not this activity was remunerated, and independently of whether it was performed according to a regular schedule, was considered employed (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 32). However I am surprised at their published high percentages of women who did not “work,” and I suspect that several women did not report unpaid domestic labour such as going to market, cooking, caring for children, the sick and the elderly, cleaning, etc. as “work.” During my survey women often first answered “Ne te baara” (I don’t work) when asked what their occupation was, but subsequently with a little probing they revealed that they did, in fact, raise children and perform numerous household chores – they simply did not think this was the kind of “work” surveyors were interested in.

Table 1. Occupation of the employed in Bamako (Based on Coulibaly et al. 1996, 36-7.)

women	sectors	men
66.7%	sales and services	61.8%
12.1%	domestic	4.7%
12%	manual labour	18.5%
8.1%	professional/technical/administrative	11.6%
1.1%	other	3.4%
100%	TOTAL	100%

In Bamako, people first and foremost work in order to eat: 48% of the annual budget of the average Bamako household goes to food (DNSI 1998b, 5, 12). Among the poorest quintile, 63% of the budget is devoted to feeding the family. This high proportion is primarily due to low incomes and secondarily to high prices (Ibid.). During my fieldwork in 1997-98 most people were still recovering from the impact of the devaluation of the F.CFA franc in 1994 – part of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs – which caused annual expenses per household to increase by 21% between 1988-89 and 1996 (DNSI 1998b, 8). Survival strategies for the majority involve maximally diversifying economic activities for all household members. Women's and girls' activities, mostly in the informal sector, represent an essential part of household revenues (UNICEF 1989, 93-5). Young girls for instance often work in small-scale ambulatory commerce.

Most people in Bamako live in households that seem densely populated from a Western point of view. More than half the population (52%) lives in households of ten or more members, and only 5% live in small households of two or three people (DNSI 1998b, 20). Roughly one fifth of the city's population lives in households of seven to nine members, another fifth in households of four to six people, and an extremely small number of city dwellers, almost all of them men, live alone (Ibid.). Typically, a household's space is delineated by an outside wall made of cement or mud bricks, about six feet tall. A large part of the family's diurnal activities

take place in the open air within this space, or in the street, immediately on the outside of the wall and close to its opening. The elderly, and to a lesser extent women, tend to stay within the wall, whereas children, youth and working men tend to spend more time outside. Sleeping and storage rooms are usually built around the periphery of the wall, and in Bamako are for the most part only one story high. A tree is almost always planted in the centre of the courtyard for shade, and it is not uncommon for poultry and caprines to be kept there.

The majority of Bamako households – as well as the streets – are filled with raucous bands of children and radio-listening groups of youth: almost 53% of the population of the city is under twenty years old, with 28% under ten (DNSI 1998b). Pregnant and nursing mothers are a very common sight, so common that when my cousin phoned from Canada to tell me that she was expecting a child, staff and visitors in the office of my host association exclaimed: “She called just for that!” For my Malian friends and acquaintances it is Western women’s low fertility that is puzzling – and pitiful.

All the country’s ethnic groups are present in Bamako, and inter-ethnic marriages seem common. Bamanakan, the dialect of the Mande language spoken by the Bamanan, has become dominant as *lingua franca* in the capital as in most of the country, even though French is the official language. The Bamanakan spoken in Bamako, which is the language I learned, has incorporated Mandinka and Dyula forms (Bailleul 1996, p. 2 n.5), as well as a number of “bamanized” French words. I have not been able to find a recent breakdown by ethnic group of the Bamako population. It is interesting to note that the Malian anthropologist and French sociologist who recently directed an extensive study of Bamako women evidently did not judge it pertinent to present their respondents’ ethnic affiliation; class however, disguised as “*niveau de vie*” in their text, proved to be a determining factor in the lives of the women who participated in the study (MISELI, 1998). The complex ways class, caste and ethnicity intermesh will be discussed in Chapter 4, but generally it appears that class divisions are becoming more salient than ethnic or caste divisions in the city: Rondeau (1994, 332) speaks of Bamako as “a real

cultural incubator.” This process was documented in the 1960s by Meillassoux (1968) in his study of voluntary associations in Bamako.

Bamako owes its growth to its strategic location on the Niger river.⁴⁷ When the French first visited in the 1880s, Bamako was the leading village of a small chieftaincy on the left (North) bank of the river. The leading clan were the Niaré, members of the Soninke diaspora, who had arrived in the mid-seventeenth century and overcome the rival Diara clan.⁴⁸ The market village soon attracted Muslim Moors, who were primarily merchants and marabouts. The Moorish merchants, traveling on camels, could not cross the river, and from Bamako the trade was taken over by Soninke and *jùla* traders who carried goods south on foot or donkeys’ back. Two Bamako Moorish clans, the Dravé and the Touati (who later changed their patronym to Touré), became prominent over time.

The town was originally made up of four sections that still exist today: Niaréla, Toutiala (later Touréla, then renamed Bagadadji), Dravéla and Bozola.⁴⁹ The first three sections were named after the three leading clans. The last one referred to the living quarters of Bozo fisherfolk whom the Niaré had captured and settled to supply the town with fish and river transportation. They were joined by slaves given to them to be trained in fishing and boating techniques, whose descendants became known as the Somono (Meillassoux 1968, 4-6).

When the French decided to expand inland from St.-Louis (Senegal), Bamako was chosen as their main outpost on the Niger for strategic reasons. Gallieni, who reached Bamako in 1881 on his way to Segou, reported that the French feared that if they selected the more suitable Segou as a capital, the British could move in from Sierra Leone to take over the upstream portion of the Niger (Meillassoux 1968, 6 n.2). In 1883 Borgnis-Desborde arrived with a battalion to

⁴⁷ My information on the history of Bamako up to Independence comes mostly from Meillassoux (1968, 3-10).

⁴⁸ Meillassoux (1968, 4) does not specify the ethnic affiliation of this clan. Today most Diara (also spelled Diarra or Jara) are Bamanan.

⁴⁹ The Mande suffix *la* in this case indicates the location of, the space controlled by or assigned to, the name it is attached to (e.g. Niaréla = at the Niaré’s).

occupy Bamako. Little resistance to this take-over appears in the historiography. By that time, Samori was threatening Bamako, and the Moors were sympathetic to him; this threatened the Niaré, who welcomed an alliance with the French. Upon arrival Borgnis-Desborde built a fort, which was attacked shortly afterwards by one of Samori's lieutenants. After he was successfully driven away, Bamako was put under French rule (or rather, protection), but it was no more than a military outpost until the end of the century.

It was after the capture of Samori and the death of Amadou Tall in 1898 that Bamako really started to expand. In 1901, the railroad reached the town, and three years later a steamship company was operating from Koulikoro (immediately east of Bamako past the rapids) to Gao. Around that time, numerous emancipated slaves were arriving in Bamako (Klein 1998, 203). The population of the city grew from an estimated 800 or 1000 in 1888 to 6000 people in 1907 (Meillassoux 1968, 3.9). By 1920 the population had more than doubled to reach 15,000 and in 1948 it had reached 38,000 (Ibid., 9). By then the city had seven sections (or neighbourhoods). The city's growth accelerated after WWII and by Independence in 1960 it had 130,000 inhabitants (Ibid., 10). The majority of those (67%) belonged to four ethnic groups: Bamanan (25.5%), Mandinka (18.4%), Fulbe (12.5%) and Soninke (10.6%), while the Moors by then only formed 1.5% of the population (Ibid., 14).

Bamako has been the main administrative centre of the country ever since the capital of the French Sudan was transferred there from Kayes in 1908. The administrative buildings erected at that time on a hill at the outskirts of the city still house the national government. The headquarters of the major banks, businesses and foreign organizations and companies are almost all located in Bamako. The next largest urban centres of Mali are very small in comparison to the capital. They are Sikasso, Segou and Mopti, with populations of respectively 113,813, 90,898 and 79,840 people (DNSI 1998a, 19, 27, 35).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ These numbers are for the urban *communes*.

Besides its administrative functions, Bamako also grew during the colonial era as an important center of trade. Colonial European trade centered around the railway station and brought in cloth, salt, hardware and alcohol, in exchange for rubber, gold, peanuts, ivory and hides. The African trade concentrated on kola nuts, and Bamako became the main market for this popular mild stimulant in Western Africa (Meillassoux 1968, 13). The economic importance of Bamako was due to the fact that it linked railway transport from Dakar with the Niger river traffic in the interior. To this day Bamako remains centered on trade and administration. The colonialists only built one factory in Bamako (a brickmaking factory), and despite the set-up of a few more state-owned manufacturing plants under the Keita and Traoré administrations, the input of the manufacturing sector in the economy of the country as a whole and of its capital is negligible.

The Association, Its Office and the Role of Trainee

My main field site was the two-room office of CMPF in Bamako, where I spent most working days (Monday-Friday) between April 1997 and April 1998. CMPF is a national women's association created in the wake of the democracy movement. Its founder, a teacher, was involved in this movement through her active role in the teachers' union. To form the association in 1991, she activated her professional and personal contacts in Bamako. In 1997-98 the membership included women from throughout the country as well as members of the Malian diaspora (notably in France and Gabon), and was estimated at 8,000 in one of the association's documents, and at 25,000 in another. Membership cards, available to women over eighteen, were relatively moderately priced at 100 F.CFA, with yearly dues of 500 F.CFA.⁵¹ Men could support the association by purchasing a "Supporter" card for 1000 F.CFA, with annual dues of 2,500 F.CFA.

⁵¹ While I occasionally witnessed the purchase of a membership card, I was never aware of any organized effort to collect the yearly dues. One hundred F.CFA at the time was worth \$0.25; for comparison, a

According to the statutes of the association, the National Executive is to report yearly to a General Assembly comprised of one representative per *cercle*⁵² (in Bamako, one per *commune*—an urban administrative division at the time), delegates from the diaspora, and supporters as observers. Every three years, the General Assembly elects or re-elects a National Executive. This executive includes the following officers: the president; a secretary-general; a treasurer; and six secretaries with the following portfolios: administration; organization (two secretaries); external relations; information and communication; and education and socio-economic activities.⁵³

These positions are all voluntary (non-remunerated) and the level of involvement varied significantly from one officer to the other. The president was the only officer for whom CMPF was a main occupation. During my stay, all of the officers were professional women around age forty, members of the small elite class of French-educated white collar workers who call themselves “*les intellectuels*.” All of the officers were employed: one worked for UNDP, three were high-ranking civil servants, one was a nurse, one a teacher, another a journalist, one was the co-ordinator of a non-governmental social service organization, and finally one was a former TV show host turned entrepreneur, who owned a restaurant and a catering business and had started her own NGO. Towards the end of my year of research, an Extraordinary General Assembly was called to address a rift within the National Executive. As this rift was serious enough to have attracted the attention of the Malian media – with accusations of fraud and calls for an independent audit involved – the Assembly was held *in camera* and I was not invited. In the end, I and the media were told,

typical bus ride from one of the peripheral neighbourhoods into downtown Bamako cost 85-125 F.CFA, a bottle of pop 200 F.CFA, and a plate of rice and sauce for lunch 300 F.CFA.

⁵² An administrative division in Mali, inherited from the colonial system, and representing the intermediary level between the *arrondissement* and the eight large administrative regions of Kates, Koulikoro, Sikasso

the Executive made peace, pledged allegiance to the president, and all of its members were re-elected.

The organizational structure of CMPF is similar to that of Bamako voluntary associations of the 1960s described by Meillassoux (1968, 73-142). He notes that the officers' titles and the division of labour in the executive, as well as the format and vocabulary of the statutes come from the French administrative and bureaucratic tradition (Ibid., 129). Another similarity with many of the organizations described by Meillassoux is that the individual units of CMPF – called “cells” – are territorially based. This is even enshrined in the “Internal Rules” where article 21 reads: “the fundamental unit of [CMPF] is the cell that is located at the level of neighbourhoods, *arrondissements*⁵⁴, and villages.”⁵⁵ Article 22 states that each cell is to have the following officers: a president, a secretary of administration, a secretary of development, a secretary of organization, and a treasurer. This pyramidal pattern of national organization recalls that of the two nation-wide socialist political parties that Mali had first under Keita and then under Traoré, and that of the dismantled UNFM.

The objectives of the association, as stated in its literature at the time of fieldwork, were to:

- educate women on their rights and on the law;
- encourage women's participation in politics;
- promote the recognition of the value of women's economic and social roles;
- support research and income-generation projects;
- create child-care infrastructures;
- fight against sexism in the law and in society;
- network with and support the work of other like-minded organizations;
- organize public information activities on themes having an impact on women's lives and status; and
- publish a newsletter.⁵⁶

⁵³ This is based on the association's statutes and was confirmed by the staff and through observation.

⁵⁴ An administrative unit regrouping several villages.

⁵⁵ “*Règlement intérieur*” of the association (n.d.), author's files.

⁵⁶ Association's flyer (n.d.), author's files.

In practice, the association was predominantly involved in two types of activities: private counseling and public education. The private counseling that I witnessed was dispensed by the president at the national office in Bamako. While I rarely attended actual counseling sessions, several of the women shared their stories with all present in the reception room (i.e., the staff, myself, and any other visitors and trainees) during their wait – which could last up to three or four hours, depending on the number of visitors, their status, the president’s other duties and her mood. For the most part, they were experiencing marital problems: the threat of divorce (with resulting loss of economic support and of their children),⁵⁷ domestic violence, failure of husbands to comply with their economic responsibilities (i.e., food and shelter), pressure on wives in a monogamous marriage to amend the marriage contract to allow the husband to take a second wife,⁵⁸ etc. Others, particularly widows, faced serious subsistence problems and were coming in the hopes of receiving financial support. The interactions between the president and those seeking counseling – often poorer, lesser educated or non-educated women – were generally performed following the established script of female patronage, analyzed by Rosa De Jorio (1997) and discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 7 of this dissertation.

The other common type of activities was public education, more specifically the organizing of, and/or participation in others’, thematic workshops, seminars, conferences, panel discussions (sometimes for broadcasting), and presentations to schools or other groups. The surveys that I conducted in Kayes, Segou, Mopti and Sikasso aimed at evaluating the impact of such activities conducted in 1993 on the theme of “women’s rights and harmful traditional practices,” including excision. In Chapter 7 I analyze such an event organized in 1997 by CMPF in Mopti.

⁵⁷ According to Malian practice and law, children belong to their father’s patrilineage, and (usually) remain with the father or a patrilineal relative in the event of divorce.

Participation in seminars was usually a reward allocated by the president to faithful CMPF members and collaborators, in order of status – in my experience, the seminar’s topic mattered little to the chosen participant. Certain criteria made some seminars more coveted than others: for Bamako members, the most prized were the ones taking place outside of Mali, particularly in Europe or North America. Overseas seminars allowed the acquisition of consumer goods not (or not easily) available in Mali, for one’s personal needs, for redistribution to one’s clients, relatives and dependents, and sometimes for resale in Mali at profit. One could also usually save money from the per diems paid to participants by development agencies – and the size of the per diem was an important criterion in evaluating the desirability of a seminar or conference. Travel overseas in and of itself added to one’s prestige and could enlarge one’s social, professional and business networks. Finally, for those with friends or relatives in the Malian diaspora, participation at such events could cover the usually prohibitive cost of a plane ticket for a visit. In a similar way CMPF women in the regions appreciated participation in seminars in Bamako, the occasion for an entertaining and often lucrative visit to the capital. This, I think, along with convenience and the reluctance of some high-ranking members of the National Executive to face the often arduous trips to the regions, explained why the majority of the seminars, workshops and other such events organized by CMPF (and by most other women’s and development organizations for that matter) took place in Bamako.

While the national office would occasionally call upon a local organization – usually to bring “their” women together to attend an event held in their city but initiated by Bamako – the local “cells” were very autonomous, and their activities depended on the initiative, energy, and networks of their local president. This meant, as I found out through my travels, that some cells were much more active than others. While some collected dues and

⁵⁸ Malian civil law obliges a couple to choose either monogamy or polygyny when signing the marriage contract (of course this only applies if the man is not already married). The signature of both spouses is

initiated small income-generating activities for their members such as vegetable gardening or cloth dying, others were dormant between participation at seminars or other special events. The rare visits from the national office – such as my arrival for the survey – would reactivate such cells, probably only temporarily. While some local leaders appreciated this autonomy, others felt neglected by Bamako – all wished for more financial support and more opportunities to travel to the capital city or outside the country, as travel offers social and economic opportunities and enhances one’s prestige.

The national office was located on a dirt street in the downtown core, in one of the second-generation of Bamako’s neighbourhoods (cf. Meillassoux 1968). It shared the main floor of a two-story building with a tailor’s shop. The president had her private air-conditioned office in the back room of the office; this is also where the precious photocopying machine was located. In the crowded front room under a loud ceiling fan were two desks, one with a computer where Fanta⁵⁹ worked, and a smaller one with a mechanical typewriter over which Astan towered. By the side of the door was another precious appliance: a mini-refrigerator where cold water was kept for Western visitors (the staff and Malian visitors preferred water cooled the traditional way in an earthen jar). Around the periphery of the remaining walls were approximately ten chairs where Boubacar, the office’s *planton*,⁶⁰ sat in between errands, and where I worked with papers on my lap. When there were too many visitors Boubacar and I had to give up our chairs; in which case he usually stood outside by the door, and I usually stood next to Astan, with my papers on top of the refrigerator.

required to subsequently change the marriage regime.

⁵⁹ The names given to the staff are pseudonyms.

⁶⁰ *Planton* is a French military term for “orderly.” Interestingly, given Mali’s history of colonial and post-colonial military rule, it is the term used in Malian French to designate the indispensable ‘Man Friday’ of every office, who is usually equipped with a motorcycle and runs various errands, mostly delivering mail and messages. I do not know whether this term is used in offices in France; I have never heard it in Quebec.

The office was connected to the outside world electronically and pictorially. There was one telephone on the president's desk and another on the desk of the head secretary, Astan. Phone calls from overseas were not uncommon. When I arrived, the office, through a development project funded by the French I believe, had just been connected to the Internet, and it soon became part of my duties to train Fanta, the computer-literate secretary, in the use of e-mail. On the walls of the office were posters testifying to the worldliness of the association: posters from United Nations conferences, from other feminist organizations and development NGOs from around the world, and from various, often global, feminist campaigns. There were also posters that CMPF had had produced in Bamako, including one against excision and another one denouncing violence against women. The later, showing a woman being beaten by a man with a horse whip, almost always initiated comments from Malian male visitors, typically something along the lines of 'Eh, so you women want to rule the world now!'

The large number of visitors – when the president was around – first baffled me, and in the beginning I diligently noted them all. On my first day of work, for instance, thirteen women and eight men solicited private time with the president, who was leaving that night for a five-day stay in Paris. She left that evening in a huff, exclaiming "I don't have an office! I do my work at home and here, I entertain people!"⁶¹ Despite her exasperation that day, this number of visitors (i.e., twenty-one) was not at all unusual: on other days when I was able to record them systematically from morning to night,⁶² they numbered twenty-four (eleven women, thirteen men), eighteen (nine women, nine men), twenty-six (fourteen men, twelve women), and thirty-five (twenty women and fifteen

⁶¹ Fieldnotes, 22/04/97.

⁶² This was not always possible as I too was sometimes sent outside of the office for errands, or had some of my own. Occasionally I was also 'rewarded' by being allowed to work in the president's air-conditioned, quieter side of the office, that had the (dis)advantage of insulating me from visitors and their stories.

men).⁶³ After a while I stopped counting, but kept observing, and by August I had produced a list of the various categories of visitors to the office and of their usual motives for visiting:

- women experiencing difficulties, coming for counseling;
- women with financial problems, asking for money (often to cover the cost of medicines and health services for themselves or for family members);
- leaders of neighbourhood or regional CMPF cells, coming to give oral reports to the presidents and to ask for support (usually financial) for their group's income-generating project(s);
- youth looking for work;
- current suppliers of goods and services, or those hoping to sell their products to the association;
- members of the professional unions that the president belonged to and was active in;
- Malian and foreign journalists requesting, or having been granted, interviews with the president;
- Malian and foreign students, coming to request an interview, documents or a work placement;
- friends of the president and friends of the staff;
- relatives of the president and relatives of the staff;
- leaders of other women's associations (mostly of small neighbourhood- or even village-based associations), looking for funding, affiliation or some form of collaboration;
- messengers;
- executive officers and consultants of the association;
- small-scale ambulatory sales and service people (e.g. peanut sellers, shoe-shiners, etc.); and more rarely,
- locally-based or visiting Western donors; and
- Malian women interested in the association and coming to buy a membership.⁶⁴

The trainees

It was in the winter of 1996 that I met the president of CMPF for the first time. She, along with two other women's rights activists, one from Latin America and another one from Asia, had been brought by a Canadian NGO to give presentations on university campuses around Canada on the theme of "women's rights as human rights." At the time, although I had not yet defended my research proposal, I had already formulated it along the lines of action research, and had just started to give some thought to how I would go about

⁶³ Fieldnotes, 19/05, 21/05, 23/05 and 26/05, 1997.

finding a suitable organization to work with. My partner had a friend who worked for the said Canadian NGO, and this woman was able to arrange for me to have lunch with the president. After listening to my project idea, quizzing me on my understanding of excision, and giving one quick glance at my resume, the president said something along the lines of 'OK, you can be a trainee with my association – when can you come?' I was taken by surprise then at how easy it had been to negotiate this collaboration. I first attributed it to the appeal of extracting one year of free labour from me, but once in Mali I came to understand that it had more to do with the prestige her association would gain from having a trainee from Canada for a one year period – prestige capital important in the competition with other Malian women's associations for overseas funding.⁶⁵ Another reason why the cultural translation of the concept of "action researcher" was easier than I had anticipated – although, like all such translations, it was not exactly congruous – was that the President immediately fit me into a locally intelligible category, that of the trainee.

When I first arrived in the CMPF office in April of 1997, there was another trainee there, and there were to be five more during my stay: one young Malian woman, two young Malian men, a young American woman and a young Norwegian woman. The two foreigners were MA students and stayed for very short periods of time, coming a few days a week for a few weeks; nobody bothered to give them anything to do. The young Malian woman and one of the young Malian men were recent graduates who hoped that hanging around the office and making themselves useful would eventually lead to paid employment. After a few months, discouraged or perhaps successful elsewhere, they disappeared. The other young Malian man was an MA student who was writing a research paper on the work of women's associations, and he arrived with a letter of recommendation

⁶⁴ Fieldnotes, 05/08/97.

⁶⁵ At the time of my research, the Malian government had no funding available at all for women's associations. To subsist and prosper, they had to rely on members' and other private contributions and on development assistance from multilateral (i.e., United Nations, World Bank), bilateral and NGO sources.

from his professor. When I had the chance to visit the office in August 1999 during a brief visit to Mali, he was still there and his responsibilities had noticeably increased; I saw the president calling him into her office to comment on a project proposal he had drafted. I did not however, have the chance to ask him if he was getting paid for his work: payment is the key difference between trainee and staff, as I learned talking with Djénéba, the trainee present at the time of my arrival.

I originally assumed that Djénéba was a staff member. She was introduced to me as the office's "*informaticienne*" (literally, computer technician, which she was not), which referred to the fact that she did most of the typing on the computer and was the only one who had been trained to use e-mail (as part of the same French-sponsored project mentioned above). She worked the same hours as the others (roughly, 7:30am – 4pm), and was precious to the president because she knew some English. Djénéba was about my age (early thirties), and like myself at the time, engaged to be married and without children. She was also the most Westernized of the staff, and had grown up in Dakar, the daughter of a pilot. Early on, she invited me to attend a naming ceremony party at her fiancé's father's house – a joyous afternoon music and dance affair for women only⁶⁶ – and soon afterwards to go out dancing at a night-club with her fiancé. We quickly became friends, and it was then that she told me that she too was a 'trainee.' This was starting to be frustrating for her, as she was not receiving a salary, only weekly "transportation expenses."⁶⁷ About two months into my stay, she left CMPF to take on a paid job elsewhere, a move the president considered treasonable.

⁶⁶ These gender-segregated naming ceremony parties are extremely common in Bamako, and fairly uniform in character. Very similar parties to the ones I attended have been described by De Jorio (1997) for Segu and by Turriffin (1987) in a village setting. They are an important social event for women.

⁶⁷ This is not meant literally – it is what one calls a small gift of money made to a young person and worth about 500-1000 F.CFA; another term is the "price of tea." For an elder, the same amount becomes the "price of the kola nut."

Although the institution of the trainee is no doubt linked to the Western education system in Mali, and may have been inherited from the French, in Bamako it has distinctive characteristics, bearing a family resemblance with the local relationship between business owner and apprentice. Taking the relationship between the kola nut trader and his *jùladenw* (literally, his children, here meaning junior associates) and his *jùlakàländenw* (*jùla* = trader, *kàländenw* = students; here, apprentices) as exemplary, Meillassoux (1968, 36) gives the following description of the “Apprentices and Mates” in Bamako:

... there is little difference between partnership and employment. Furthermore, to be employed by an African [as opposed to a European] usually involves some links of a personal nature, either familial or neighbourly. The employee is in the personal custody of his master, whose duties toward him go beyond the mere paying of wages. The master must teach his trade to his apprentice or pupil, must often provide his room and board, and must help him in case of need. ... A [*kàländen*]'s income is difficult to estimate, since he does not receive wages proper. Beyond a little cash for personal expenses, this income is made up of returns and profits, plus noncomputable advantages in kind.

While Meillassoux insists on the trader/trainer's duties, the trainee has many obligations as well; first and foremost, she must treat the *patronne* with all the respect due to an elder. As with senior/junior relationships in the kin network and the family setting, the trainee does not have the right to retort when she is being disciplined by the *patronne*: not only must she not reply verbally, but her eyes must be downcast and her body language must express submission. While the most common type of discipline I observed in the rearing of children was physical punishment, in the office it was public humiliation.

Secondly, while the “master” may have the obligation to “teach his trade” to his pupil, this teaching – as with all knowledge transmission situations I observed while in Mali – is not interactive but firmly controlled by the knowledge-owner. (Maliens have a keen understanding that knowledge is power.) Slowly, I was molded to perform the proper behaviour of the trainee / knowledge-seeker, which meant to keep questions for my social peers, and to patiently wait for the *patronne* to bestow knowledge upon me when *she*

thought I was ready and deserving. Mostly, I and the other trainees were expected to learn by observation, and at first I was given very little work to do. Little by little, as both sides (leadership and staff) waited to see where my allegiance would lie, I was given some administrative tasks, such as typing documents that had been hand-written by the president (mostly letters and funding requests in English), and drafting project proposals. It was obvious – and this I expected from the start – that the leadership wanted to profit from my cultural capital, i.e., my knowledge of the English language and my understanding of Western culture and of the Western development discourse. As Ferguson (1994) has demonstrated, “development” texts follow specific discursive rules, and knowledge of these conventions is necessary in order to write fundable project proposals.

Finally, as Meillassoux described for the kola nut traders and their apprentices, the staff and trainees at the office were, to a certain extent, incorporated in the kin and dependents’ networks of the association’s leadership. For instance, when I was invited to attend a blessing ceremony and party at the newly-built house of the association’s president on a week-end. I found that two of the office’s staff of three had been busy there helping with the cooking and other preparations, alongside younger relatives and house staff. I was also told that a member of the national executive committee had paid for Bouhacar’s religious wedding. As a final example, when my fiancé and I decided to perform our wedding in Mali, not only did the president sponsor the ceremony and celebration, but she arranged for one of her classificatory uncles to act as Faris’ host father for the religious ceremony held in the mosque’s courtyard.

Hippodrome

For most of my stay in Bamako I rented a room in the house of a Canadian woman who worked for UNICEF. My Malian friends and acquaintances found it normal that I

would want to live with another *tùbàbùmuso* (Western or 'white' woman⁶⁸). Once, in the reception room at the office, a French female journalist my age was sitting in a corner, waiting for an interview with the president. I was sitting a few chairs away studying Bamanakan. A visitor, one of Astan's relatives, observed us for a while and then exclaimed loudly to me in French in a reproachful tone: "Why don't you go and talk to her! If I'm in Europe and I see another black man, I go and talk to him!"

This living arrangement brought me into contact with a broad range of people: the two house staff (a gardener-night guard and a housekeeper-laundryman-day guard), both young Dogon men having recently migrated to Bamako for work; a series of other Western housemates and guests with varied (generally short) lengths of stay; my housemates' Malian and expatriate colleagues and friends; our Bamanakan teacher; and Malian neighbours, especially young men performing seduction scripts.⁶⁹ Teaching us how to reject their rather unsubtle offers in a proper *hɔɔn* fashion was Mariam, one of the daughters of our neighbours across the street, a Fulbe civil servant near retirement age and his Mandinka wife. Mariam was a medical school student, unusually single at age twenty-eight, who would eventually become my assistant.

Hippodrome is a relatively recent neighbourhood of Bamako: it does not, for instance, appear on the map of the city that Meillassoux (1968, 11) published based on his 1962 fieldwork, although he does show the horse-racing tracks that give their name to the neighbourhood. While Meillassoux (1968, 88) indicates that attending horse races was a form of entertainment in Bamako in the 1960s, at the time of my stay the hippodrome was in disuse and disrepair. The neighbourhood is relatively wealthy: in fact, before the recent

⁶⁸ I put 'White' in quotation marks here as my housemate was from the South Asian diaspora; however, even if Malians are acquainted with Indian culture from the numerous Hindi films that have been shown since at least the 1970s in Malian cinemas, they generally group all non-Africans in the *tùbàbu* category, which in Malian French is generally rendered as "*les Blancs*."

⁶⁹ The number of male visitors asking for me significantly decreased after the arrival of my fiancé in December 1997.

construction of luxury villas in new neighbourhoods on the right (South) bank of the Niger. Hippodrome was nicknamed the “millionaires’ ward” (*millionbugu*).⁷⁰ This wealth means that most residents are educated civil servants or large-scale merchants and their families and dependents, although there are also courtyards with individual rooms rented to poorer tenants. The neighbourhood was also home to a few embassies, government and NGO offices, and various businesses including restaurants and two Lebanese-owned Western-style supermarkets catering to expatriates and the local elite.

While this wealth was immediately obvious to a Malian and gradually became apparent to me, my mother’s visit in February 1998 reminded me of how poor the neighbourhood looked to a Westerner. Only three roads were paved; there was no street lighting at night; the lack of a municipal sewage system meant that those who could not afford a private sewage service would dispose of their wastes directly into the street; and most vehicles, including taxis, looked like they dated from the 1960s or 1970s. While there were no beggars in the streets of Hippodrome,⁷¹ there were numerous small peddlers – men, women and children – whose dress and sometimes whose thinness spoke of their poverty.

Kalaban Koro

In June 1997, two months after my arrival in Mali, I was ready to leave the house of my Canadian friend and move in with a Malian family. This proved much more difficult than I expected. First, there is a housing shortage in Bamako, and usually all of the sleeping rooms within a compound are used, often even crowded. Knowing this, I did not want to displace anybody – something which my ability to pay higher rent could have

⁷⁰ It is worth keeping in mind here that 1,000,000 F.CFA is worth approximately \$2,500.

⁷¹ In fact, there are remarkably few in Bamako in general, compared to other large Third World cities I have visited such as Kingston, Lima, Quito and Bombay. This can be explained by the strong social stigma

allowed me to do. On a practical level, it is difficult to even obtain information about available rooms, as such information circulates by word of mouth only. Once one hears rumours about an available room, it is necessary to go there in person, as only a minimal number of households in Bamako have a telephone – 3.7% in 1995-96, according to the DHS (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 24).⁷² Locating the compound is difficult in neighbourhoods one is not familiar with, as streets are not formally named and very few people think of using the street numbers that the administration painted shortly before my arrival – directions are given using a mixture of spatial and social landmarks, for instance. ‘the compound across from Baba Diallo’s near the Marka women’s house three blocks from the Hamdallaye mosque.’

I was also looking for specific characteristics that proved hard to reconcile: a household where Bamanakan would be the day-to-day language spoken; that was not so wealthy that I would feel out of touch, yet not so poor that the sanitary conditions would endanger my health; and a compound where there would be other young women for me to befriend (and preferably not too many single men). I also needed to be personally introduced to the family and the neighbourhood. Most people connected to the CMPF leadership who offered to help wanted to send me to the households of French-speaking, wealthy, cosmopolitan Malians, where I feared I would not learn any Bamanakan and was uncomfortable with the class positioning. On the other hand the office staff felt strongly that the households in their networks were not appropriate for a *tùbàbùmuso*: the latrines were of particular concern.

My neighbour in Hippodrome, friend and future assistant, Mariam, was one of the few people who understood what I was looking for. She took me to her mother’s deceased

attached to begging (except for the pupils of marabouts), and to the redistribution of wealth and food through kin and patron-client networks.

⁷² Even my determined Canadian housemate, after over a year in the city, had not been able to obtain a line by the time I arrived, presumably because she refused to pay the ‘encouragement money.’

father's house, which was fundamentally a female household where I felt instantly comfortable. However, the only sleeping place available at the time was an area in an open hallway, and I could not imagine surviving the lack of privacy (or the mosquitoes!). Mariam's maternal relatives offered the following arrangement: if I could find a room to sleep in somewhere in the neighbourhood, I could take my morning and evening meals with them and spend my free time in their compound. Mariam's cousin knew of a man in the neighbourhood, nicknamed *L'américain* for his entrepreneurship, who offered room research services for a fee. In my case, the fee was paid but the room never found. The only room we were shown was in a building peopled with single men who had recently migrated to Bamako; Mariam took one look at the unpainted cement room, the male dwellers and the dirty latrines and gave *L'américain* a lecture about how ridiculous it was of him to think that a self-respecting woman on her own could live in such conditions.

By August, I had just about given up hope, when I met Safiatou. A primary school teacher in her 40s, she came to the CMPF office one day to show her tenth child, born three weeks earlier. She had previously been involved in the women's association, and kept in touch. As had become customary by now, Astan introduced me as Kadiatou (my Malian name), and I exchanged a few pleasantries with Safiatou, who told her scrawny eight-year old daughter, also named Kadiatou, to get her new-born baby brother off her back and give him to me to hold. At the end of the visit, Safiatou said that her daughter really liked her *ɔgɔma* (namesake).⁷³ and that she would come back two weeks later to pick me up and take me to her home for a meal.

⁷³ The institution of the *ɔgɔma* serves to create kin-like links: babies are often given the personal name of a successful relative, patron, friend or acquaintance, and from then on the adult in the relationship is expected to act as a sort of 'godparent' to the child. On the Muslim festival locally known as "Tabaski" (*Id al-adha*), for instance, one should purchase new clothes for one's namesakes, and the child is often sent to her namesake's compound to spend the school vacations.

Fifteen days later, as scheduled, Safiatou came back to the office in her husband's old vehicle, driven by a chauffeur. They took me to her compound in Kalaban Koro, just outside Bamako's city limits. After the meal, I mechanically asked Safiatou whether she knew anybody who had a room available. To my surprise, she said "I do!" I moved in six days later, and was to stay in her compound for one month, until I started working on the evaluation project for CMPF that would take me to Kayes, Segou, Mopti, Sikasso and back to Mopti to administer surveys. This one-month stay was an extremely rich learning experience, and while after my travels outside of Bamako I decided to go back to my Canadian friend's house (partly because my mother and fiancé were coming to visit), I continued to visit "my family" in Kalaban Koro regularly for the entire length of fieldwork.

Safiatou is the fourth wife of a Lieutenant in the Malian army. This was her third marriage, after two divorces. In an unusual arrangement, she lived in her own compound while the Lieutenant's first three wives shared another one nearby.⁷⁴ During the month that I lived in Kalaban Koro, I spent most of my evenings and week-ends and all my nights in Safiatou's compound, a large walled area including in its centre a shallow well, a young tree, a small vegetable garden, and a large wooden mortar for pounding grain. Various cement-block buildings lay in a typical fashion around the inside perimeter of the wall. Next to the door was the latrine / washing area, followed, clockwise, by two roofless and grass-invaded unfinished rooms (one of which served as a pen for a sheep), and a kitchen.

Along the wall facing the door was the main construction, a large rectangular three-room building with a verandah. At both ends of the verandah were two small storage rooms, and a Guinean couple slept in one of these with their two young children. These were not kinfolk, but destitute recent migrants whom Safiatou had befriended on the Dakar-Bamako train. Behind the Guineans there was a large room with anteroom.

⁷⁴ What was unusual – and a source of tension – was not that she had her own compound per se, but the fact that the living arrangements were not equivalent for the four wives.

occupied by the twenty-year old son of one of the Lieutenant's older brothers in his lineage's home village, who had been sent to work in his uncle's fields. The small middle room was usually occupied by Safiatou's daughters and her two maids (also relatives of the Lieutenant sent from the village). As at the time of my arrival all but the three youngest of her children had been sent to spend the school vacations with relatives, Safiatou decided to empty the room and give it to me, taking her daughters, the maids and the girls' few possessions into her own room. Her bedroom was at the other end of the rectangular building, next to the second verandah storage room which contained her grain and cooking equipment. In her anteroom were signs of wealth: a Western-style sofa, some glassware and chinaware, and a small black-and-white television set, powered by an old car battery (there was no electricity in Kalaban Koro at the time).

Safiatou's money came not primarily from her teaching position (as Malian primary school teachers in 1997-98 were appallingly underpaid), but from her international trade in cloth and women's apparel between Senegal and Mali, not an uncommon occupation for urban Malian women her age. She carried out her business during school vacations and closures (common in Mali in the 1990s), and was assisted by relatives in Dakar. At the time that she offered me a room, however, her funds were low for two reasons. First, by school closing date she was too advanced in her pregnancy to travel, and second, her first husband had recently passed away and the responsibility for feeding, clothing and schooling the children they had had together had been transferred to her. This was an unusual situation, since children belong to their father's lineage and are usually taken in by a member of the patrilineage in the case of divorce or father's death. Safiatou never offered an explanation as to why, in her case, the normative pattern had not been followed. Her first husband was a writer – an “*intellectuel*” – but she never specified which ethnic group he belonged to or anything else about his personal or his lineage's economic circumstances.

The Lieutenant had established a two-night rotation pattern between his wives, so every seventh and eighth days he ate the evening meal in Safiatou's compound and spent the night in her room. On my fifth night in the compound, he was scheduled to come, so all the girls vacated Safiatou's room and moved back into my room – for good, it turned out. To me it appeared that the Lieutenant lived, for the most part, in his car, his most prized possession. His other source of pride were his fields nearby, where he took me on my first afternoon in his household. He practiced millet, corn and pumpkin intercropping. Eucalyptus bushes alternating with a local medicinal plant formed the fences around the fields. As his military office duties took him into Bamako from Monday to Friday, he had three nephews farming for him. The corn and millet provided enough grain for the thirty-plus family members,⁷⁵ and a surplus was sold which supplemented his income.

Kalaban Koro was far enough from downtown Bamako to have land available for farming, but close enough that fleets of *Sotramas* (the local refurbished vans that serve as popular transportation providers) traveled to and from the city daily from morning to night. The trip lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes, making it easy for me to travel to town. While Kalaban Koro belongs to the *cercle* of Kati, a town on the other side of the Niger river, it actually functions as a peripheral neighbourhood of Bamako. The *arrondissement* of Kalaban Koro has grown massively in recent years, as the capital city is expanding: the 1998 census recorded a population of 114,823 people, up from 44,205 in 1987 (DNSI 1998a, 15).

The Evaluation Study

As discussed above, it was in consultation with the association's leadership that I developed a study to evaluate the impact of their anti-excision campaign in four regional

⁷⁵ It is the husband's responsibility to provide his wife or wives with grain.

capitals, Kayes, Mopti, Segou and Sikasso, where seminars were held in 1993. I developed a survey for the general population, and three interview schedules: one for CMPF members, one for female circumcisers, and one for community leaders. The drafts of these documents were reviewed by two members of the association's leadership, who recommended a few changes. After surveying the first city, Kayes, a few minor changes were made to the "General Population" survey, and a revised version was used in the other three towns.

The anonymous survey for the general population was divided into five parts: (i) presentation; (ii) demographic data; (iii) knowledge on excision, the campaign against it, and CMPF; (iv) personal experience with excision; and (v) attitudes towards excision. The third part included the following questions:

1. According to you, why is excision practiced?
2. What are the consequences of excision?
3. What will happen to a girl if she is not excised?
4. Who practices excision where you live?
5. Do you know CMPF? Its president [named]?
6. Have you heard of campaigns against excision? If yes, by whom and how was it done?
7. What do you think of those campaigns?
8. Have those campaigns convinced you that excision is harmful?

The next section included more personal questions that differed according to gender. Women were asked whether they were excised; those who were (almost all of them) were then asked:

1. How old were you?
2. (If excised at age three or older): Can you describe your excision?
3. Have you had health problems, problems while giving birth, or problems with your husband that are due to excision? (If yes): What problems?

Originally, we asked excised women what they had had cut, but we soon realized that they either did not know (typically answering "what the circumciser cuts"), did not have the vocabulary or were too embarrassed to answer. Eventually we dropped the question in the general population survey (but asked CMPF members and circumcisers). For their part

men were asked whether it was important for them that their wife or wives be excised, and whether they preferred an excised or non-excised woman (here the connotation was sexual). The last few questions in this section on personal experience were addressed to both sexes. Those who had daughters were asked whether their daughters were excised, who had made that decision, and why. Those who did not have daughters but could were asked whether they would want any future daughter(s) to be excised.

The survey closed with the following questions:

1. Do you think that excision is a good or a bad thing, and why?
2. What needs to be done to convince people to stop excision?

Finally, respondents were asked if they had any other comments, or questions for us – this is often when they shared the most interesting data.

The questionnaire for CMPF members was similar, but after demographics it started with a section about their experience with CMPF in general, and more specifically with anti-excision activities. They were asked whether they considered the 1993 seminar to have been successful or not, and why. We asked for concrete examples of cases where they had been able to prevent an excision. We also sought their opinion on the next step that CMPF should take.

Another difference between the general survey and the one for CMPF members was that the latter was more detailed. Under “personal experience,” they were asked, if excised, how they felt about this and whether they would choose to have it done again. For the few women who were not excised, they were asked whether they experienced discrimination. Concerning their daughters, CMPF women were asked for each one:

1. Who made the decision to have her excised or not excised?
(For excised daughters):
2. Who practiced the operation?
3. Where was it done?
4. Who paid the circumciser and how much?
5. What type of circumcision was done? (Here clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation were first described by us.)

6. Did anybody disagree with the excision?

In closing, CMPF members were asked to identify who supported and who opposed excision in their community, whether they thought excision would continue in Mali, and whether the government should legislate against the practice.

Contrary to the above two questionnaires, the interviews with community leaders were usually conducted in French, and often while Mariam was taking a well-deserved break. The interview schedule contained the following questions:

1. What does excision mean/represent for you?
2. Personally, are you for or against excision, and why?
3. Do you know CMPF?
4. What do you think of their campaigns against excision?
5. If the Malian government campaigned against excision, what would be your reaction?
6. Who are the circumcisers in your community? Has there been a change recently?
7. Have you encountered cases of health complications due to excision? Which ones?
8. What do you think would be the social consequences of *not* excising?
9. If you were convinced that excision was harmful, would you be willing to publicly speak against it?
10. Has anybody ever asked you to do so?
11. How are non-excised women treated in your community?
12. Do you think excision is a religious requirement?
13. What should be done to stop excision in Mali?
14. Do you have any other comments or questions?

Our last methodological instrument was the questionnaire used to interview female circumcisers. They were asked the following questions (Mande concepts such as *nyama* will be explained in Chapter 4):

1. How old were you when you started to excise?
2. Who taught you how to do it?
3. Is circumcision a tradition in your family? Tell us about it.
4. Why did you decide to become an exciser?
5. How much do you (or did you)⁷⁶ charge to circumcise a girl?
6. Is the money you earn(ed) from this practice enough to live on?
7. A *nùmùmuso* who refuses to excise, is she a real *nùmùmuso*?

⁷⁶ Three of the nine circumcisers we interviewed had handed over their knives to CMPF and pledged to stop excising (see Gosselin 2000b).

8. Some believe that children have too much *nyama*, and that circumcision is necessary to remove this danger.⁷⁷ What can you tell us about this?
9. If a nurse performs an excision, without the knowledge that you have, is it as valid?
10. Why did the ancestors practice excision?
11. Why is excision practiced now?
12. What are the consequences of excision?
13. Have you ever had cases of death following an excision?
14. If girls are not excised, what will happen to them?
15. Some think that a circumcised woman cannot enjoy sex; what do you think?
16. When you perform an excision, are there some women that you cut less than others? Who and why?⁷⁸
17. Why is the blood of excised girls used to perform libations on fields and on *boliv*,⁷⁹ and to make poisons?
18. Is boys' blood used in the same way?
19. Do you use the blood of excised girls? What for?
20. What do (did) you cut, and how?
21. What instrument do (did) you use?
22. Has CMPF taught you anything about excision? What?
23. Have you abandoned excision? Why or why not?
24. How can excisers be convinced to abandon excision?

The interviews were closed by asking excisers if they had any further comments or questions for us.

Methods and Sampling

In each town, one hundred female and male respondents were chosen at random. Sampling was done by creating population clusters using a city map, numbering these clusters and randomly selecting ten of them (see Bernard 1995, 99-100). I originally intended to map all the households (*duw* – walled compounds) in each cluster and then randomly select five of them in which to interview one man and one woman. However, this method proved socially unacceptable, as people were suspicious of our motives for mapping their neighbourhood; and

⁷⁷ A reference to Brett-Smith's article (1982).

⁷⁸ This and the next question were based on information publicly presented by the leader of a Malian organization devoted to eliminating "harmful traditional practices" during the National Seminar on FGM organized by the Malian government in Bamako in June 1997 and discussed in Chapter 7.

⁷⁹ A *boli* (pl. *boliv*) is an object made by a ritual specialist from various organic materials, and often in the shape of an animal. It is used to offer animal sacrifices to various spirits, usually by pouring the blood of the victim on the *boli*. In a sense, it is a portable altar, and acts as a connecting point between the human

technically impossible, as my assistant felt that this was impolite (i.e., diverged too much from *hɔɔnyɑ*), and after one attempt refused to do it again. Subsequently, Mariam and I would try to locate the cluster from the map by taxi or on foot, using landmarks such as mosques and schools (streets were not named nor numbered on the maps; furthermore, the maps were over ten years old and not very accurate), and interviewed the first ten willing people in what we guessed to be our cluster.

I introduced myself as a student and a trainee with CMPF, and Mariam as my interpreter. We emphasized that we had not come to speak against excision, but only wanted respondents' opinion. Mariam stressed that she was not associated with CMPF. We did not interview more than two people per household,⁸⁰ but we often had to interview two of the same sex. In many households only one person would volunteer. Generally our sample contains more women than men, and youth and people educated in French are also over-represented (the numbers will be given for each town). The interviewees were given the choice to conduct the interview in Bamanakan or in French; the majority chose Bamanakan. In closing, we gave older respondents kola nuts or dates as a token of appreciation and a sign of respect; younger interviewees generally seemed to enjoy the chance to chat and did not expect to be rewarded.

In addition to the survey, in each of the four cities we led open-ended interviews with up to fifteen CMPF members, with ten community leaders (administrators, health personnel, Muslim religious leaders, leaders of NGOs and associations, and *dùgùtigiw* [in this case, neighbourhood chiefs⁸¹]), and with as many circumcisers as were willing to talk to us (a total of nine for all four cities). The names of those people were given to us by the CMPF contact person(s) in each town, who sometimes accompanied us or personally pre-arranged the interview.

and the spirit worlds. These objects are said to be filled with *nyama*, and are considered dangerous for non-initiates. The only *boliv* I saw in Mali were in the National Museum in Bamako.

⁸⁰ Except in very few *duw* where the *dutigi* [(male) head of household] insisted that we interview him after we had already interviewed two household members.

⁸¹ *Dùgùtigi* (pl. *dùgùtigiw*) means "village chief" in rural areas (Bailleul 1996, s. v. *dùgùtigi*).

I now briefly present the survey sites and a profile of the respondents in Kayes, Mopti and Segou. Because Sikasso falls outside of the cultural areas that I focus on in this thesis (Mande and Fulbe), I do not discuss those results in this dissertation, except where they are particularly illustrative of a national phenomenon.

Kayes

Kayes is the capital of the administrative region of the same name in the extreme west end of the country at the border with Senegal. It was important during conquest, as the French selected it as one of their first bases in the interior of Sudan, and later as a railway terminal on the Dakar-Bamako railroad. Prior to French occupation Kayes was a small slave village connected to the nearby market town of Medine (Klein 1998, 78). Most of the present city is located on the left bank of the Senegal river, with one neighbourhood, Kayes Ndi, on the other bank. The population of the city numbered 50,993 in 1987, and reached 67,262 in 1998 (DNSI 1998a,3). While to my knowledge there are no published breakdowns of the city's population by ethnic group, in general for the *cercle* of Kayes the Khassonke, a Mande people,⁴² predominate, and other numerically important populations include the Soninke, the Bamanan, the Fulbe, the Mandinka and the Moors (DRPS-K 1997, 5).

Kayes was briefly the political centre of the French Sudan (then Haut-Sénégal-Niger), but it has now lost its former importance. This decline started as early as 1908, with the transfer of the capital to Bamako (Boutillier 1980, 60). The whole region has been neglected in terms of economic and infrastructural development, and seasonal or longer-term migration to neighbouring countries or to France is a common wage-earning strategy for young men (MEPI 1998). This is particularly marked among the Soninke, who

have a long history of migration and well-established diasporic support networks (Klein 1998, 69-70, 224-5; Quiminal 1991). Recently the opening of a gold mine near Kayes raised hopes for the region, but so far the socio-economic benefits have been disappointing to say the least (Gosselin and Toure 2000, 59-61).

Kayes proper, on the left bank of the river, is divided into six neighbourhoods. The oldest of these, according to local informants, is the Khasso, named after the small local warrior state with which the French allied themselves during conquest (Klein 1998, 80). At the end of the nineteenth century Charles Monteil, administrator and ethnographer, spent two years (1897-99) in Medine, Kayes's neighbouring town, which was at the time "the commercial metropolis of the Western Sudan" (Monteil 1915, 1, my translation). While at the time of Monteil's posting, the Khasso was a well-defined administrative and territorial area, encompassing both today's Kayes and Medine (Klein, *ibid.*), this had not historically been the case. Monteil (1915, 9) noted that originally "Khasso" referred to a small area on the right bank of the Senegal near Bafoulabé where some Fulbe clans grazed their herds. Eventually they united with "indigenous" lineages of agriculturists, and formed a clan independent of the local chiefs. The name "Khasso" was given to this new, hybrid clan, which was nomadic for a while, relocating in the search for grassland and security from warfare (most likely slave-raiding). Eventually, the Khasso clan settled on the left bank of the Senegal near Medine. Monteil (1915, 9-10, my translation) concludes: "the name of Khasso, following the clan's fortunes, was therefore applied to successive territories [it designates] the area upon which the clan of the same name exercised its influence."

Today the term Khasso designates a residential neighbourhood of Kayes where Mariam and I stayed and administered our survey. She and I arrived in September 1997.

⁸² See the discussion on Malian ethnicity in general and on the Mande grouping in particular in the next chapter.

accompanied and guided by Astan, the Khassonke head secretary from the Bamako national office of CMPF, who was going home to give her condolences to the family of a recently deceased relative. We stayed in Astan's late father's compound with her mother's co-wife and this woman's grand-daughter, a divorced mother in her thirties who had recently moved in (without her children). Astan's mother usually lived there as well, but during our stay she had temporarily relocated to the compound of the recently dead relative to keep the aggrieved family company and help host visitors. To earn a living, the two elderly widows (Astan's mother and her co-wife) rented rooms in the compound to two impoverished families of monogamous spouses with young children.

Mariam and I spent two weeks in the widows' compound, and during that time administered our one hundred surveys in the Khasso. We also interviewed CMPF members, community leaders and female circumcisers in several of the city's neighbourhoods and in a nearby village. The Khasso was chosen for the general population survey because the local CMPF leaders informed us that the majority of the urban participants at the 1993 seminar were Khasso residents. We were also informed that the Khasso had the highest concentration of traditional excisers.

In our survey sample of 52 women and 48 men from 57 different compounds selected at random, the Khassonke formed only a slight majority with 26% of respondents, despite the fact that we were in "their" neighbourhood. Next most numerous were the Soninke, with 21% of those interviewed, followed by the Bamanan (19%), the Fulbe (14%) and the Mandinka (8%). The last 12% of the sample was divided between seven ethnic groups: Senufo, Wolof, Bozo, Dogon, Somono, Songhay and Tamacheq. Sixty out of a hundred respondents stated that the language they spoke most often at home was Bamanakan, while for another twenty-four it was Khassonkakan,⁸³ a very similar Mande

⁸³ As must be obvious to the reader, the suffix "kan" means "language" in Mande, so for instance French is *tubàbùkan* (but English is *anglaiskan*).

dialect. Only sixty-three of the respondents had been born in Kayes, indicative of the high mobility of the Malian population. The next most common place of origin was Bamako (8 respondents). All but two respondents said their religion was Islam; of the two non-Muslims, one was Protestant and the other did not know what to call her religion.

Table 2: Age and gender distribution of survey respondents (n=100), Kayes

age group	women	men	total by age
15-29	25	20	45
30-49	15	17	32
50 and over	12	11	23
total by gender	52	48	100

A significant proportion of our respondents, 45%, were under thirty years of age; the exact age and gender distribution appears in Table 2 above. The education level of our respondents was high compared to the national average, with 37% having completed primary school, 18% secondary school, and 4% having post-secondary education. This is partly due to the fact that people thought that educated members of their households were most appropriate to answer the questions of a *tùbàbumuso* and of an educated young woman from Bamako. However, as Table 3 below shows, the percentage of educated people that I obtained in my survey in Kayes is comparable to the averages obtained by the DHS in 1995-96 for *urban* populations (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 27-8).

Table 3: Educational levels of respondents by gender (Kayes) compared to national urban average

level	women (n=52)	men (n=48)	total (n=100)	national average, urban populations ⁸⁴	
				women	men
no education	21%	8%	15%	59.9%	43.2%
Qur'anic only	35%	17%	26%		
primary (F1 and F2 combined) ⁸⁵	36%	38%	37%	21%	20.2%
secondary	6%	31%	18%	19.1%	36.6%
tertiary	2%	6%	4%		

In terms of employment, a fairly large number of our respondents, twenty-one, were salaried workers. Twenty women performed unpaid domestic work for their husbands and usually for their husband's family, which most described either as "not working" or as *tobilike* – food preparation, a long and arduous task in Mali. The next most common occupation was trade, which was the main source of income of fifteen of our respondents. Twelve others were students and another twelve were retired elders. Nine practiced crafts, and four agriculture. Two women gave their occupation as *jèliw* (praise-singers) and one respondent was a fisherman. Four people were out of work, including one permanently (a disabled woman). Seventy-seven of the respondents were also parents, with an average of four living children per respondent.

When asked whether they were *hɔɔn*, *nyamakala* or *jɔn*, the majority of the Kayes respondents, 68%, said they were of *hɔɔn* descent. Exactly a quarter of the one

⁸⁴ Source: Table 2.11 in Coulibaly et al. (1996, 28).

⁸⁵ In Mali, primary education consists in two cycles: the first, known as Fundamental 1 (here, F1), lasts six years, and corresponds to our Grades 1-6; the second, Fundamental 2 (here, F2), lasts three years, corresponding roughly to the "junior high school" level in English Canada (see ODHD 1998b, 45). The first version of my survey, used in Kayes, did not distinguish between completion of F1 and F2 (both were lumped together under 'primary education'); this was corrected in the second version of the survey used in the other cities.

hundred identified themselves as *nyamakalaw*, with ten specifying they were *nùmuw*, seven *jèliw* and five *garankew*. The remaining 7% acknowledged slave descent.⁸⁶

Mopti

Upon arrival in Mopti on November 2, 1997, it was obvious to me that the city of 79,840 people (DNSI 1998a,35) was more economically active than Kayes. Activity is centered around the port, where fisherfolk sell dried fish, a popular ingredient for making *na*, the ubiquitous and multiform sauce that is eaten in most of Mali with the staple cereals (millet, rice, fonio) and that can make or break a wife's reputation. Mopti, the administrative capital of the interior Niger delta region, is located at the junction of the Bani and Niger rivers. Its location, at the intersection of river and road transportation, has contributed to its growth and commercial success over nearby Jenne (Gallais 1980a, 55). Mopti also serves as a tourist centre where travelers (mostly Europeans) stop on their way to Timbuktu or Jenne, or to find a guide for a trek in nearby Dogon country.

This touristic function explains why, whereas Kayes only had one hotel in 1997, Mopti and its neighbouring town, Sevare, had at least four. I got to know one of these hotels very well as, unlike our experience in all the other towns surveyed, the local CMPF leadership did not offer to host Mariam and I. I was never able to find out what was behind this unusual breach of Malian hospitality. While I had been introduced to the Mopti CMPF president during a brief overnight visit to Kayes in June 1997 to attend a ceremony during which circumcisers handed over their excision knives (discussed in Chapter 7; see also Gosselin, 2000b), I can not imagine how I could have insulted her then and can only assume that her apparent coldness had to do with some conflict with the Bamako leadership who had sent me. In any case, this unplanned stay in a hotel soon

⁸⁶ Such a percentage seems low, and similar low numbers were obtained in all cities surveyed. Because of the stigma still attached to slave descent, it could in fact have been higher. There is also the fact that in

exhausted my cash reserves and after one week we were back on the bus to Bamako. It would not be until March 1998 that Mariam and I would be able to come back to complete fieldwork in Mopti.

The Fulbe presence is another aspect of Mopti that is immediately noticeable. While in Bamako it is generally difficult to tell a Pulo from a non-Pulo until you know the person's patronym, in Mopti many Fulbe men and women display their ethnic identity through distinctive clothing, headdresses and, for women, jewelry. Fulfulde is commonly heard on the streets of the city, and there were a few Fulbe households where we could not conduct interviews because there was nobody present who spoke Bamanakan – something which did not happen in the other three towns surveyed. In those cases people gently reproached Mariam, whom they knew to be a Pulo from her patronym, for not speaking her father's language – a fact which did not elicit comments in Bamako.

Mopti is located within the Maasina region, but despite its proximity to the historical city of Hamdallaahi, it did not play an important role in the Diina.⁸⁷ It was Seeku Aamadu who gave the village of Isaca its current name, Mopti, meaning “meeting” in Fulfulde. Isaca was originally a Bozo fishing camp. Due to its location, it soon attracted traders: Marka from Jenne and Arma from Timbuktu. Over the next few centuries they were joined by Fulbe pastoralists. It was Umar Tall, and later his nephew Tijani, who in the nineteenth century increased the importance of Mopti by choosing it as a base from which to attack the Fulbe of Maasina (Gallais 1967, 488; also Gaudio, 1988, 201).

In 1892, Mopti was taken by Archinard, and the French conquered Maasina. French conquest and occupation brought an end to thirty years of warfare in the region (Klein 1998, 91). It was when the railroad from Dakar reached its terminus at Koulikoro (just east of Bamako) that Mopti really started to grow (Gallais 1967, 489-90), because at

law, no one is any longer a “slave” in Mali – see the discussion in the next chapter.

⁸⁷ Source for the information on pre-colonial Mopti: Gallais (1967, vol. II, p. 488).

Koulikoro, merchandise coming from or going to Senegal could be loaded onto or out of ships going to or coming from Mopti during the high water season (approximately June-January). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Koulikoro-Mopti waterway became “the lung of the Middle Niger” (Ibid., 490), with Bamako commercial houses selecting Mopti as their trading place in the Middle Niger. European commerce in egret feathers, wool, hides and rice suffered greatly during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but in the same period the long-established African-controlled trade in dried fish expanded, reaching as far south as today’s Ghana (Ibid., 491-4).

Mopti has a very distinctive look and feel due to its location on a series of islets in a marsh. Originally, most of these islets were seasonal, but under colonial administration they were made permanent and enlarged through filling (Gallais 1967, vol. II, p. 562-3). This arduous work was carried out manually through forced labour campaigns, probably mostly executed by *riimaayBe*, the slaves of the Fulbe (see Klein 1998). Eventually, the growth of commerce on the island where the old town was located became constrained due to lack of space, and between 1910 and 1914 the colonial administration “urged” the African population to move out of the commercial core across one of the lagoons onto the next islet to the south, where the community named Komoguel was located (Gallais 1967, 493).

Komoguel is presumably named after the Fulbe families that founded it, the Ouro-Komongallou, who were refugees at the time of the Umarian wars (Ibid., 488). The majority of them returned home after 1895, and by the time of Gallais’ work in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Komoguel had become primarily a Bozo and Somono neighbourhood, with half the Bozo population of Mopti and two-thirds of its Somono population (Ibid., 594). Komoguel, also known as *Wakin*, is one of the three residential neighbourhoods in which Mariam and I administered our surveys. We also interviewed in Gangal, immediately to the south of Komoguel, and in Toguel to the east.

Gangal is the second oldest residential neighbourhood of Mopti after Komoguel. It was settled starting in 1920, and like Komoguel, is very densely built and populated. In both of these neighbourhoods the architecture is of the Jenne style, with the typical two-story clay houses with internal courtyards and roof terraces. With space at a premium on the islet, the sleeping rooms are small, and so are the courtyards – generally too small to plant a tree. The streets are equally narrow, and there is rarely any empty space between two contiguous houses – in fact Gallais (1967, 594) believed that it was only because Komoguel and Gangal houses leaned onto each other that they were still standing despite the unsteady ground! Perhaps it is this crowdedness that causes Mopti men to leave home: Mariam and I found very few of them present at the time that we administered our surveys (i.e., the daylight hours).⁸⁸ While this was a general pattern, it was especially marked in Mopti, and from 78 participant households we only recruited 35 male respondents. The age and gender distribution of the Mopti general survey respondents follows in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Age and gender distribution of survey respondents (n=100), Mopti

age group	women	men	total by age
15-29	26	12	38
30-49	25	16	41
50 and over	14	7	21
total by gender	65	35	100

We also interviewed in Toguel, a more recent neighbourhood with wider streets and larger courtyards. Settlement in this “little island” (the meaning of the neighbourhood’s name) began in the 1950s as a “residential annex for the well-to-do

⁸⁸ Everywhere I went in Mali, as well as in Bamako, it was considered dangerous to walk around at night, especially for two young women: not only are there suspicious young men hanging around the dark streets (the low availability and high cost of electricity in Mali deters street lighting), but it is said that *jinsw* (spirits, supernatural beings) come into human settlements at that time. Mariam was also concerned that people might suspect we were *jinsw*, should we arrive at strangers’ homes in the night.

groups of the first two neighbourhoods” (Gallais 1967, 599). At the time of Gallais’ research, 36% of its inhabitants were merchants and 20% were civil servants (Ibid., 596). The three majority ethnic groups at the time were the Marka (33%), the Fulbe (25%) and the Arma (10%).

For Mopti as a whole, Gallais (1967, 570) estimated the following ethnic distribution in 1958:

Ethnic group	percentage of the total population
Marka	20.9%
Fulbe	17.7%
Bozo	13%
Bamanan	11%
Somono	6.1%
Arma	5.8%
Others	25.5%
Total	100%

Among the “others” we find people with the following identities: Bella, Songhay, Dogon, Tukolor, Mossi, Wolof, Mandinka, Samogo, Cherif, Moors, Tamacheq, Hausa, Bwa and Minyanka, with each group accounting for less than 3% of the total population. It is not surprising to find relatively large concentrations of Fulbe, Bozo, Somono and Arma people, since they are Mopti’s founders. Gallais (1967, 571, my translation) sees the relatively high number of Bamanan people as a result of French colonization: “Recently arrived in town [Mopti] they, like everywhere else in Mali, followed the colonial administration: families of interpreters, guards, soldiers, and administrative clerks.” We will be discussing the Bamanan, Bozo, Somono and Fulbe ethnicities in the next chapter. As for the Arma, suffice to recall here that they are the descendants of Moroccan occupants who married into local families, mostly in Jenne, as we saw in the historical overview. But here I want to discuss briefly the case of the majority group in Mopti at the eve of Independence, the Marka. They were not among the city’s founders, but arrived later, in the wake of commercial and urban development (Gallais 1967, 570).

Along with the Khassonke of the Kayes region, the Marka are a prime example of the ethnic hybridity and fluidity that Amselle (1990) sees as paradigmatic for Mali.⁸⁹ They are a small group in the country as a whole, not appearing among the ten most numerous ethnic groups in the DHS (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 26); however they are significant in the Niger delta area, where they are “omnipresent,” according to Gallais (1967, vol. I, p.109). For Malian historian Adame Ba Konaré (1993, 471), “Maraka” or “Marka” was a term originally applied to Soninke traders – and this is what my informants in Bamako told me. Yet Ba Konaré adds that in the Segou region, “Marka” is an occupational term, applying to merchants whatever their ethnic origin. But Bintou Sanankoua (1990, 9 n.1), who worked in the Maasina, writes that the “Marka” are in fact the Nono people. Here I would like to quote at length from Gallais (1967, 109-10, my translation), who most clearly elucidated the enigma for our benefit as outsiders – for ambiguity seems to suit local actors just fine:

Historical studies have shown that the Marka group is not a biological community, but originates in submission to a political entity, that of the Mali empire. Since the demise of this empire the term has acquired a cultural and religious meaning. In the [Niger] Delta one becomes Marka by converting to Islam. The group is constituted like a pyramid, with each layer corresponding to a phase of Islamization. The most ancient is formed by the Nono people, who converted to Islam with the penetration of the Mali empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These are the Marka *pi*, that is, the black Marka. Above is found the strata of the Marka *dié*, the white Marka, originally from the sahel and related to the Sarakolé [Soninke], with some being part Fulbe or Moorish. A third strata originated a hundred years ago. These are the Marka *dialan*, or colored Marka, Bamanan or Bobo people who put on a Muslim facade in the last century during the Tukolor [Umarian] domination.

Gallais continues by noting that at the time of his research, some recently Islamized Dogon and Bamanan villagers presented themselves as Marka. He concludes by saying that the spatial distribution of the Marka “... does not result from the movement of people, but from the progression of a culture and of a religion through diverse peoples. Under such conditions there cannot be a link between an ethnic group and a geographical space” (Gallais 1967, 110).

In my own survey I obtained the following ethnic distribution:

Table 5: Ethnic distribution of respondents, Mopti (n=100)

Fulbe	24
Bamanan	16
Songhay	14
Dogon	9
Somono	8
Bozo	7
Marka	6
Soninke	4
Mandinka	2
Other	8
does not know	1
no answer	1

While only sixteen people indicated Bamanan ethnicity, fifty-seven said that the Bamanan language was what they spoke most often at home, giving an indication of how this language has become the unofficial common language of Mali. Of the other languages spoken at home, Fulfulde came second (23 respondents), followed by Songhay (8), then Dogon (4), Bozo (3), Soninke (2) and French (2).⁹⁹ When asked to specify their caste, 86 of the respondents considered themselves to be *harɔn*, two to be *jan*, one refused to answer, and two did not know. The nine other respondents were *nyamakalaw*, including four *nùmuw*, one *jèli* and one *maabo*.

Seventy-two of the survey respondents had children, with an average of 4.5 children per respondents. Twenty-nine of the women were busy at home with child-rearing, cooking, and housekeeping. The next most common occupation was trading, with twenty-one traders, male and female. Next came manual labour, occupying fourteen people; work in services (7); salaried work (6), studies (6) and agriculture (4). Thirteen people had occupations that did not fit into these categories. Educational levels achieved were a little lower than in Kayes, with twenty-two

⁹⁹ See the discussion in the next chapter.

respondents having no education at all, twenty-five Qur'anic education only, eighteen having completed the first cycle of primary school (Fundamental 1, lasting six years), an equal number having reached the equivalent to junior high school (Fundamental 2), fourteen having attended or attending *lycée* (high school), and only two having post-secondary education.

Among the other characteristics of the Mopti sample we note that 64% of the respondents were married, 18% were single, 10% were widowed (all women), 4% were engaged to be married and 3% were divorced. Forty-eight had not been born in Mopti; among those, five were born in Bamako, another five in Jenne, three in Segou, three in Gao and another three in Timbuktu, two in San and two in Bourem. Finally, 96% professed to be Muslims, only one person followed Christianity, and two said they did not have a religion.

Segu

Between 1987 and 1998, Segou, the historical Bamanan capital, lost its rank as second most populous Malian city to Sikasso, due to the phenomenal growth of the latter (from 73,859 inhabitants in 1987 to 113,813 in 1998 – [DNSI 1998a, 19]). Segou's population grew much slower in the same time period, from 88,135 to 90,898 people (Ibid., 27). It now ranks as third most populated urban commune in Mali, with Mopti fourth and Kayes fifth (Ibid., 35, 3).

Segu is a lively yet peaceful commercial and administrative centre spreading along the right (south) bank of the tranquil Niger river. Economic life in the Segou region is significantly linked to the activities of the *Office du Niger*, a colonial structure (Gallais 1980b, 56-7). The *Office* was created in 1932 to set up cotton and rice production through irrigation. To build this infrastructure and grow the crops, initially and until 1948 labour was forcibly recruited, mostly among the Bamanan people of the region, the Minyanka further south-east and the Mossi of today's Burkina Faso (Ibid., 56). With Independence

⁹⁰ These numbers, as well as the ones in the rest of this section, add up to 99 instead of 100 because one woman refused to answer any of the demographic data questions (she did however complete the rest of the

the *Office* became the property of the Malian state and production was reorganized. Sugar cultivation was also introduced at that time. The *Office*'s administration is located in Segou, which also hosts the COMATEX cotton processing plant, an important employer in the country.

Bitòn Mamari Kulibali selected Segukoro, a village located ten kilometres from today's Segou, as the first capital of the Segou kingdom.⁹¹ It was Ngolo Diarra who moved the capital to the actual location in 1770. The Segou of the Bamanan Ngolosi kings would have had approximately 30,000 inhabitants, with up to 2,000 (including numerous slaves) living in the royal palace. The city was surrounded by a high wall and by *Acacia albida* (in Bamanan, *balansan*), which would have been planted there to slow attackers on horses. Those magnificent and spiritually potent trees still greet today's visitor to Segou, but few other vestiges of the pre-colonial city remain. In fact, to my knowledge only Bitòn's tomb is accessible to visitors, in the village of Segukoro outside the city. I did not see any traces of the old Bamanan palace nor of the one built by al-Hajj Umar after he took the city in 1861. However numerous large buildings erected by the next group of conquerors, the French, endure.

My assistant and I conducted interviews in Segou in 1997, during the cool season after harvest (November 28th - December 11th). We were lodged in the house of the local CMPF president, who had already hosted me overnight in June of the same year, during a gathering organized for the benefit of a Canadian NGO film-making team. The local president was a Mande woman whose sole occupations were, I believe, house management and her volunteer activities. She was married to a wealthy and influential Fulbe man, involved in commerce and politics. She and her husband were highly educated, and most of their children were studying abroad. Their large and comfortable home had two distinct

survey).

⁹¹ Source for this paragraph: Brasseur (1968, 411-7) and personal observation.

personalities, a European one and an African one, that were spatially marked. During both of my stays with this family I was put up on the European side, a large bungalow built in the French colonial style. It had a few sleeping rooms, a formal dining room, an air-conditioned living room, a European-style bathroom, and *Monsieur's* apartments, forbidden to all. During my first stay I slept in the glacial air-conditioned living room, a definite honour, since even *Madame* had to ask permission to enter this space, which was in fact *Monsieur's* reception room. When I came back with Mariam at the end of November for a two-week stay, we were given one of the absent sons' bedrooms.

For all its display of wealth the European villa was devoid of life. As is almost always the case in Mali, most of the household activities took place outdoors, and in this case centered around the two courtyards: the one that connected the villa to its adjacent Mande-style house, and the internal courtyard of the latter. In the 'in-between' courtyard was a television set, and several of the house inhabitants and visitors gathered there at night to eat and watch the daily programming of Mali's only channel (which only broadcasts in the evening). The internal courtyard of the 'African' house was where female domestics, dependents and visitors prepared food, washed clothes, braided hair, nursed children, and generally hung out, keeping an eye on the ruminations of *Monsieur's* huge domesticated tortoise.

While both *Monsieur* and *Madame* were home in June and the house was full of relatives, visitors, and staff, in November and December the *dutigi* (head of the household), his wife, and their closest people had relocated to Bamako, and everything was quiet. Even though Mariam and I were formally under the responsibility of one of *Madame's* younger sisters, most of our upkeep and the general housekeeping was in fact done by a young man whom the sister addressed as "*fɛn*" ("thing"). His performed submissiveness

and the fact that *Madame* had, in June, introduced him as an “adoptive son.” lead me to think that he may have been a descendant of a slave of the family.⁹²

Our hosts lived in a neighbourhood I will call Falajie,⁹³ near the old city centre. From the map I was able to obtain at the local branch of the *Ministère du Plan*, it appears that Segou has fifteen different neighbourhoods of varying sizes. Mariam and I administered our one hundred surveys in “Falajie” and in Pelengana, a large neighbourhood at the south-eastern city limits. Pelengana is a former village where the capital of the Bamanan kingdom was briefly located just before the coming to power of the Ngolosi (Brasseur 1968, 411). French explorer Mage reported that during the Umarian occupation the village belonged to the empire’s cavalrymen (Ibid., 416). I selected Pelengana and Falajie for the general population survey because it was in those two neighbourhoods that CMPF had a pilot project to provide alternative sources of income for traditional circumcisers pledging to stop performing excisions.

This project grew out of the 1993 series of CMPF seminars already mentioned. In Segou, according to the CMPF leadership, circumcisers present at the seminar agreed to stop practicing excision if they could find a substitute source of income. A little later a summer student at a wealthy Embassy in Bamako was put in charge of finding new groups to fund as partners for that country’s bilateral aid program, under the envelope “good governance,” and she came to Segou. By coincidence I met this woman in 1998, when she was back in Bamako for other reasons. She told me of having been impressed by the dynamism of the Segou branch of CMPF at the time, and that she had pushed for their project to be approved. Whatever the internal decision-making process was in the Embassy, the project was funded, and a group of *nùmu* women pledged to stop excising girls. They were trained in

⁹² As Amselle (1998 [1990], 81) notes for historical myths, the disguising of slaves as relatives (in his case, brothers), is not uncommon in Mande speech.

⁹³ Naming the neighbourhood would allow those familiar with Segou to identify the women’s association I worked with, the anonymity of which I want to protect.

an entrepreneurial venture, and provided with the machines necessary to run the business. Another aspect of the project was to form neighbourhood information and consciousness-raising committees that would include the reformed *nìmu* women and hold community information sessions on the harmfulness of excision. Unfortunately when I interviewed participants and neighbours three years later the business had proven difficult to manage and unprofitable, some of the equipment was in disrepair, and on one of the sites the women had been evicted by the landlord. In fact, at the time of my visit, all business activities had ceased. The community information sessions were no longer held, and at least some of the *nìmu* women had reactivated their excision practice. There did not seem to be any follow-up on the part of the funding Embassy.⁹⁴ This state of affairs was a source of frustration for the *nìmu* women involved, and only two of the original twelve participants agreed to be interviewed by Mariam and I.

We were also able to interview nine CMPF members and ten community leaders, and to administer the survey to one hundred members of the general population (fifty in Pelengana and fifty in the central neighbourhood). Enduring Bamanan dominance in the city is reflected in the fact that forty-three respondents professed that ethnicity; moreover eighty said that Bamanakan was the language they spoke most often at home. The second most common ethnic identity was Fulbe, with eleven respondents, but only two people used Fulfulde as their day-to-day language. The rest of the respondents expressed the following ethnic membership: Minyanka (8), Marka (6), Dogon (6), Songhay (6), Mandinka (5), Bobo (4), Soninke (3), Mossi (2), Somono (2), Bozo (1), Arma (1), other

⁹⁴ I long mulled over contacting the Embassy concerned, but in the end I decided that would be disloyal to CMPF and contravene my university's research guidelines, as explained above. As a result I did not interview the Embassy staff nor share my findings with them. Up until my evaluation study CMPF had been presenting this project as a success story in the media and at public events. However, this has probably changed by now, since I heard just before leaving Mali in 1998 that a team of Malian consultants, contracted by Plan International, were starting a study on the effectiveness of income-generating projects for pledging excisers as a means to stop excision, and that the association I call CMPF was one of their case studies.

(2). Three of the Songhay respondents, two of the Dogon, and two of the Bobo spoke their own language most often within the household.

Compared to Kayes and Mopti, in Segou for unknown reasons we had difficulty getting people over fifty to answer our survey. In the seventy participating households, only ten people over fifty (three women and seven men) completed the survey, compared to forty-two youth (twenty-six women and sixteen men) and forty-eight people between thirty and forty-nine years of age (twenty-nine women and nineteen men). The great majority of the respondents, 85%, said that they belonged to *hɔɔn* lineages, while only one person acknowledged slave descent. Four people refused to answer the question on caste, and the remaining ten were *nyamakalaw*, including five *jèliw* and three *nùmuw*.

Concerning family situation 66% of the respondents were married, 21% were single, 5% were widowed (all women), and 8% were engaged – not a single person was currently divorced. Demonstrating the great mobility of West African people and the growing urbanization of Mali – with men often migrating for work to the city or to other countries and women often marrying out of their place of birth – only 40% of the respondents had been born in Segou. The remaining sixty came from everywhere: Bamako, Côte d'Ivoire, Maasina, Kita, Timbuktu, Bougouni, Bandiagara, Burkina Faso, Gao, Mopti, etc. Most were parents (69%), with an average of 4.3 children per respondent with children.

The educational levels of the Segou respondents were comparable to the ones for Kayes and Mopti (see Table 6 below) – i.e., low on a world-scale, high compared to those of the rural Malian majority. With regards to main occupation thirty of the fifty-eight women interviewed performed reproductive work at home, seventeen respondents were traders, thirteen were salaried workers, eleven were students, ten worked providing services (e.g. hairdressing), and two cultivated on lands just outside the city. The

remaining nine were involved in various other uncategorized income-earning activities.

Finally, if the Bamanan kingdom was once a centre of resistance to Islamization, this is no longer true. Our sample in Segu included slightly more Christians than in Kayes or Mopti, but they were still a tiny minority, with five followers. While two people may have been animists (they professed no religion), the overwhelming majority of the respondents (93%) were Muslims.

Table 6: Educational level of survey respondents, Segu (n=100)

Educational level	women (n=58)	men (n=42)	total
no education	17	4	21
Qur'anic only	13	6	19
F 1	13	4	17
F 2	10	13	23
secondary	4	13	17
post-secondary	1	2	3

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined my research strategy, which consisted mostly in working as a volunteer for a Malian women's association that is active in the campaign against excision. This strategy allowed me to investigate some of my research questions better than others. Regular and sustained participant-observation in the Bamako office of the association allowed me to appreciate and document the subtle ways in which social stratification was expressed and negotiated amongst and between the association's leaders, staff, members and clients. In turn, understanding the interconnection of different axes of power within the association was crucial to the analysis of similar matrixes of social relations amongst women, between men and women, and even amongst men in the larger society. The Malian discourses for or against excision do not take place in a social vacuum, and developing an ethnographic understanding of the formation.

reproduction and impact of these discourses was a central goal of my research. In other words, the association was a good point of entry into the politics of the campaign against excision in Mali.

There were advantages and disadvantages to my research strategy in terms of access to informants and to information. Because working in the CMPF office put me in contact with some of the association's donors and other international collaborators, it was a good location from which to probe the association's relationship to the global hierarchies and systems of knowledge production that both inform and feed on local feminist and "*intellectuel*" discourses on excision in Mali. Also, the evaluation study which I developed jointly with CMPF provided me with logistical support and privileged access to hundreds of survey respondents and several key informants in four cities (Kayes, Segou, Mopti and Sikasso), allowing for the production of ample quantitative and qualitative data that was useful both for my project and CMPF's work.

Yet my close working relationship with the association left me with little time and energy to investigate other sites of discourse production on excision. Further, my access to Muslim leaders (men and women) was limited not just for those reasons but also for political and ideological ones, as there was an enmity between several of these leaders and feminist associations such as CMPF. As a result, and as will be obvious in Chapter 10, I have had to rely on several secondary sources to supplement my data on the Islamic discourse on excision in Mali. Finally, the impact of my identity as a CMPF 'trainee' on my access to *nùmuw* informants was not so clear. In Segou and Mopti, several *nùmu* women were frustrated by the way their income-generating projects with CMPF were progressing, and several refused to talk to Mariam and me. Those who did speak to us however gave valuable interviews. In Kayes, the good offices of local CMPF members yielded rich interviews with *nùmu* women who practiced excision, circumcisers I would probably not have been able to locate or approach on my own.

In the next chapter I discuss the structural hierarchies found amongst the two largest cultural groups with whom I worked, the Mande and Fulbe peoples. The ways in which gender,

age, caste and class intersect are crucial to the discussion in Part II below, an analysis of the processes by which the campaign against excision in Mali is produced, implemented, received, evaluated and resisted. The hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects of various groups and sub-groups in the Malian socioscape are also crucial to an understanding of the "common-sense" nature of excision, of the mechanisms (of coercion and rewards) that help to explain the practice's reproduction, and of the contestation of the operation by some.

CHAPTER 4

THE MANDE AND FULBE PEOPLES AND THEIR STRUCTURAL HIERARCHIES

It will have become clear from the foregoing discussion that Mali is ethnically complex. In this chapter I present the ethnic groups on whom this dissertation focuses, while acknowledging that Malian society is one in which cultural meanings, as well as individuals, have long and extensively crossed group boundaries, and that these boundaries themselves are constantly re-negotiated. However, an outline of the main characteristics that allow these groups to imagine and reproduce themselves as a community, and of the social hierarchies that structure them, is necessary to situate excision practices within their cultural contexts and to begin to discern the mechanisms that reproduce these practices. Since urban communities in Mali are profoundly multi-ethnic (but, as we saw in the previous chapter, each has its own unique mixture of cultures due to its particular history), I interviewed people from a variety of group identities. For the purposes of this work however, I have chosen to concentrate on two large and inter-penetrating cultural spheres, the Mande and the Fulbe, who are dominant (in various proportions and to various degrees) in Bamako, Segou, Kayes and Mopti. But before presenting these groups, it is necessary to discuss the Mande concept of *siya*, a concept which imperfectly translates into English or French.

Bailleul (1996, s. v. *siya*, my translation from the French) translates the noun *siya* as “(1) race, ethnic group, tribe, caste [;] (2) type, species, variety.” In conversation, French-speaking Malians translate the word as “race,” by which they mean both what social scientists have considered to be ethnic groups (e.g. Dogon, Bozo, Bamanan, etc.) and castes (blacksmiths and potters, leather-workers, praise-singers, etc.). This overlapping meaning was emphasized for me when my assistant and I administered our four hundred questionnaires to the population at large. In the “demographic data” section, question #3 referred to the respondent’s ethnic group, and

question #4 to her or his caste (*hɔɔn*, *nyamakala*, *jɔn*). However when non-*hɔɔn* people were asked in Bamanakan “what is your *siya*?” (question #3), they would generally give what is normally considered a caste ranking, such as *nùmu*, *jèli*, *fulajɔn* (“slave of the Fulbe” in Bamanakan), etc. In such cases Mariam would then ask, for instance, “*nùmu sugu jùmen?*” (*nùmu* of which type?), or even suggest answers such as “Bamanan *nùmu*, Mandinka *nùmu*, or what?” A few had difficulty answering this as well, probably because they were *nyamakalaw* for patrons of different ethnic affiliations. This phenomenon however, is not recognized by census-takers in Mali, and various “casted” groups are not listed in tables giving the “ethnic” distribution of Malians (perhaps some are amalgamated into the category “other”).

Ethnicity in Mali and the Mande and Fulbe Cultural Spheres

The preliminary results of the latest census taken in Mali in April 1998 (DNSI 1998a)⁹⁵ do not provide a breakdown of the population by ethnic group. The most recent data I have found are those collected in 1995-96 for the DHS, in which the Tamacheq and Songhay populations are probably slightly under-represented, since the survey coordinators decided, for undisclosed reasons (probably logistical and financial), to exclude from the survey the rural zones of Timbuktu and Gao, where these two groups predominate (Coulibaly et al. 1996, p.7 n.2). These zones (which at the time included the current administrative division of Kidal, since carved out of the Timbuktu region), represent approximately 65% of the national territory but only 10% of its population. The DHS sample included 9,704 women and 2,474 men and is considered statistically representative at the national level. It gives the following ethnic distribution for Mali:

⁹⁵ At the time of my last visit to Mali (August 1999), the final findings were not yet available.

Table 7: Self-identified ethnic belonging, Mali (n= 12,178)⁹⁶

(M) = sub-group of the Mande (according to Dwyer 1989)

Ethnic group	%
Bamanan (M)	29.65
Fulbe	14.6
Soninke (M)	12.6
Senufo and Minyanka ⁹⁷	8.85
Dogon	8.65
Mandinka (M)	7.95
Bobo (M)	3.4
Songhay	3.1
Foreigners	0.75
Tamacheq	0.7
Other	9.7
non-determined	0.1

Generally speaking (the phenomenon of ethnic “mutation” or “conversion” will be discussed below), one inherits one’s ethnicity from one’s father – exceptions might be the generally matrilineal Tamacheq, and some duolineal Senufo groups (Rondeau 1994, 18). Among the majority patrilineal groups (including all the Mande and Fulbe Malian groups, even though the Fulbe once had a matrilineal filiation system), in the case of inter-ethnic marriages wives keep their ethnicity of birth, just as they keep their patronym and lineage affiliation. From my own observations in Bamako I concluded that inter-ethnic marriages are fairly common and generally favourably looked upon,⁹⁸ as long as the spouses are from the same caste – or, among the elite, from the same class.

From Table 7 it is immediately obvious that the Mande sub-groups (marked by “M”) are numerically dominant in Mali. While these groups share numerous cultural characteristics among themselves and, arguably, with the Fulbe, Senufo and Minyanka (see Amselle, 1998 [1990], and

⁹⁶ Calculated from Coulibaly et al., (1996), p. 26, Table 2.10.

⁹⁷ While the Senufo and Minyanka peoples, mostly based in the Sikasso region, share a similar language, they are culturally distinct, according to Chantal Rondeau (1994, 18), a specialist of the region. Here it was the DHS researchers who amalgamated the two groups, not me.

below), here the classification system I am using is linguistic as opposed to cultural. Linguists have described the characteristics of the Mande languages that permit their classification as a subgroup of the Niger-Congo languages (Dwyer 1989).⁹⁹ When David Dwyer was writing a decade ago, the Mande languages were spoken by about 10 million people in fifteen West African countries, and Mande speakers represented a large part of the population in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The Malian groups that speak Mande languages are the Bamanan, Soninke, Mandinka, Dyula, Wasulunke, Bozo, and some smaller groups (based on Ibid., 50). While using language as a marker of ethnicity has the advantage for the scholar of presenting an objective, measurable criterion – as Maurice Delafosse (1972 [1912], vol. I, p. 111) noted at the beginning of the century – it very imperfectly does justice to the lived reality of today's Mali where entire groups do not speak the language associated with their ethnic identity, such as the Mande-speaking Fulbe of the Wasulu region where Jean-Loup Amselle, a student of Claude Meillassoux and today a respected elder of French-Malian anthropology, did most of his fieldwork.

The publication of Amselle's *Logiques métisses* in 1990 (published in English in 1998 under the title *Mestizo Logics*) was epochal in the anthropology of Mali and of West Africa, generating various panel discussions, critiques and follow-up work (see for instance the two edited volumes by De Bruijn and Van Dick 1997a; and Conrad and Frank, 1995a). In this book Amselle was very critical of colonial ethnography which for its own purposes "congealed" – even, "invented" – ethnic groups, insisting upon neat demarcations where the reality was much more complex. Amselle (1998 [1990], 43-57) himself postulated for south-west Mali a historical system of Fulbe-Bamanan-Mandinka ethnic identity transformations. For an individual such a transformation "... always occurs in terms of power relations, resulting in the individual's

⁹⁹ Except where there is a taboo in place as part of a *sènènkùnya* relationship (discussed below), such as between Dogon and Bozo, for instance.

inscription into a position of dominant or dominated” (Ibid., 52). Ethnic conversions were generally linked to status change and migration, in a context of persecutions of non-Muslims, state formations, warfare, slavery and slave raiding. However, under colonial administration and especially with the publication of *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* by Maurice Delafosse in 1912, these ethnic groups were officially ‘baptized,’ to use Jean Bazin’s (1985, 113) expression.

While Delafosse’s nomenclature may have produced a frozen picture of a fluid reality, he himself was aware of the untidiness of ethnicity in the region then called Haut-Sénégal-Niger. In a passage in which the reader can feel the taxonomist’s frustration, Delafosse (1972 [1912], 109-12) explained the difficulties he faced in his classification project, presenting various possible criteria for classification and then discussing the problems associated with each. First, he discusses the methods of physical anthropology, “... difficult to use in the area concerned ... [since] each group is composed of elements from diverse origins due to migration, conquest, inter-group marriage, slavery, etc.” (Ibid., 109, my translation). Next, Delafosse turns to genealogy, only to find that the genealogical memory of his informants is either shallow or obviously spurious (such as claims of descent from Prophet Mohammed). He considered that “... the ethnographic method, based on analogies and differences in the material and social traits of the different groups” produced better results, but was not completely satisfactory, since similarities might result from geographical proximity or conquest (Ibid., 110, my translation). Finally, Delafosse, an accomplished linguist, discussed linguistic criteria, which have the advantages of exactitude and objectivity, yet cannot be used in isolation since numerous groups, he noted, historically adopted other languages after migration, conquest or capture and lost their language of origin (Ibid., 111). In the end, Delafosse resigned himself to utilizing all these methods simultaneously to arrive at “... a result as close as possible to practical reality based on

⁹⁹ This article was recommended by David Conrad, the president of the Mande Studies Association (MANSA), in an e-mail communication of April 12, 1999 responding to my query as to exactly which Malian ethnic groups were Mande.

the current state of knowledge, ” and considered his classification to be “provisory and in need of revision” (Ibid., 112, my translation).

Charles Monteil, another colonial administrator and ethnographer, also recognized the “mestizo” character of the population whose ‘customary law’ he was charged to codify. In his monograph on the Khassonke of the Kayes region, Monteil (1915, 5, my translation) concluded that:

Custom ... differs here and there; each important family has its own traditions which, in the judiciary sphere for instance, are unique.

This is due to the fact that in those countries, the fundamental social unit is the family: the village, the chiefdom, the province, the state, are federations of families ... There are no nationalities: Khassonke, Soninke, Malinke [Mandinka] ... are only clan names; and since these clans were formed from extremely diverse ethnic elements, their names cannot designate homogeneous races, but only individuals who were submitted, for a more or less long period of time, to the same polity.

As a matter of fact Monteil, as we saw in the previous chapter, used a politico-historical criterion to define the Khassonke people as those who came to live under the protection and domination of the Khasso kingdom.

A commonly remembered political history was one of the criteria selected by Jean Gallais (1962), a Niger Delta specialist, in his attempt to analyze the meaning of “ethnic group” in Mali. Another criterion that allows a community to draw a boundary between “us” and “them” he observed, is that of technical specialization in productive activities. As Gallais himself notes, this criterion is particularly salient in the Niger Delta (Mopti area), where the relative generosity of nature allows for more economic niches in resource exploitation than does the dry savannah, for instance. In the Niger Delta, roughly speaking, the Fulbe specialize in cattle transhumance (actually performed by a small number of shepherds within the group), the Bozo and Somono specialize in fishing, the Marka in rice cultivation, and the Bamanan and Bobo in millet agriculture (Ibid., 107-10). Each group owns the usufruct rights to a particular resource and territory in exchange for the ritualized performance of appropriate sacrifices to the *jineɓ* that are the true proprietors of natural resources (Ibid., 108, 114; Fay 1995). The knowledge of how to

enter into communication with the *jineɓ* and how to propitiate them is owned by a few select members of specific lineages.

Other than the vagrancy of history and the specialization in resource exploitation, Gallais (1962, 114-5) argued that Islam also acted as an ethnic marker, as we saw in the previous chapter with respect to the Marka. Yet in today's Mali (and especially in urban Mali), the near universality of professed belonging to Islam means that being Muslim is no longer an ethnic marker, but on the contrary, it is a factor in national integration.

As would Amselle (1977; 1990) in Wasulu a generation later, Gallais (1962, 120) remarked upon the common occurrence of individual ethnic "mutations" in Mali, and suggested that the frequency of such identity changes was greatly increased by urbanization. At the beginning of the twentieth century Monteil (1915, 3) had already remarked upon the ethnic hybridity present in the large commercial centres of the French Sudan. Gallais (1962, 121-3) noted the tendency for migrants in Mopti coming from lower-status ethnic groups – those historically dominated and enslaved – to engage in trade, convert to Islam (i.e., start to publicly perform prayers), adopt the city's dominant language, and replace their village ethnic identity with the plastic one of "Dyula," (i.e., "trader"), often adopting a new patronym in the process. While neither Gallais nor Amselle include a gender perspective in their analyses of ethnic identity changes, it appears from their materials that this option is more open to men than to women.

Amselle's critique of colonial ethnography needs to be situated within the recent phase of deconstruction in anthropology, as discussed in the section on multi-sited ethnography in the previous chapter. The danger with such critiques in the field of ethnicity is that in their emphasis on the "invention" of ethnic groups and of "traditions" by colonial agents they may overstress the impact of colonialism on Africa and understress the agency of the colonized. We saw in Chapter 2 how precarious was France's control over the vast territory of the French Sudan. Djata (1997, 179-80), in his work on the Bamanan kingdom of Segou, makes this point and specifically takes issue with Amselle (1990) under the heading "Identity: A Question for Whom?" Djata (Ibid..

179) targets Amselle's contention that "Bambara" was an ethnic identity created by French colonialism,¹⁰⁰ and questions whether this academic debate matters to the individual man or woman who today calls himself or herself "Bamanan." For Djata (Ibid., 180), what is problematic is that "... social scientists still cling to the notion that experience born of contact with the West is an all-powerful one."¹⁰¹ The difference between the two authors here may have a lot to do with their different fieldwork sites: while by Amselle's own account Wasulu was a region socially and literally devastated first by slave-raiding during the wars of the nineteenth century and then by the gradual abolition of slavery (see also Klein 1998, 109-10, 121-2), Djata's Segou has been a strong self-identified Bamanan cultural centre throughout that period and up until today.

Whatever the degree of "invention" in the colonizers' ethnic categories, the ethnic classificatory system they developed has now been re-appropriated by Malians. "... particularly in urban centres since it is the elite which now pronounce the new ethnic labels; but also in rural areas since urban identities travel from the cities to the country" (Amselle 1990, 31, my translation; see also Bazin, 1985, 97). For instance Malian scholar Bokar N'Diaye (1970a, 3) used the colonial sources to produce his encyclopedic *Groupes ethniques au Mali*, published in Bamako and presumably used to teach Malians about the 'origins' of their ethnic groups, providing an example of the 'full-circle' process which Amselle (1990, 31) noted.

In the next sections on the Mande and Fulbe cultural spheres I continue to use the ethnic labels – for lack of a better option – for delineating the "cultures" within which excision takes place, while fully recognizing that such cultures are subject to changes from within and from without, as their members respond to different historical circumstances and show "innovation and individuality" (after Koenig, Diarra, and Sow 1998). I also recognize that the boundaries around these cultures are porous, and that they expand and contract – but they nevertheless exist. Before

¹⁰⁰ See also Jean Bazin (1985), who reviews the multiple, confusing and often contradictory uses of the terms 'Bamanan' or 'Bambara' from the earliest travel reports to recent works.

I can sketch the broad outlines of the Mande and Fulbe cultural spheres however. one more caveat is in order: it is important to acknowledge that in urban Mali – and particularly among the elite whose frame of reference is planetary – a national identity is emerging that is superseding ethnic identities.

Interview Gf8, Segou, November 30, 1997, with a 26 year old woman:

Q: What is your *siya*?

A: “Are we supposed to answer ‘I am Malian’?”

The above quote reflects the efforts at nation-building undertaken by the Malian state since Independence. As Gallais (1962:124) remarked, the choice of the name “Mali” was ideologically effective in this regard, evoking a glorious and unified past, at least for Mande groups. Other forces for national integration include the common experience of French colonization, the party and state apparatuses put in place since Independence, Islam, the humiliation felt at the breakdown of the Mali-Senegal federation and at the economic success of Côte d’Ivoire, and the informal spread of Bamanakan as the lingua franca of most central and western parts of the country, as my survey results demonstrated for Kayes, Segou, and Mopti. At the national level, 48% of the population identified Bamanakan as their first language in the 1987 census (UNICEF 1989, 32). The common use of Bamanakan in the national media has evidently played a role in this spread (see Schulz 1997), which some, like my Ottawa-based Soninke teacher of Bamanakan, resent as “Bamanan imperialism.” This linguistic domination originates in the fact that French military administrators preferred to recruit Bamanan soldiers into the colonial army (who were stereotypically perceived as fierce and courageous but docile), with the result that Bamanakan became the common language for soldiers of the French Sudan (Klein 1998, 74), and later on for the colonial bureaucracy (Foltz 1965, 148). Since Bamanakan is intelligible for speakers of other Mande dialects in Mali, this spread could take place fairly easily.

¹⁰¹ Here note that Djata is guilty of homogenizing, grouping all “social scientists” together.

Internal migration (especially rural-urban) and the frequency of inter-ethnic marriages also contribute to national integration. Although always present as far as we know in Mali, these phenomena have accelerated in the last few decades to the point that one of the participants in the National Seminar for the Definition of Strategies to Eradicate FGM in Mali¹⁰² (henceforth National Seminar on FGM) held in Bamako in June 1997 (see Chapter 7 below), argued that it was pointless to discuss the excision practices of this or that ethnic group. This man, a high-profile medical researcher and politician, was responding to the remark by the presenter, Malian sociologist Assitan Diallo that, contrary to popular notions, a significant proportion of the population in the Songhay-dominated city of Gao (29%, she said) practices excision. He commented:¹⁰³

... when you say “people excise in Gao,” this is not interesting information, because knowing the mixing and mingling of people in Mali, it is obvious that there is no longer a single place in Mali where excision is not practiced by someone. Now the problem is to know whether the different Malian ethnic groups have the same behaviour. When we, at the School of Medicine, tried to establish relationships between certain pathologies and certain ethnic groups, we soon abandoned the project because we realized that in reality this did not make any sense. The degree of *métissage*¹⁰⁴ in Mali today is such that, someone whom we say is Fulbe because his patronym is Diallo, in reality we soon find out that he is mestizo. Take my children: today we say that they are Fulbe. In reality they are a mixture of Fulbe and Arma, and the Arma himself ... err herself is a mestizo, etc. Hence, the degree of *métissage* is such today that to want to establish a correlation between the different pathologies and the different Malian ethnic groups is a waste of time.

What is very interesting here is that the Doctor recognizes the contribution of the mother to her child’s ethnicity; a fact that might be observable in daily practice but that is not recognized in official ethnic ideologies – which explains the gender slip in his speech.

¹⁰² My translation of *Séminaire national pour la définition de stratégies d’éradication des MGF [mutilations génitales féminines] au Mali*. In the translation FGM stands for “female genital mutilation.”

¹⁰³ Transcription of a recording of the proceedings of the Seminar on June 17, 1997 (author’s files, tape #3). I am translating from the French.

¹⁰⁴ This French word is difficult to render into English, as the translator of Amselle’s *Logiques métisses*, Claudia Royal explained (Amselle, 1998 [1990], xix). My French-English dictionary translates *métissage* as “cross-breeding” (*Harrap’s New Shorter French and English Dictionary*, 1967, s. v. *métissage*), which sounds insulting when applied to human beings (it does not have that connotation in French). Royal chose to use the adjective “mestizo,” but here I want a noun so I am keeping the French word.

With the notable exceptions of rebellions in the north-western portion of the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s associated with a regional Tamacheq independence movement, some Songhay agitation in the last few years of colonialism, and recurrent local conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, Mali has been free of the kind of ethnic violence and enmity that has caused so much suffering in other parts of Africa. However, the fear of igniting ethnic tensions is not altogether absent from popular discourses, as exemplified in a Letter to the Editor in a Bamako newspaper following the second version of *Tabital Pulaaku*, a three-day “international festival of the Fulbe arts and culture” held in the capital city in 1998. This festival brought together participants from Mali, Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal and Nigeria to participate in conferences, panels, fashion shows, concerts and visits to Maasina (Traore 1998). This alarmed Mr. Idrissa Keita (1998), a reader of *Le Malien* in Bamako, who wrote, he said, to express what numerous others were whispering. In an opinion piece entitled “Towards a Malian fulocracy?” (my translation) he deplored this ethnic revival in the age of globalization, which he argued was contrary to the spirit of an emerging Malian national culture. He argued that the political party in power, ADEMA, is dominated by a Fulbe intelligentsia, and that while the President is Mande, his influential wife, historian Adame Ba Konaré, publicly stresses her “pharaonic” Fulbe identity.¹⁰⁵ Mr. Keita wished to see the annual Festival of Youth, organized under the First Republic to encourage (folkloric) multiculturalism (with a Mande tint, some would argue), revived, and the ‘Association of the Friends of the Fulbe Culture’ (my translation), which organizes *Tabital Pulaaku*, disbanded. In the eyes of Mr. Keita, the Fulbe association contravened Article 2 of the Malian Constitution which states that “any discrimination based on social origin, colour, language, race, religion and political opinion is prohibited” (Keita 1998, my translation).

¹⁰⁵ In her Dictionary of famous Malian women, Ba Konaré (1993, 470, my translation) writes that although the origins of the Fulbe are uncertain, “the most common hypothesis is that they came from the valley of the Nile.” Her biography on the back cover presents her as belonging to a family of Fulbe-Futanke (i.e.,

The Mande and Fulbe Cultural Spheres

In Mali, the Mande and Fulbe peoples have been in contact for centuries, exemplifying the well-documented ecological and economic relationships between predominantly pastoral and predominantly agricultural peoples (see Khazanov 1984). Historically in the region that is now Mali, relationships between the Mande and the Fulbe have oscillated between the three models proposed by Khazanov: (1) pastoral hegemony, with extraction of agricultural and labour surplus from the dominated sedentary populations; (2) peaceful cohabitation marked by fair economic exchanges within a neutral political system, and (3) sedentary/agricultural hegemony, with domination of and extraction of products and labour from the pastoral populations (as summarized in De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1997b, 17-19; Khazanov 1984).

The actual or symbolic association with, respectively, tilling the earth or raising cattle serves to mark the boundary between Mande and Fulbe peoples. This is also reflected in the fact that the various Mande groups are tied to a *place*, whether they actually live there or their constructed genealogies hark back to it: that of the "Mande country," an imprecisely delineated area usually meant to correspond to the territory of the old Mali empire (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1997b, 13), itself approximate and constantly contracting and expanding. On the contrary, Fulbe identity is linked to mobility, despite the fact that large groups of Fulbe have been sedentarized (particularly, urbanized) for centuries. In this regard, it is fit that the "origins" of the Fulbe peoples remain mysterious (with hypothesized regions of origin including Senegal, Egypt, and India), helping to maintain the image of nomadism.

Two other conceptual dichotomies serve to maintain the boundary between Mande and Fulbe: that of Pagan/Muslim and Black/White. Both were encouraged by French colonialism. French conquerors and later, administrators, maintained an ambivalent relationship with West

from the Futa Jallon in Senegal) scholars, noting that her great-grand-father, Mohamed Ali Thiam, was the author of the *Qacida en poular*, an epic poem relating the life and *jihad* of al-Hajj Umar Tall.

African Islam, on the one hand respecting it as a literate, monotheistic and urban culture, higher up on their racist evolutionary scheme; and on the other hand fighting powerful enemies leading self-described Muslim armies – El Hajj Umar, Samori, and later various colonial rebellion leaders – forcing them into tactical alliances with ‘pagan’ people such as the Bamanan, whom they considered ‘primitive’ but nevertheless admired for their military bravado. While recent scholarship has shown that even in the emblematic core of Mande paganism, the Mandinka hills, the quintessentially ‘pagan’ cult of the *kɔmɔ* (or “kòma”) is impregnated with Muslim concepts (Zobel 1996), the dichotomy persists not only in scholarly work but, more importantly, in the minds of local actors.

Delafosse, in *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, insisted upon classifying the Fulbe as a “white race.” along with the Moors and Tamacheq (Delafosse, 1972 [1912], vol. I, pp. 328, my translation), despite his recognition that

... the number of mestizos is naturally high amongst those different peoples, especially among the Moors and the Fulbe, not to mention the Harratins [slaves of the Moors], Bella and Rimaibe of purely negroid origin who live among them, with the result that all colours of skin exist, from the lightest to the darkest, and that numerous Moors, Tamacheq, Fulbe and those who call themselves such, are as black as the Bamanan or the Mossi.

The way to neutralize this contradiction intellectually and ideologically so that it did not endanger the *construct* of Fulbe as, if not quite White, at least non-Black, was to create the emblem of the *pure* Pulo. Nearly sixty years later, Malian anthropologist Bokar N’Diaye, who judging by his patronym is probably a Fulbe of Futanke (Senegalese) descent, repeated this myth in his book *Groupes ethniques au Mali* (1970a, 58). Even as serious a Fulbe specialist as Victor Azarya (1978, 15, emphasis mine) wrote twenty years ago that: “...the Fulbe have basically nonnegroid physical traits, though they vary widely in the *purity* of those traits.” Sadly, today among urban Malian women, lighter skin is more likely due to bleaching than to ethnic origin:

indeed, the practice of whitening the skin with toxic chemical creams has reached such proportions that it has become a public health concern.¹⁰⁶

Working in multi-ethnic urban settings, I could not limit my research to one particular ethnic group, but learning Bamanakan exposed me more to Mande cultural concepts. However, my own fieldwork experience was testimony to the degree of inter-penetration of Mande and Fulbe cultures, at least in Bamako: in Hippodrome, the Malian family with whom I had the most contact was headed by a Fulbe man married to a Mandinka woman; in Kalaban Koro, my host father, the Lieutenant, was Mandinka but his fourth wife with whom I lived called herself *Tukulor* (i.e., a descendent of the Senegalese Fulbe who came with al-Hajj Umar Tall); and at the office of CMPF, my colleagues were two Fulbe women, one Khassonke woman and one Bamanan man, while the president was a Pulo whose children were Mandinka.

In the sections below I draw from the ethnographic literature on various Fulbe and Mande groups, as well as from my own fieldwork experience to discuss structural hierarchies in the interrelated spheres of age (including seniority and birth order) and gender. This is not meant as an exhaustive analysis of such complex phenomena, but rather as a background to the study of the structures that both ensure the reproduction of the practice of excision and constrain responses to the campaign against it. In Part II of this dissertation, the empirical study of the campaign and of its impact will illuminate some of the mechanics of these hegemonic processes.

Gender

All Mande and Fulbe groups present in Mali are patriarchal and gerontocratic. All currently trace descent patrilineally and encourage virilocal residence after marriage. Polygyny is

¹⁰⁶ A newspaper article published in *Le Républicain* of Bamako (Camara 1997) warned Malian women about the danger of using such creams; seven months later, the same newspaper ran a story from *Agence France-Presse* about the release in Cotonou of a study by the Benin government stating that 80% of women in Benin bleach their skin, and noting that the problem exists in most West African countries (Mali Presse info 1998).

common amongst all groups: the DHS study of 1995-96 found that 44.3% of married Malian women were in a polygynous marriage, with this frequency increasing with age so that 58.6% of married women over 45 had at least one co-wife (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 89). Polygyny frequency was not desegregated by ethnic group in the DHS, but regional differences emerged, with polygyny being more common in the regions of Kayes (53,6% of all married women and 72% of those over 45) and Sikasso (50,6% and 64,9%, respectively), and least common in Bamako (34,2% and 52,7%). The DHS researchers also noted that it was more frequent in rural areas than in cities, and amongst lesser educated women (Ibid.).

Male jural dominance is evidenced in the fact that both in popular understandings and in the law, the head of a household is always male (technically, the eldest male of the lineage in charge). This is true even if a woman is the *de facto* leader of the compound: in such rare cases, such as the house of the two widows where I stayed in Kayes, an absent male relative will still be appointed as nominal head. Even the 1998 government census defined household heads (*dutigiw*) and within the household, family heads, in male terms (DNSI 1998a, iv).¹⁰⁷ This is not surprising, since Article 34 of the *Code du mariage et de la tutelle*, the law that regulates marriage and guardianship in Mali, clearly states that the husband is the head of the family (Ba Konaré 1993, 59). Similarly, the *Code*'s Article 32 echoes the normative understanding that the wife owes obedience to the husband: "... the husband must protect his wife; the wife must obey her husband" (Ibid., my translation). While obviously husbands differ in the degree that they actually exercise leadership and authority at home, I nevertheless witnessed this hierarchy being activated numerous times, as we will see in Part II. Male authority is sustained by ownership of resources (especially land) and it is also underwritten by the socially condoned use or threat of physical violence, as the high number of abused wives coming to CMPF testified.

¹⁰⁷ Here "household" refers to the (usually large) group of relatives, classificatory relatives and various dependents living within the same walled compound (*du*); "family" refers to the unit composed of a man, his wife or wives, and his biological and adopted children (i.e., *fādènya*, *fa* = father, *den* = child). A Mande word, *badènya*, refers to an even smaller unit, that of a mother (*ba*) and her children.

Paul Riesman (1974, 95, my translation, his emphasis), who worked with Fulbe people in neighbouring Burkina Faso, stressed that the husband's domination over his wife or wives "... must be carefully expressed in every public interaction...: the husband must *appear* to dominate his wife. Even if the wife actually has a stronger personality than her husband, this does not mean that the husband's authority is only a facade, since, in this society where such a large part of life is public, this facade possesses a reality than cannot be minimised." This I observed first hand in Safiatou's household where, even though she is a strong, income-earning, educated woman of status, perfectly able to run her own household during the six days that her husband is with his other wives, she performed a calculated public submission and deference during her two days on "cooking" duty and every other public interaction with her husband. Women usually willingly collaborate in this script, since having a "weak" husband is a source of mockery and negatively affects a woman's status.

This lack of access to a formal position of authority within the household and the lineage is reproduced at the level of local, traditional political units. Here I use the terms "local" and "traditional" in contradistinction with national state politics where, at least in the current Republic, women are relatively well represented (compared to Canada, for instance). While the remarkable number of female members of Parliament is in part the result of hard work on the part of dedicated Malian feminists, I am afraid that it has been allowed to happen because the majority of Malians do not value nor pay much attention to that level of politics, as I will argue with regards to state activities on excision in Chapter 8. I now turn to the work of Jane Turriffin (1987) and Paule Simard (1993) on Bamanan village politics, for it is this level of politics that has most impact on the lives of the majority of Malians, and because these structures are replicated in the city at the level of the neighborhood.

Bamanan Village Politics

Two feminist ethnographic studies of Bamanan village life show that family, lineage and village structures are organized hierarchically within a patriarchal and gerontocratic structure which limits women's political participation. Both Paule Simard (1993) and Jane Turrutin (1987) provide recent descriptions of structures of power within Bamanan villages. All villages in Mali are headed by a male chief – nominated by state administrators.¹⁰⁸ This nomination, in Simard's experience (1993, 55), usually represented an endorsement of the long-established village power elite. The chief is assisted by an all-male village council, a form of local government in which each household, in the village where Turrutin worked, was represented by its eldest male member (Turrutin 1987, 91). Another all-male village political structure is the Council of Elders, which advises the village council, and, in the village where Turrutin conducted fieldwork, collected taxes.

Parallel to this structure, Simard (1993, 56, 80-82) describes other pre-colonial forms of association, particularly the "*sékouton*." Men and women where she conducted research belonged to age-associations, *tɔnw* (sing. *tɔn*).¹⁰⁹ Male and female *tɔnw* are hierarchically organized with respect to age and gender. Simard (1993, 80, my translation) explains how the male and female "*sékoutonw*" are formed: "The village council designates a man to be in charge, the "*sékou*," who brings together the men of his age group to form the "*sékouton*." Women who belong to the same age group as these men form the women's "*sékouton*," the head of which is selected by the women themselves." The female "*sékouton*" comprises three successive age-

¹⁰⁸ The situation may have changed under the current Republic, especially with the establishment in the last few years of *communes* (municipalities) regrouping several villages and governed by an elected municipal council (the first municipal elections took place in 1999).

¹⁰⁹ Age-associations have been described in several monographs and other ethnographic works on Mande peoples; see for instance Cissé (1970, 227-32), Diarra (1992, 205-7), Meillassoux (1968, 50-2), Monteil (1977 [1924], 290-4), Pâques (1954, 61-2), and Pollet and Winter (1971, 261-5).

groups,¹¹⁰ with the eldest *tɔw* members exercising leadership and the second-eldest acting as ‘vice-presidents.’ The mandate of the female “*sékouton*” is mostly to organize the labour of younger women, and in this function it came to overlap or conflict with the committees of the National Union of Malian Women (UNFM, the women’s branch of the party) under the government of Moussa Traoré.

Both the male and female “*sékoutonw*” are also empowered to settle disputes. However, Simard (1993) found that this prerogative was in decline for the female *sékouton*, and that women tended to bring their disputes to the men. This change was not reciprocal, in that the female *sékouton* did not arbitrate male disputes, indicating a decline in the influence of the women’s age association. Turriffin (1987, 93, 115) came to a similar conclusion in the village where she worked in the early 1980s, where she found that the women’s age associations had atrophied. The result was that women “... now lack a formal institution through which they could promote their interests independently from men.... As a group, women are without an effective spokeswoman to act on their behalf with respect to internal and external village affairs” (Turriffin 1987, 93). This atrophy, combined with men’s greater literacy, and to the organization of state-sponsored male-only *Associations villageoises* (Villagers’ associations) to structure cotton production, had resulted in a recent decline in women’s formal political influence as a result of state “development.” Simard (1993, 81) however, found that in certain villages “*sékouton*” members doubled as UNFM committee members, and were able thereby to maintain a certain level of political influence through the appropriation of a state-designed organization.

Turriffin (1987) concluded that at the village level, women were excluded from the jural-political domain, but did not necessarily want to participate in it. The politics in which they were interested were sexual or gender politics. Turriffin used the concept of a women’s “sub-culture”

¹¹⁰ This part of Simard’s description is not clear: presumably the women of the same age-group as the male leader selected by the village council proceed to recruit the two age-groups (*tɔw*) immediately below them to join them in the “*sékouton*.”

to analyze the political solidarity that developed among women in relation to their common experience of subordination to men. Women's main political strategy, used to negotiate spaces of autonomy and mediate their status vis-à-vis men was to stress their role and power as mothers.

Motherhood and Virilocal Residence

Motherhood is women's central role in Mali and their main source of power and self-actualization, while the combination of patrilineality and virilocal residence are mechanisms of oppression – two facts generally stressed by authors looking at the status of Mande and Fulbe women. In her study of the then nomadic Fulbe *WoDaaBe* of neighbouring Niger, Marguerite Dupire (1963,72) went as far as to say that "... having a child is what gives a married woman her purpose in life." Dupire (1963, 61-3) explains that the first pregnancy marked an important change in status for a Fulbe *WoDaaBe* woman: until her first pregnancy, the young bride spent a 'probation' period working for her mother-in-law, during which she was not considered fully adult. In the middle of her first pregnancy, she left her affines' camp for her father's, where she stayed with her child for two or three years. After this period, she returned triumphantly to her affines' household with her child to establish her own household. It is only then that she became a 'woman' in the full sense of the term.

In rural subsistence agricultural societies the high value placed on children is easily understood. Anthropologist Katherine A. Dettwyler (1994, 78) put it plainly: "In Mali, a man's success and status are measured by the number of children he has. A man with no children is pitied or scorned, but a man with several wives and many children is powerful indeed, because he controls the lives and loyalties of many people." Riesman (1974, 94, my translation) specified, with regards to the Fulbe: "... it is having a large number of children that proves a man's virility and constitutes his strength," since "the strength of a man is manifested by the number of

dependents that he has.” The number of sons is especially important for a man’s status. The fact that men are dependent on women for reproduction provides Malian women with significant, albeit informal, power. As Jane Turrittin (1987, 29) remarked, “Bambara [in fact all Malian] women value their identity as mothers more than any other social identity, and one of the most important assets they have in the process of bargaining with men is their reproductive labor power.” This emphasis on fertility explains the tragedy of childless women, poignantly expressed by the West African novelist Ahmadou Kourouma (1970). It also explains the Mande norms of beauty that value the outwards signs of female fertility: large breasts, wide hips and overall healthy roundness.¹¹¹

The fact that in patrilineal and virilocal African populations, wives are often accused of witchcraft is linked to their being strangers in the community in which they live, a point that is stressed by all anthropologists who have paid attention to gender in Mali. In her discussion of the Bamanan construction of gender, Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1989) explained that because of virilocal residence, women, and particularly young women, are seen as a potentially divisive force within the community. She wrote (1989, 178-9): “The construct of ‘young woman’ is fraught with ambiguity and tension: she is an outsider who must prove her commitment to the kin group and she potentially threatens household unity.” The fact that wives are strangers ultimately loyal to their own brothers is articulated by rural Bamanan men themselves, according to Grosz-Ngaté, and is a common theme in Mande mythology, as we have seen. It is also re-created in daily practice, for instance in the fact that women are paid in millet by the patrilineal head of the household for their work in the lineage’s fields, while junior men do not receive such payment, but are fed by their wives or mothers (Grosz-Ngaté 1989, 176-7). While women as strangers are thought to pursue their own self-interest, men are associated with the communal: their reputation is tied to that of the kin group, and they cultivate for the extended household. For junior men to

¹¹¹ While these norms are current enough in Bamako for my Malian friends to have urged me to eat more so that I could be fat for my fiancé’s arrival, young elite women (for instance post-secondary students) are

promote their personal interests causes serious friction with their elders and great shame. In this way, "... patrilineal descent and male gender have reinforced each other through an identification with the patrimony and stability of land and crops, [and] the collectivity..." (Grosz-Ngaté 1989, 180).

Among the nomadic Fulbe with whom Dupire (1963) worked, marriage represented a double break for young women. First, they had to leave their natal family, unless the ideal marriage pattern of paternal parallel cousins living in the same community was followed (Dupire 1963, 65-6). In the family of her husband, "the young wife is no more than a stranger ... and entirely dependent on them [her affines]" (Dupire 1963, 61-2). Second, it also brought an end to the period of pre-marital sexual freedom which girls enjoyed. According to Dupire (1963, 58), writing about 1950 nomadic WoDaaBe Fulbe society, "... no value is attached to virginity, and it is an understood thing that girls will have plenty of experience before marriage." A much more recent article by Danièle Kintz (1990) on another group of Fulbe pastoralists in neighbouring Burkina Faso shows that married women have a large degree of control over their sexuality, being able to divorce and take lovers.

For Dupire (1963), women in WoDaaBe society were also a divisive force through their practice of secondary marriages¹¹². These marriages were very frequent, and generally initiated by a woman after the break-up of her first (arranged) marriage to allow her to marry a man of her own choosing. From the example of secondary marriages, Dupire (1963, 69) concluded that "women play a leading part in this struggle for the liberty of the individual, and their desire for independence constantly threatens the socio-political equilibrium of the society."

Riesman (1974, 65), argued that marriage itself (no matter whether secondary or not), was perceived by Fulbe as a threat to agnatic unity. For a man to fall in love with his wife,

starting to adopt the Western beauty ideal of thinness.

¹¹² Chantal Rondeau (1994, 95, 320) discusses the institution of secondary marriage (or marriage by abduction) in rural Senufo society, where such marriages are generally initiated by women who have divorced or refused the husband selected by the elders.

especially if their marriage was fertile, might cause him to split from the lineage to form a nuclear household – the ultimate threat to patrilineal power. Consequently Riesman argued that the numerous cultural norms and practices that segregated male and female activities were designed to make sure that husbands and wives spent as little time together as possible. Turriffin (1987) was equally impressed with the sexual segregation in the Bamanan village where she worked, actualized through not only a sexual division of labour but also the segregation of entertainment by gender. To a lesser extent this segregation exists in Bamako, where while male and female colleagues often work together, husbands and wives generally avoid appearing together in public and lead quite separate social lives. At mosque, and during rites of passage such as name-giving ceremonies, marriages and funerals, male and female guests for the most part either participate at different times or in different spaces.

As noted by Turriffin (1987), Riesman (1974, 91), and others, gender segregation allows women spaces of autonomy. It circumscribes men's power, as Riesman explains, since a man cannot ask his wife to perform "men's work" – nor can he, as Turriffin stressed, enter physical or social spaces designated as female. Similarly, a husband has obligations towards his wife and children, first and foremost to feed and house them, and women know they can legitimately complain and potentially obtain redress if their husband does not fulfill these responsibilities, as many of them did in the Bamako office of CPMF.¹¹³ Another important aspect of the parallel lives of wives and husbands is that Mande women have control over their personal incomes. In the Mande village, this means usufruct rights and reserved days to work on their own garden plots and the freedom to dispose of the produce; in the city, it means that salaried women and those who earn money through trading or other businesses are under no obligation to share this income with their husbands – nor to inform them of how much they earn, as one of my Bamako informants complained when I asked him about his wife's job! Preserving these spaces of

¹¹³ Types of redress would vary. Generally, women were asking for husbands to resume economic contributions to the household; divorce was definitively seen as a last recourse.

autonomy is important for women and explains why Malian feminists, even the most Westernized, do not advocate the eradication of the sexual division of labour.

At this point, the reader must have noticed the numerous references to age in this material on gender. This indicates how inextricably these two systems of social hierarchy are linked in Mande and Fulbe cultural spheres. Marriage is an example of how they are combined in the daily lives of Malian men and women, since the authority of the husband over his wife is not only based on gender hierarchy but also on age. Indeed, marriages in Mali are generally arranged between an older man and a much younger woman: the median age at first marriage in 1995-96 was 16 years for women and 25.8 years for men, and a husband was on average eleven years older than his wife or wives (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 91-2). In the following section we look at this axis of power more closely.

Age, Seniority and Birth Order

In his monograph on the Mandinka of the Kita region of Mali, Diango Cissé (1970, 104-5) explains that the principle of seniority according to age is a function of patrilineal descent, as it is on this principle that access to positions of leadership in the patrilineage is determined. Cissé explains: "The social organization is based on the adoption of the collateral line to determine succession. Amongst a group of relatives, it is always the eldest that inherits headship. Power goes from one brother to the next in age, and not necessarily from father to son" (Ibid., 105, my translation). We also saw in Chapter 2 that the principle of primogeniture operated in the Diina among the Maasina Fulbe, a system different from adelphic succession but also based on age. But birth order is not only pertinent in determining succession to positions of authority: it is expressed and experienced daily, even today in Bamako, through language and mundane day-to-day interactions amongst siblings, cousins and classificatory siblings of both sexes.

As a matter of fact, when one talks about or addresses one's siblings (biological and classificatory) in Bamanakan, one always specifies whether the sibling is older or younger than ego. So for instance one's younger sister is *dɔgɔmuso* (*dɔgɔ* = younger, junior, *muso* = woman, female), one's younger brother is *dɔgɔkɛ* (*kɛ* = man, male), one's older sister is *kɔɔmuso* (*kɔɔ* = older, elder) and one's older brother is *kɔɔkɛ*. *Kɔɔ* is also used as a term of respect, for instance in addressing an older colleague at work. Riesman (1974, 44) reports the same linguistic phenomenon in Fulfulde. For him, age and generation are fundamental organizing principles in Fulbe society. He insists: "In fact, one of the ideas that is the most strongly rooted in Fulbe thinking is the fact that seniority justifies the power that one has over somebody else, the right to give orders to someone, and this is true not only in the political sphere but also within the family" (Ibid., my translation).

The most poignant example of the authority of older siblings over younger ones I encountered during my fieldwork was the case of a woman in her forties whom I met at the NGO Seminar on FGM in Bamako in June 1997. This woman worked in the field of reproductive health in a project funded by the United Nations, and part of her mandate was to educate the population on the harmfulness of excision. During a break at the seminar, she told me that since she had started this job her *kɔɔmuso* gave birth to a baby girl – her twelfth pregnancy, she specified. She tried everything to convince her sister not to have the girl excised, but she was not successful. The sister arranged for the excision, but she was not able to find anybody to help hold the girl down for the circumciser, so the woman telling me the story had to do it herself. I asked her: "You mean, because she is your older sister you could not refuse?" She acquiesced. This woman was very pessimistic about the possibility of "eradicating" excision in Mali in the short term, as the seminar leaders advocated.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Notes on *Séminaire Djoliba*, 26 June 1997, p. 80, author's files.

Throughout my stay in Mali I observed more mundane uses of older sibling's power through the practice of getting younger siblings – or even, younger neighbors – to run one's errands. Typically on my street in Hippodrome, a high school or college student would be sitting around with a few friends, and would decide to make tea. He or she would then authoritatively call the nearest child, usually not using the child's name but only the generic “*den!*” (“child!”). The well-behaved child, at this point, had immediately to drop what she or he was doing, and without a word rush to the side of his or her *kɔɔ* to be given instructions – typically, the child would be given some money and told to go to the store to purchase enough tea, sugar and charcoal for one teapot. The obedient child might be rewarded by being told to keep the change, but if a child dared to disobey (which occurred extremely rarely), it was the prerogative of the teenager or young adult to strike her or him.

While brothers – and, separately, sisters – in a patrilineage are ranked according to birth order, wives are instead ranked according to ‘social age;’ that is, their rank depends on their husband's rank as well as on their respective time of entry as wives into the patrilineage, rather than on their biological age (Grosz-Ngaté 1989, 176). The same logic is repeated within a particular household of brothers, and within a man's individual family, where the first wife has some prerogatives and is publicly addressed as *kɔɔmuso* by the second and subsequent wives. Lest the first wife become complacent and too powerful in the household, however, this particular hierarchy is balanced by the construct of the *baramuso*. As we saw in the section on Samori in Chapter 2, the *baramuso* is the favorite wife of a polygynous man, and she is publicly (although somewhat controversially) recognized as such. Without accusing polygynous Malian men of Machiavellian plotting – their preference, after all, may be based on physical attraction, fondness, or friendship rather than calculation – this institution does serve to divide-and-rule and to prevent what must be every polygynous man's fear: the possibility that his wives unite and rebel against him. Other personal characteristics and achievements of wives contribute to the social

mathematics of their ranking: their industriousness, their beauty, their nobility, their piousness, their wisdom, their loyalty, their knowledge and, first and foremost, their fertility – especially in providing sons for the patrilineage.

If this kind of relationship exists between members of the same generation ranked according to age, it is all the more present between members of different generations. In Mali, everyone of ego's parents' generation should be addressed as *fa* (father) or *ba* (mother) – or another appropriate term marking the generational distance (such as “*tantie*” [‘aunty’] in Malian French) – and is owed respect and obedience, as we already noted in the section on relationships between patrons and staff in women's associations in Chapter 2. People of the grand-parents' generation are considered elders and are normally addressed with a specific term of respect, *mūsòkɔɔba* (*ba* = superlative) for women and *cɛkɔɔba* for men. Elders receive quasi-religious respect for, even though their physical or even intellectual capacities may be diminished, this is not seen as a weakness, as their closeness to death brings them near (and possibly, in contact with) the world of the venerated and powerful deceased ancestors – the world of the spirits.¹¹⁵ To various degrees depending on their gender, *siya* and personal initiative and capacity, they are also acknowledged as experts on various types of oral knowledge – it was a Malian, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, who pronounced the famous “when an elder dies in Africa, it is a whole library that burns.” It is also normally after one's children have themselves married and produced children that men and women have enough free time to study Islam, perform daily prayers and, financial situation permitting, perform the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) – another source of respect and prestige. Finally, as we will see with regards to decision-making regarding excision, elders' decisions must be respected (or appear to be respected), otherwise the younger challenger risks social opprobrium, maledictions (those are taken extremely seriously), or even exile. There is also a form of positive reinforcement at work, in the sense that parents and elders are those who bestow

potent benedictions upon their obedient and respectful juniors, and juniors hope to become respected elders one day.

In the past, it is reported by informants and in the literature that fathers had absolute rights over their children, and this relationship would endure throughout one's lifetime. Nowadays, the elders complain, one's children and particularly one's sons once they reach adulthood are becoming increasingly rebellious. In this regard, a comment given to Martin Klein by one of his older Fulbe informants in Maasina is instructive. The man said: "The breakdown of slavery leads to the breakdown of the society. Even your child will not respect you any more. Today, you cannot choose a wife for your son. When the law says no one can have a slave, this leads to no one owning his own son" (Klein 1998, 244). This statement leads us to consider another fundamental axis of power in Fulbe and Mande societies, that of the caste system.

Caste Systems

"Nous sommes une société esclavagiste."
(We are a society based on slavery.)
Malian anthropologist Younoussa Touré, 1997¹¹⁶

Caste systems are currently found amongst over fifteen West African peoples, including the great majority of groups present in Mali: Mande groups as well as Dogon, Songhay, Senufo, and most Fulbe and Tamacheq groups (Tamari 1991, 221). Bokar N'Diaye (1995 [1970]) provides what has become the canonical description of the Mande pattern of social organization, presented as a three-tiered ranked caste system with strict marriage rules. One's position in the system is normally inherited through one's father, and the three larger groupings are, in descending order of social status:

¹¹⁵ This belief is held by several Malian Muslims, despite Islam's contradictory teachings, of which they may or may not be aware. In fact, some express beliefs in a type of reincarnation.

- The *hɔɔnw*, usually translated as ‘noble’ or ‘free people.’ This group includes not only ruling lineages but also farmers, traders, Muslim religious leaders, and most warriors – in fact, since the abolition of slavery the great majority of the population claims *hɔɔn* identity.
- The *nyamakalaw*. These are endogamous socio-professional lineages of artisans and artists, including principally the *nɔmuw* (potters and blacksmiths), the *jɛliw* (praise-singers), and the *garankew* (amongst whom the men are leather-workers and the women tattoo lips and gums and dye cloth). Generally they were (and some still are) clients of *hɔɔn* families. *Nyamakalaw* are free and were allowed to possess slaves, but they could not hold political office nor could *nyamakala* men marry *hɔɔn* women.¹¹⁷
- The slaves, *jɔnw* and *wolosow*. The *jɔnw*, or captives, were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, having lost their patronym and humanity. They were considered chattel and assigned the most onerous tasks. *Wolosow* were second-generation slaves, adopted, to a certain extent, in their master’s family, but not free. Slave men could only marry slave women, however slave women could be married by *nyamakalaw* or *hɔɔnw* men.

Even though slavery was gradually abolished during colonization, this social division of society is still meaningful in Mali today, as will become clear with regards to excision. Recent anthropological work, however, has shown the model to be more fluid than what had become codified in texts (see Conrad and Frank 1995a).

¹¹⁶ Statement by Dr. Touré during the discussion following the presentation of the findings of the study he conducted on excision with Dr. Yaouaga Félix Koné for the Centre Djoliba in Bamako. Source: author’s recording of the session, *Séminaire du Centre Djoliba*, 24 June 1997, Bamako.

¹¹⁷ A recent article by Salif Sangaré (1998) in the newspaper *Le Soir de Bamako*, entitled “Pourquoi Refuse-t-on le Mariage avec les Griots?” (Why Do People Refuse Marriage with *Jɛliw*?) shows how current this prescription is, even if it has no legal status.

An almost exact replica of this system of stratification exists among the Fulbe of the region. Indeed, in their introduction to the collection they edited on the dialectical relationships between Mande and Fulbe populations, Mirjam De Bruijn and Han Van Dijk (1997b, 15, my translation) argue that:

It is precisely these political hierarchies, that is, the model of nobles, vassals and slaves that unite the Mande and Fulbe worlds.... This means that, while Mande and Fulbe have been and remain distinct and even antagonistic or even hostile, they are at the same time inseparable. In practice, they were and remain for instance co-managers of rural space and resources....

Bernard Gardi (1989), who conducted dissertation research with artisans and artists in Mopti, has summarized the caste system amongst Maasina Fulbe. Recognized as nobles (*rimBe*, sing. *dimo*) are the Fulbe proper, who are the most numerous of all groups, and the *jaawamBe* (sing. *jaawando*), a small minority group. N'Diaye (1995, 48-52) describes the *jaawamBe*'s traditional occupations as those of valued courtiers, cattle-owners and long-distance traders; *jaawamBe* women, he reports, looked after the animals for years while their husbands were away trading.¹¹⁸ While certainly not all Fulbe or *jaawamBe* are wealthy – far from it, considering the impact of the droughts of the last few decades and the general underdevelopment of Mali – they still retain authority, their power being based primarily on resource ownership.

The former slaves and serfs of the Fulbe and *jaawamBe* are the *riimaayBe* and the *maccuBe*.¹¹⁹ The group that is equivalent to the Mande *nyamakalaw* are the *nyeenyBe*, who represent, in Gardi's estimate, only 5 to 8% of the local population. They are subdivided into five groups with the following gender-specific occupations:

¹¹⁸ The head of the household that hosted me in Segou was a *jaawando*, who was active in politics and trade, and also owned cattle. His herd of cattle however, was in the care of client male shepherds, not of his wife – who, in any case, was Mande.

¹¹⁹ According to Riesman (1974,2) *riimaayBe* (sing. *diimaajo*) = descendants of captives; *maccuBe* (sing. *maccuDo*) = captive.

Table 8: Malian Fulbe *nyeenyBe* (artists and craftspeople)
sources: primarily Gardi (1989); also N'Diaye (1995), and my fieldwork

Plural	singular	men's occupations	women's occupations
<i>maabuuBe</i>	<i>maabo</i>	weavers	potters, cloth dyers, excisers
<i>wayluBe</i>	<i>baylo</i>	blacksmiths, jewelers, circumcisers? (not clear)	not specified
<i>sakkeeBe</i>	<i>sakke</i>	leatherworkers	not specified in the literature; mentioned as excisers by one informant in Mopti
<i>LawBe</i>	<i>labbo</i>	woodworkers	potters, incense-makers
<i>wammbaaBe</i>	<i>bammbaaDo</i>	praise-singers, genealogists, musicians	musicians (drummers)

Despite the fact that certain clans own the rights to specific technological knowledge, it is important to realize that to be a *nyeenyo* (or a *nyamakala*) is not a profession but a social condition. In other words, one remains *nyeenyo* (or *nyamakala*) whether or not one practices the profession of her/his birthright. Like Mande *nyamakalaw*, *nyeenyBe* may request and receive gifts from the nobles. I personally experienced this behaviour extremely often in Mali, as white foreigners, despite their common transgressions of the 'noble' code of behaviour, are considered honorific nobles for begging purposes, and are perceived to be particular good sources of presents.

Gift-giving – aristocratic largesse – is one of the ways in which 'nobleness' is performed and sustained; and begging is the ultimate antithetical behaviour, performed by people who have 'no shame.' In the next section I describe the similar ideological constructions of honour and shame that sustain the Mande and Fulbe caste systems, paying more attention to the moral and behaviour code that I learned in the field, *hɔɔnya*.

'Nobleness'

The ideal Fulbe noble behaviour has perhaps most famously been described by Paul Riesman (1974), who reported that it was called "*pulaaku*." Riesman (1974, 128-33), who

worked among the semi-nomadic Jelgoobe Fulbe of Burkina Faso, discussed the public behaviours that nobles valued. These behaviours are based on a strict discipline of the body, or self-mastery, with stoicism being highly valued in both men and women: “one should not express in public any discomfort, whether it be physical or emotional pain, or a need like hunger, thirst, or the need to defecate; it is also forbidden to fart” (Ibid., 128, my translation). Proper noble behaviour also involves respecting taboos such as against pronouncing the name of one’s spouse (so as not to show intimacy), and the various rules that regulate who can eat with whom (eating is gender-segregated, and various other restrictions apply, such as generation). Failure or inability to respect these taboos and *pulaaku* in general creates a strong sense of ‘shame.’ *Pulaaku* also importantly involves controlling speech: silence is valued. When speaking is required, one should say as little as possible, speaking softly, unless one is with one’s peers or in certain situations where the rules are relaxed. The ideal Pulo is one who is in control of her or his body, speech and emotions. In this regard I will never forget the profound disdain with which the Fulbe president of CMPF told me that an American woman she was collaborating with in New York broke down in public under stress. Her terse words – “*Elle a pleuré.*” (She cried.) – do not render the disgust that her eyes, face and body language expressed so clearly.

Anneke Breedveld and Mirjam De Bruijn (1996) have recently challenged this interpretation of the word “*pulaaku.*” arguing that in Mali, *pulaaku* does not refer to a Fulbe behavioural or moral code but only to the other sense of the word reported by Riesman, that of the community of the Fulbe.¹²⁰ This is also how anthropologist Bernard Gardi (1989) and historian Bintou Sanankoua (1990), who both worked in the Mopti region, use the word. Breedveld and De Bruijn (1996, 807-810) instead describe the moral code of the Fulbe of the Hayre, a central region in Mali, using three key components: *ndimu* (nobility), *yaage* (shame, reserve) and *juulde* (piety). Nobility is based on descent, and is protected through endogamy. It

¹²⁰ For instance Riesman (1974, 128) wrote: “*La pulaaku étant à la fois les hommes [in the outdated sense of ‘human beings’] et leur manière d’être.....*”

is also expressed through a division of labour between nobles and descendants of slaves. as also noted by Sanankoua (1990, p. 159, n.28, my translation) who explains: “The noble Pulo does not work with his hands. It is the *riimaayBe* who perform for him all farming, fishing and construction work. All work outside of herding and Islam is considered degrading and humiliating.”

While Sanankoua’s emblematic Pulo is male only, Breedveld and De Bruijn (1996, 809) note that this division of labour, still meaningful today, is particularly marked amongst women. They report that in the Hayre, noble Fulbe women’s work is centered on dairy products, and that most of them refuse to farm the land; however ex-slave women consider that cultivating millet is honourable – thereby adopting a Mande definition of honourable work. Nobility is also expressed through Islam in the region discussed by Breedveld and De Bruijn, and here ex-slaves are staking a claim to honour by publicly performing prayers and sending their children to Qur’anic schools, from which they were once barred (see also Klein 1998). Finally, the two authors describe taboos regulating who can eat with whom very similar to those described by Riesman above, and note that for someone to be in presence of another, who is to them taboo (for instance, for a married couple to be seen together in public) initiates a feeling of shame, *yaage*. The authors note that ‘noble’ Fulbe said that they have more *yaage* than slaves – which is also an essential aspect of the Mande caste ideology.

There are striking similarities between the Fulbe and Mande expressions of honourable behaviour. In fact, Breedveld and De Bruijn (1996, 811) note that the word *yaage* (shame) is borrowed from the Soninke language, which belongs to the Mande group. They close their article by suggesting that if the word “*pulaaku*” does not denote the particular ideal behaviour of the Fulbe in Mali, it is perhaps because that behaviour is not an ethnic boundary marker, but rather a regional pattern applicable to all groups who have similar systems of social stratification (Ibid., 110-1). Amselle came to a similar conclusion after decades of research in Mali. Citing Dupire (1981) on *pulaaku* – she highlighted the values of discretion or reserve, courage, intelligence, and

resignation – Amselle (1998 [1990], 44) argued that “these values characterize all aristocratic West African societies, whether sedentary or nomadic. They could in no way genuinely define anything unique to the Fulani.” I would point out that the main, current difference¹²¹ consists in what is characterized as the emblematic honourable work for the group: pastoralism for the Fulbe, millet farming for the agriculturist Mande, and fishing for the Bozo and Somono.

In the Mande cultural sphere, Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1989, 170) has nicely expressed how Bamanan personhood is anchored in the system of social hierarchy:

The social superiority of the Bamanan noble is sustained by a recognizable quality of demeanor (*hòrònya*) which has not lost its force in spite of the elimination of slavery. A highly developed sense of shame (*maloya*) is inseparable from nobleness, which means that a noble must refrain from any conduct that would bring shame. This sense of shame guides action in all domains of social life from proper bodily position to speech, interpersonal relations, and productive activity. A noble is by definition a person who is discreet, generous, honest, does not laugh or talk loudly, and always acts in a dignified manner. ... Slaves or their descendants ... are said to have no shame.

Grosz-Ngaté argues convincingly that this capacity for shame serves to differentiate men from women, since men are said to have a greater capacity for shame than women. In the field, I was not able to confirm this interpretation, but it was clear that the capacity for shame served to distinguish *hòrònya* from *nyamakalaw* and *jònw* (and, I would add, from *tùbàbuw*, the Westerners, generally seen as depraved). The question “Aren’t you ashamed?” was also how I knew that I had broken one of the rules of *hòrònya* in my re-socialization.

When I was only a neighbour to her, my often dishonourable *tùbàbu* behaviour was no doubt a source of entertainment for my friend Mariam. But when she became my assistant and the one to introduce me into hundreds of households for the purposes of conducting the evaluation survey for CMPF, she became my teacher: there was no way that

¹²¹ As seen in the history section in Chapter 2, at different periods in certain regions, the practice of Islam distinguished Fulbe from Mande, but this marker is no longer active, as the near totality of the population is

she was going to let my infractions of *hɔɔnya* stain her 'name' (her reputation). I would be hard pressed to define what she (and others such as my co-workers) taught me as either a Mande or a Fulbe code of behaviour – I would argue that it was a Malian code. She herself called it “*hɔɔnya*,” but this could be because although she was Fulbe according to the patrilineal rules of descent, she did not speak Fulfulde and, as a woman, spent a lot more time with her Mandinka mother than with her father. While it is difficult to provide an exhaustive list of the range of behaviours that were considered appropriate (and I naturally noticed more the ones that were different from Canadian rules of etiquette and appropriate styles of demeanour), the code included stoicism, reserve, modesty, courage, pride, control of speech and emotions, respect for those older than oneself (and most especially for senior men), distance from and command of one's social juniors, honesty, resignation to Allah's will, disdain for manual labour, and (apparent, public) lack of interest in sex.

While this would probably surprise Malians from Mariam's age group, who generally have not known slavery, the last item above clearly reveals the architecture of *hɔɔnya* ideology, which in both the Mande and Fulbe cultural spheres is constructed in relationship to an Other: the slave, the one who has, quite literally, lost her or his 'name' (in this case, his/her patronym). Indeed, as we will see in the next section, the public expression of sexuality is clearly linked to the dishonourable behaviour associated with slaves – a fact which plays an important role in the difficulties that Malian feminists face in culturally translating the international discourse on “female genital mutilation,” as we will see in Chapter 7.

Slaves¹²²

The origin of slavery in West Africa is not known; however, the area that was to become the French Sudan was a source of slaves to the Mediterranean world as early as the beginning of the first millennium. When the Portuguese reached Senegambia in the fifteenth century, they found that slavery was well established on the coast and in the medieval empires in the interior, and that slaves were available for sale. While most African slaves originated as prisoners of war, some were enslaved as a penalty for a criminal offense, while others were sold or pawned as children (Klein 1998, 4).

Generally in the area that is now Mali, a linguistic and social distinction was made between those enslaved in their own lifetime (in Bamanakan *jɔn*, pl. *jɔnw*), and those born in slavery (in Bamanakan *wolosow*, pl. *wolosow*).¹²³ Slaves recently acquired by African masters were treated more harshly than *wolosow*, and seasoned into accepting their new condition: re-named, they "... were given the most onerous tasks, had no land of their own, worked under direct supervision, and were watched more carefully," and often "... required to sleep in irons..." (Klein 1998, 5). Because *jɔnw* were forced to walk to areas far from their point of capture in order to reduce the likelihood of escape (the most common form of resistance), they often found themselves in places where they did not know the language. Their social location as foreigners outside of kin circles created their inhumanity. By contrast, their children, born and raised in the community, spoke the master's language and had ties to his compound or in his slave village. While many report that *wolosow* could not be sold, Klein (1998, 6) disagrees: "A slave born in the community was less likely to be sold than a newcomer, but the [French] Sudan suffered from

¹²² I am greatly indebted to the work of Martin Klein (1998) for the information on which this section is based.

¹²³ To recall, in Fulfulde, newly captured were *maccuBe* (sing. *maccuDo*), while those born in slavery were *riimaayBe* (sing. *diimaajo*).

recurrent wars and famines, during which people sold or pawned their own children. No one was completely secure.”

Usually *wolosow* were given land, and farmed partly for the master and partly for themselves. From their portion of the harvest slaves could accumulate property, even buy slaves or their own freedom, but Klein (1998, 7) stresses that “... the possibilities of accumulation were limited by their obligations, by the fortunes of weather, and by disease and accident.” While most slaves farmed, they also performed other work such as weaving in some societies, and reproductive work in the households of the masters. There were also slave soldiers, such as the Bamanan *ɓɓɓɓɓɓ*. According to Klein, the warriors were “the most privileged slaves in West Africa” who often also farmed, but “...preferred to live off booty or off the labour of their wives, who were often originally booty” (1998, 8).

During the Atlantic slave trade, while captured women and children were generally kept on the African continent, the majority of male prisoners were sold to the Atlantic slave traders (Klein 1998, 4). The demand for slaves for American, Mediterranean, and African production systems based on slavery contributed to the development of African military and commercial elites. The demand for slaves for the sugar plantations in the West Indies raised slave prices, contributing to “...the appearance of a series of military states, which used war and raiding to supply larger and larger numbers of slaves” (Klein 1998, 3).

Analytically, one can distinguish between high and low density systems of slavery (Klein 1998, 4). In high-density systems, such as those of the Tamacheq and of several Fulbe groups, slaves made up a large part of the population, sometimes the majority. They lived in separate villages, had limited face-to-face relations with their masters, and could rarely escape slave status. Work was considered the slave’s lot and was supervised by masters. Since the children of slaves retained slave status, “... slavery reproduced itself..., but not at high enough rate to provide labor

for growth” (Klein 1998, 4). Expansion thus required continued war-making and raiding to take prisoners.

At the other end of this analytical continuum of African slavery in West Africa, we find low density systems, present in some decentralized societies as well as in some farming communities within a state’s fiefdom. In these systems, the slaves worked and ate with their masters, living in the same household. They participated in the masters’ culture, and assimilation was fairly rapid, usually within one to three generations. Within such systems, “...slavery did not reproduce itself because offspring were integrated into kinship systems” (Klein 1998,4). Probably the most widespread form of integration took place through a woman’s womb: a slave woman’s child fathered by her master was free on birth – provided that he recognized being the genitor (Klein 1998, 13).

It is mostly this gradual process of incorporation in low-density systems of African slavery that has led some authors to present it as fairly benign. Another aspect of the argument focuses on the structural similarities between slavery and other hierarchical relationships involving “rights in persons” such as marriage, fatherhood, adoption, age and birth order, and the relationship between *hɔrɔnw* and *nyamakalaw*. For Klein (1998, 14), (West) African slavery was not benign, yet it did not rely exclusively on violence: it “... combined coercion, rewards and hegemonic ideology.” He points out that “... stability and productivity depended on slaves accepting and working within the system Slaves were given their own plots because it was the most efficient way to feed them and were allowed autonomy because they were more productive when working on their own” (Klein 1998, 14). Slaves were forced to embody and express submission through linguistic, behavioural, nutritional and sartorial codes. There are obvious parallels here with the Mande and Fulbe age and gender systems. All these relationships involved – and still involve, to a lesser degree – socially sanctioned physical violence exercised by seniors and socially enforced submission for juniors.

The Gradual Elimination of Slavery

From the 1848 French law abolishing slavery to the great West African slave exodus half a century later, Klein (1998) paints a history of reluctant steps taken by a local colonial administration caught between the internal logic of conquest and colonization that used slavery, and abolitionist demands from Paris. Not only did most of the French colonialists in the Sudan condone slavery among their allies, they themselves bought or otherwise recruited slaves to staff their armies, build their infrastructure, and satisfy their domestic and sexual needs and desires. Crucial to this balance was the colonialists' ability to deceive: "It was desirable that European public opinion not be informed about the real situation in the colonies and, in most cases, that metropolitan authorities be equally uninformed" (Klein 1998, 36).

In 1905, the President of the French Republic proclaimed new legislation on slavery, the "Comprehensive Slavery Decree" (Klein 1998, 134). While this decree had more teeth than earlier legislation and abolished enslavement and the sale, gift or exchange of persons, Klein (1998, 136) argues that it did not abolish slavery as an institution. For instance, Governor General Roume, a proponent of the new legislation, had "... insisted that it explicitly exclude the authority of husbands over wives and of fathers and guardians over minor children and that there be no prohibition against 'certain individuals remaining voluntarily in the service of other natives'" (Klein 1998, 136). (By that time many Africans passed female slaves as 'wives'.) Roume and other administrators were afraid of a mass movement which would greatly disrupt – if not interrupt – production, and create chaos. All had underestimated the slaves who, in Klein's evocative phrase, took the issue into their own feet (Klein 1998, 140).

Proving that "slavery cannot exist without a structure of law and coercive machinery to back up the masters," up to 900,000 slaves left their masters between 1905 and 1913 in the French Sudan, Guinea and Senegal (Klein 1998, 140, 173). The exodus started at Banamba, in today's Mali (north-east of Bamako), a recently-founded town with an important slave market

and a 50 km wide belt of slave-worked plantations owned by Marka chiefs (Klein 1998, 159-160). Here I quote Klein at length who describes the exodus with moving empathy:

For the next four or five years, all across the [French] Sudan, groups of slaves trekked slowly and patiently across the dry savanna lands, braving hunger and deprivation to look for earlier homes. Often villages they sought no longer existed. Sometimes, those enslaved when young had forgotten their clans and even their villages. Many ended up in other places, but hundreds of thousands went home and began the difficult task of reconstructing destroyed communities. (Klein 1998, 159)

Unlike the anarchical scenarios imagined by French colonial administrators, the exodus was very orderly, and while its effect was "... the destruction of slavery as a labor system," it also "... free[ed] the energies of slaves for other kinds of productive activity" (Klein 1998, 159, 178).

While the number of slaves who braved difficult conditions to walk back to earlier homes is truly remarkable, most slaves in French West Africa, probably close to two-thirds of them, did not leave (Klein 1998, 197). The majority of *wolosow*, who could not have remembered an earlier home, stayed and embarked on a long process of renegotiating rights, duties and identity, in which control of reproduction (marriage and social parenthood) and access to and control of means of production (particularly land and children's labour) were crucial. This process continues to this day, and here class and caste are intermeshed: the key factor is capital. For instance, 1984 interviews in the Mopti region by one of Klein's collaborators revealed "... a lot of regional and individual variation with the crucial question that of wealth. Some Fulbe without dependents have been reduced to farming for themselves. *Rimaibe* with land and income show no deference. Where *rimaibe* are poor and landowners rich, the *rimaibe* show great deference" (Klein 1998, 183).

Other than the colonial outlawing of slavery, other historical events and processes helped to reduce masters' power during the 20th century: the two World Wars, the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, and nationalist politics. France conscripted large numbers of African soldiers from its colonies for both WWI and WWII, and in both cases, slaves were part of the army, even forming the majority of African recruits in the first World War (Klein 1998, 216, *passim*). Returning

veterans were unwilling to acknowledge masters' authority, and many were absorbed in the modern bureaucracy or into the urban economy. The impact of the disastrous droughts that occurred between 1968 and 1983 in the sahelian regions of West Africa was to kill the herds and therefore destroy the power of nomadic groups (such as the Tamacheq and the Moors in northern Mali) to control 'their' remaining servile groups of agriculturists (the *bella* and the *harratin*, respectively). Finally, the US-RDA was committed to the abolition of slavery, and took credit for the "liberation" of the *bella* and the *harratin* in a 1963 report on slavery for the United Nations (Klein 1998, 240).

The Slave as Other

As discussed above, notions of honour were the ideological arm of the hegemonic system that sustained slavery. What is very interesting is that Klein (1998, 3, 250) claims that former masters intensified ideological processes of *hɔɔn/jɔn* and *FulbelriimaayBe* boundary maintenance after the abolition of slavery – in other words, (ex)masters tried to compensate in the ideological sphere (superstructure) for what they had lost in the legal and economic spheres (structure). Social prohibitions against former slaves becoming imams probably came into existence only in the 20th century, at the same time as endogamy was more strictly enforced (Klein 1998, 250). Many former slaves reacted to this by staking claims to honour through the creation of families and lineages, education, conversion to Islam, and the adoption of 'honourable' dress and behaviour – i.e., *hɔɔnya* – particularly refusal to beg and self-control in the realm of sexuality (Klein 1998, 250). Indeed, the "... notion that those of slave descent are less able to control their sexual desires" is crucial to the honour/dishonour system (Klein 1998, 250). Klein (Ibid., 247) reports that this was used as a justification for the rape of slave women, and that these women were encouraged to perform obscene dances. "The female slave," he writes (Ibid., 248) "was seen as licentious and promiscuous."

While Riesman (1974) does not explicitly discuss sexuality as an expression of slave behaviour, he clearly sees the slave as the antithesis of the noble Fulbe. This was expressed by his informants in the way of stereotypes of the *riimaayBe*, said to be “black, fat, crude, naive, irresponsible, pagan, shameless, and dominated by their [bodily] needs and their emotions” (Riesman 1974, 119, my translation). Breedveld and De Bruijn (1996, 809) for their part report that ex-slaves of the Fulbe in the Malian region of the Hayre are resisting the honour ideology, not only through the reconstruction of genealogies and the performance of Islam, but also by turning the ideology on its head and arguing that their physical strength (from working in the fields) makes them superior to the physically weaker herders. They have also started to model such rituals as marriage on those practiced by nobles.

My first encounter with a person who performed *jɔnya* (the condition of being a slave) as opposed to adopting *hɔnya* was at a CMPF event in Segou in June 1997, two months after my arrival in Mali. This was an important event, as the national president of the association was coming from Bamako with two visitors from a sponsoring Canadian NGO who were making a documentary about the activities of their sponsored partners around the world. Among the women waiting for and then watching the filming, there was one big and tall middle-aged woman whose behavior contrasted sharply with that of the other women. While the others were for the large part sitting on rented metal chairs in the shade, moving little and looking bored and dignified, she was walking around, full of energy, bubbling and making clownish faces. While the others spoke softly if at all, she yelled. She was making jokes which I could not understand but which obviously delighted the other women. I overheard somebody refer to her as *jɔnmuso* (slave/captive-woman). During the filming, she was one of the protagonists of the staged operating of the husking machine which CMPF had bought for the use of excisers who had pledged to stop practicing excision. The Canadian documentary film-maker, a man, was having the women repeat the scene over and over again in the oppressive midday heat. After a few takes,

the *jɔnmuso* said something very loudly which made all the women burst with embarrassed but titillated laughter. I knew this had to be a good one, so I asked my neighbor, who spoke French, what the "*jɔnmuso*" had said. She hesitated before translating for me, saying "Can I translate something like that? It's an insult!", but she did not need too much convincing to finally tell me that the *jɔnmuso* had said "If we repeat, repeat, repeat, even the man's penis is going to perspire!" When she heard my belated laughter (obviously I hadn't learned proper *hɔɔnya* by then and was laughing loudly), the *jɔnmuso* turned towards me and said in simple Bamanakan, pointing to her groin, smiling, "*Madame*, it's hot! (*a ka kalan!*)" There was more delighted and disgusted laughter.

Performing *jɔnya* also, and perhaps foremost, involves begging, with the required reciprocal *hɔɔn* behaviour being lavish generosity – which many *hɔɔnw* currently complain about, especially those who are impoverished. Other aspects of *jɔnya* involve specific services performed for the descendants of former masters, such as cooking at weddings (which I witnessed in Kati, a town near Bamako, in 1997) and at naming ceremonies, carrying messages, and inviting *hɔɔnw* to preside over festivities (Klein 1998, 250). For *riimaayBe*, at least in the late 1970s in the Mopti region, continuing to behave as a slave consisted of working under sharecropping contracts, giving gifts to masters, paying a head tax and other dues, sending one's children to work for the former master, calling the latter *abba* (Arabic for "father"), sitting in the back of the mosque, and doing work considered unclean, such as butchering (Klein 1998, 183). Performed submission to former masters acts as a form of 'insurance policy' for poor descendants of slaves, in a country where famine and generalized poverty are common and options few. However, in order to 'collect' on the 'insurance policy,' the former slave must beg and behave in otherwise

deferential ways, thereby confirming her or his submission (Klein 1998, 241). This process is very similar to clientelism, which is discussed later.

The persistent strength of the hegemonic discourse on honour is reflected in the stigma that is still attached to slave ancestry. Klein (1998, 245) confirms that in Mali, Senegal and Guinea, it is impolite to let somebody know that you are aware of her or his slave ancestry. In the 400 surveys that I carried out in Kayes, Sikasso, Segou and Mopti only thirteen respondents (a little over 3% of the sample) self-described as *jɔnw*.¹²⁴ Among them were twelve women and only one man, a 21-year old Soninke *lycée* (high school) student. Amid the women, one was a trader, one was a student, one farmed and one was retired. All but one of the others performed (probably unpaid) reproductive work at home, which they variously described as “cooking” (*tobilikε*), “grain-pounding” (*sūsulikε*), “nothing” (*fosi*) or in French, “*ménagère*” (homemaker, or, more literally, housecleaner). Amongst the two who presented their work as “cooking” was a Khassonke woman in her late thirties in Kayes with no education, who added: “Also, if there are weddings or naming ceremonies we go there and people give us money.”¹²⁵ Another person who performed work stereotypically associated with slavery was a spinner, a Somono woman in Segou who thought she might be in her sixties. She was spinning cotton while we were interviewing her, and when we asked whether she was *hɔɔn*, *nyamakala* or *jɔn*, she corrected us, answering: “*Wolosó*. People say that we are *jɔnw* but we are not *jɔnw* because we were not purchased.”¹²⁶

Finally, two women gave examples of caste conversions. In one case, a 45-year old Senufo woman in Sikasso said: “My father came to Sikasso as *jɔn* but we are *nyamakalaw*.”¹²⁷ She presently earned money trading. In Segou, a 40-year old Bamanan woman, when asked about

¹²⁴ Because *jɔn* is the term that one hears used in joking relationships in Bamako where I learned Bamanakan, and because I did not realize the importance of the distinction at the time, we did not ask people whether they were *wolosó*.

¹²⁵ Interview KF52.

¹²⁶ Interview G£20.

her caste, gave this puzzling answer: “*Hɔɔn* but also *nyamakala* because I was raised among the *jɔnw*.” Later on in the questionnaire she specified: “I was born in the bush among the Fulbe” – perhaps she meant the *riimaayBe*? She described her profession as trader, and also as a “*kɔɔjuga*” – a clown. She explained that she performed as clown at weddings, dressed as a man. At the end of the questionnaire, she asked if we wanted to see her number. We agreed, and she performed, cross-dressed, to the delight of my assistant and the shrieks of the neighbourhood children.¹²⁸ I gave her some money, which she expected.

Nyamakalaw

The above cases of caste conversion hint at a certain fluidity in the social stratification system. This fluidity – albeit limited – has been highlighted in recent scholarship. Just as ethnicity scholars have started to deconstruct colonial ethnic categories and to acknowledge the “mestizo” character of pre-colonial identities and social organization, recent writings on the Mande caste system¹²⁹ have questioned the rigid three-strata system as it became codified during the colonial period. A close re-reading of historical documents reveals a system which was more complex and more flexible than the simplified colonial version. “If,” Conrad and Frank (1995b, 8) write, “as in Amselle’s view, ethnicity was a product of social circumstances, the same could be said of occupational activities.” The ambiguous social status of the *nyamakalaw*, both historically and in contemporary Malian society, seems the least well understood. Recent research has highlighted the extent to which *nyamakalaw* re-defined their identity in response to changing circumstances, “... influencing local perceptions of their social status, and even what

¹²⁷ Interview Sf63.

¹²⁸ As I witnessed at a Bamako screening of *Taafe fanga* (“The power of the skirts”), a film by Malian director Adama Drabo in which men are made to wear skirts and do women’s work. Malians in general seem to find gender cross-dressing uproariously funny.

¹²⁹ See in particular the collection edited by David Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (1995a).

Europeans perceived as ‘ethnicity’” (Conrad and Frank 1995b, 10).¹³⁰ In her ethnological study of women potters in Jenne in the early 1980s for example, Adria LaViolette (1995) found that female potters exercised more social flexibility than male *nyamakalaw*, and commonly crossed cultural boundaries through marriage and other social and economic alliances. In this way they were “... assisting family members to form relationships across boundaries that men alone cannot so readily cross” (ibid., 170). In another instance Jean-Loup Amselle (1990, 84) notes that marrying *nyamakalaw* women was a means for *hɔɔn* men of defeated groups to transform their identity and avoid death or slavery.

Much of the current academic debate on the Mande caste system centres on the social status of the *nyamakalaw*, who were portrayed very negatively in most of the colonial and early ethnographic literature, appearing as outcasts, beggars or malignant sorcerers (Conrad and Frank 1995b, 2; McNaughton 1988, 7-8). The etymology for the word “*nyamakala*” published by Malian scholar Bokar N’Diaye (1970b, 14), indicate that *nyamakalaw* do not appear in a positive light in popular perceptions. N’Diaye reported that in common usage *kala* means “stalk” or “handle,” while *nyama* means “manure” or “garbage.”

In the revised edition of his book, N’Diaye (1995, 14) offers an interesting new etymology for *nyamakala*: “in Bambara, from *nyama* = evil spell and *kala* = antidote....”¹³¹ This is closer to the etymology given by Patrick McNaughton (1988, 18-19, 152) and Sarah Brett-Smith (1994, 38) who, following Dominique Zahan (1963, 127), stress the other meaning of *nyama*, that of an awesome power with the potential to harm. This analysis is crucial to an understanding of the ambivalence that most Malians feel toward *nyamakalaw*, including the *nɔmɔw* who perform circumcisions and excisions. McNaughton (1988, 15) has discussed the concept of *nyama* most clearly:

¹³⁰ The debate over whether the Dyula of Mali should be considered a professional category (i.e., merchants, the Arabic meaning of the word), or a distinct ethnic group comes to mind (see Bazin 1985, 120).

¹³¹ I am translating from the French.

At sorcery's base lies a phenomenon that generates its own fair share of ambivalence and disquiet among the Mande. It is perceived as the world's basic energy, the energy that animates the universe. It is the force that the Mande call *nyama*, which I refer to as special energy or occult power.... The Mande believe that in concentrations, especially when they are massive and uncontrolled, this force is potentially dangerous, even deadly. People can learn to control it through sorcery, however, and thereby harness it to help carry out their activities.

The meaning of the word *nyamakala* can therefore be understood as "antidote to *nyama*", after N'Diaye (1995) or, following Brett-Smith, "handle/handler of *nyama*." Brett-Smith (1994, 38) describes *nyamakala* people as "human instruments for contacting and mastering this unpredictable energy," and points out that amongst them, the *nùmuw* (which she translates as "blacksmiths-sculptors") "are the supreme instrument for controlling *nyama*" and are commonly considered "necessary but dangerous."

While feared because of their closeness to *nyama*, *nyamakalaw* are also generally respected and admired for their technical and esoteric expertise, and have often served as advisors, mediators and spokespeople for Mande rulers and chiefs. They play important roles in the Mande indigenous religion: *nùmu* men notably were priests of the important *kɔmɔ* male initiation society. As noted by Conrad and Frank (1995b, 2), the ambivalence in perceptions of *nyamakalaw*, alternatively despised and respected, partly stems from the social position of the speaker: *hɔɔn* informants tend to emphasize negative aspects of *nyamakalaw* behaviour, such as their perceived lack of shame or modesty (see Grosz-Ngaté 1989, 170), while *nyamakalaw* themselves, while often acknowledging (even performing) their shamelessness, tend to stress society's dependency on their products and services, as in the praise song for *nùmuw* below.

I now turn to a presentation of the people belonging to one of the *nyamakala* categories, that of the *nùmuw*. While the word *nùmu* has generally been rendered as "blacksmiths" in the literature and is commonly translated into the French equivalent, "*forgerons*," by French speakers in Mali, this is limiting, as *nùmu* men own the rights to various other spheres of knowledge, as famously discussed by McNaughton (1988) and more recently by Brett-Smith (1994), who

highlighted their role as sculptors of ritual objects. It is even more limiting – sexist, in my view – to translate the term “*nùmùmusow*” (*musow* = women) as ‘wives of the blacksmiths.’ when these women’s identity centres around the monopoly they have had over a craft – pottery-making (see Frank 1998) – and a service: excision.

Nùmuw

Aye! Aye! Aye! *Nùmuw* are people of the arts!
 Soumaro [Sumanguru], master of the bow was right, the first blacksmith-king to have stayed on the throne for a long time!
 If one has to name *nùmuw*, one first names the Kanté!
 If people want to know more *nùmuw*, we will call the Bagayoko!
 If people ask for even more to be named, we will name the Sinaba or Sinayoko!
 To the question, who else is a *nùmu*? the Kamissoko or Cissoko will be mentioned!
 The mortar in which grain is husked comes from Soumaro’s families, therefore the entire world owes its existence to them!
 The hoe with which the earth is moved comes from the *nùmuw*, therefore the human world exists thanks to them!
 The pots in which food is prepared come from *nùmu* families, therefore the world survives thanks to them!
 Kounkounba, Bantanba, Niani Niani are the cities they conquered and which gave their names to their families!
 Makan, the ancestor, master of the wind, everything comes from your families! All things find their origin there!
 To make a woman from a girl, that is the work of the *nùmùmuso*!
 To make a man from a boy, that is the work of the *nùmùkε*!
 Aye! Aye! Aye! *Nùmuw* are not just anybody!

Traditional Mande praise song for nùmuw (Kanté and Erny 1993, 9, my translation)

Among the spiritual and social roles which McNaughton (1988) found *nùmu* men performing in Mali in the 1970s were blacksmithing, sculpting, circumcising, rainmaking, divining, and making amulets; acting as advisors, intermediaries, judges, spokesmen and witnesses; and practicing sorcery and healing. Blacksmithing is viewed in awe in Mande cosmology, as metal, put in the guardianship of *jinεw* (spirits) emits *nyama* and is therefore

dangerous to work with. Kanté (1993, 42) reports that all smiths maintain an altar dedicated to the metal they work with. The anvil also acts as a altar, and animals are sacrificed to it.

While the acquisition of the knowledge necessary to activate forces found in nature for specific harmful or beneficial purposes is not restricted to *nyamakalaw* in the Mande world, large numbers of *nùmuw* become healers and sorcerers (McNaughton 1988, 41). Most people are not willing to undertake such study which "... is very difficult [and] demands much time, a willingness to take many risks, and considerable expense" (Ibid., 12). *Nùmuw* and other *nyamakalaw*, on the other hand, "... are believed to be born with much of the powers others have to acquire, or at least with a ready access to it, and their lengthy [technological] apprenticeships are ideally suited for learning the principles involved" (Ibid.). While for some *nùmuw* healing and sorcery is a modest side occupation, for others it is their main practice. McNaughton (Ibid., 41) notes that members of the Kanté clan, in particular, are apt to be diviners and herbalists. In one instance in 1997 in Kayes, an elderly Kanté *nùmùmuso* we interviewed gave my assistant two beneficial 'magical formulae' in exchange for a small gift of money. I was not offered any, probably because it is well-known in Mali that *tùbàbuw* do not believe in the power of such words and procedures.

Nambala Kanté (1993), a Mandinka *nùmu* born in 1952 in a Malian village near the Guinean border, provides us with a rare glance at the ritual and medical roles of *nùmùmusow*. He tells us that in his village, *nùmuw* are responsible for four cults addressed to *jinεw* (spirits), including the ritual for the extraction of clay. The goal of this ritual is to ensure that the *jinεw* who own the clay will allow the work of potters to proceed safely. The officiant¹³² recites the following while squatting facing the sunset (Kanté and Erny 1993, 127, my translation):

I have come with a white chicken and three kola nuts to worship the *jinεw* of
Kombori.
I am a *nùmu*. My father and all my ancestors were *nùmuw*.

¹³² Kanté fails to specify the gender of the officiant, but it is probably a man, since Barbara E. Frank (1998, 79, 81), who describes an almost identical ritual from the same region in Mali, specifies that it is *nùmu* men who perform the sacrifices at the clay pit before digging can start.

I ask the *jinεw* to open the door to the clay.
 When we extract it, let nobody suffer from a headache nor eye illnesses.
 Once the pots are made, let them withstand wind and fire.
 The world stands on its head (exists) thanks to three things: the black cloud, the black metal and the black pot.
 If this is true, be it that Allah, His Messenger and the *jinεw* allow us to extract clay to make it into pots so that we can raise our children.

The officiant then digs the earth three times, slits the throats of the chicken, spilling the blood on the three mounds of earth, and abandons the kola nuts on the ground (Ibid., 127-8). Later, when *nùmu* women extract the clay, they cannot be menstruating nor be accompanied by *hɔɔn* friends, two acts which would upset the *jinεw* (Ibid., 97).¹³³

The above ritual highlights the fact that *jinεw* are perceived as the true owners of natural resources, as discussed in the section on ethnicity above. Most people in Mali (even in Bamako today) are afraid of *jinεw*, but as McNaughton (1988, 18) notes, *nùmuw* and *jinεw* are commonly perceived as being in close communication, and “smiths at their most skilled negotiate treaties with a complex of spirits through ritual, and the unions thus created give the blacksmiths access to the powers of spirits for any tasks they care to undertake.” However, *jinεw* sometimes require great sacrifices on the part of *nùmuw* in exchange for the powers they provide them with. Sarah Brett-Smith (1994), who worked with *nùmuw* specializing in sculpture, reveals that the *jinεw* with whom these men negotiated alliances were conceived of as female, and that in exchange for the secrets of the ‘bush’ they often demanded the life of a child and the sculptor’s sexual potency.

It is not impossible that *nùmùmusow* enter into equally demanding and personalized relationships with *jinεw*, but I have not found evidence to this effect. Yet the thought that they might be in contact with spirits suffices, I believe, to make most (non-*nùmu*) Malians uncomfortable in their presence. Kanté (1993, 140) recalls that his mother

¹³³ Forbidding access to the clay pit and to the forge to menstruating women is a common taboo throughout Africa – see Frank (1998) for West Africa (particularly Mande areas) and Herbert (1993) for a continental

was sometimes called to intercede with the spirits of recently deceased individuals, often to ask them to vacate their terrestrial dwellings and to leave their descendants in peace. *Jinɛw* and ancestor spirits suffuse the Malian imagination, and the relationship of *nùmuw* with spirits "... add tremendous mystique to [their] work" (McNaughton 1988, 20).

Nùmuw are amongst various experts on traditional medicine in Mali. Kanté (1993, 143-44) lists the problems in which they tend to specialize, and tells us that while *nùmu* men treat adult men, *nùmu* women treat women and children. Among the illnesses listed by Kanté are problems of reproductive health: impotence, sterility, and problems related to menstruation. Malian anthropologists Younoussa Touré, Yaouga F. Koné and Tiéman Diarra (1997a, 24-25) recently wrote that *nùmu* women have "occult" powers which help facilitate birthing, and are called upon both to prevent and solve problems during parturition. Their assistance is seen as invaluable in offsetting the risks of giving birth – here we must keep in mind that the maternal mortality rate is very high in Mali, 1200 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to UNDP (1998, 157). Touré and his colleagues even postulate that this is one of the reasons Malians hesitate to abandon excision: they fear that *nùmu* women could refuse to help a non-excised parturient, presumably in retaliation. Kanté (1993, 144, my translation) reports that his mother acted as village midwife, even though there were a health centre and a maternity ward in the village, "... certainly because," he comments, "my mother's treatments were effective and free."

I do not know how common it is for *nùmu* women to act as midwives, like Kanté's mother. The quote above from Touré and his colleagues suggests that in some cases, *nùmu* women *assist* midwives, thereby indicating that these are two different roles. In an early monograph on the Bamanan, Monteil (1977 [1924], 243) makes the same observation. None of the eight *nùmu* women I interviewed mentioned acting as midwives (but I did not ask them specifically whether they did or not). In her monograph on the Bamanan, Viviana Pâques (1954,

perspective. Herbert argues that this has to do with the symbolic association between smithing (and, to a lesser extent, pottery-making) and fertility, with fertility of the earth and of women being linked.

88) talks about midwives without specifying which group they belong to. Finally, physician Pascal J. Imperato (1977a, 116) is more specific: he reports that among the Bamanan, “traditional mid-wives” are “*maniamaga mousso [mùsow]*.” I have not been able to find much in the literature about these women, other than a portrait of a Bamako “*manyon magan*” in the women’s magazine *Faro* (Ouattara 1999), in which the woman featured mentions neither acting as a midwife nor as an exciser, but rather, as a sex and marriage counselor (see also McDonald 1996). She is, however, a member of the Kanté lineage, which indicates that she is probably *nùmu*. Finally, to the best of my memory, in her 395-page autobiography Aoua Kéita (1975), the first ‘licensed’ professional mid-wife in Mali, although she frequently deplores the methods of her ‘traditional’ counterparts, never specifies whether they come from a specific *siya*. All of this leads me to think that the role of midwife is achieved and not ascribed in Mali. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to investigate further the links between the women who deliver babies and those who excise girls.

Arguably the most important function of *nùmuw* is *bolokoli*: circumcision of boys and girls. I will look at the role of *nùmuw* as experts on circumcision (for boys) and especially on excision (for girls) in Chapter 5 and especially in Chapter 9. At this point I need to discuss an institution which both lubricates the caste system with laughter and acts to ensure its perpetuation in daily discourse, the institution of *sènènkùnya*, or joking relationships. After discussing the general structure and functions of such relationships, I will present the one between *nùmuw* and Fulbe, which is particularly relevant for our purposes.

Sènènkùnya

Denise Paulme (1939) was one of the first authors to discuss *sènènkùnya* as it exists in Mali, that is, a “traditional relationship involving joking and the provision of services” (Bailleul

1996, q.v. *sènènkùnya*, my translation).¹³⁴ Joking relationships exist in the Mande cultural sphere amongst various categories of relatives:¹³⁵

(i) between alternate generations, i.e., grand-parents and grand-children:

(ii) between cross-cousins (who, unlike paternal parallel cousins, are permitted marriage partners),¹³⁶

(iii) between a certain category of affines, *nimɔgɔw*, that is, for a wife, her husband's younger brothers (who might 'inherit' her in the case of her husband's death),¹³⁷ and for a husband, his wife's younger sisters (whom he may receive in marriage in the event of his wife's death).¹³⁸

Among such relatives not only is the normal restraint in speech not required, it is discouraged. What is encouraged is language that is normally considered improper, especially joking related to sexuality. In my experience even French-speaking members of the Malian bureaucratic elite in Bamako call their *nimɔgɔw* of the opposite sex *chéri(e)* (darling), and publicly exchange risqué banter with them. In the case of grand-parents and grand-children of opposite sex, they comically act as each other's spouses, enacting mock spousal disputes. As Paulme (1973 [1968], 87) points out, "this equality between alternate generations contrasts with the authoritarian relations between proximate generations, those of parents and children." In fact, all these relationships provide a welcome and highly entertaining reprieve from the body- and self-discipline imposed by *hɔɔnya*.

Another type of joking relationship is the *sènènkùnya* that exists between various *hɔɔɔ* clans or sub-sections of clans, according to their patronym. For instance, since during fieldwork I was honoured with the patronym Diarra (also spelled Jara), all the people I met whose patronym

¹³⁴ See also Labouret (1929).

¹³⁵ Based on Paulme (1973 [1968]) and fieldwork, unless otherwise indicated.

¹³⁶ Among the Mande, paternal parallel cousins may well live together and are considered brothers and sisters; they are not allowed to marry. The situation may be different among Fulbe groups: we saw above that Dupire (1963), who worked with nomadic Fulbe in Niger, reported preferred paternal parallel cousin marriage.

¹³⁷ Feminist organizations in Mali are fighting against this practice.

was Traoré (also spelled Tarawele) were my *sènènkunw*. According to Paulme (Ibid., 88), nearly all Malian and Senegalese aristocratic clans are linked through such relationships. This type of *sènènkunya* (that between *hɔɔn* clans) is characterized by unmarriageability, mandatory provision of assistance, interdictions against causing harm or refusing favours.¹³⁹ and the exchange of jokes, often in the form of insults. While according to Paulme (Ibid., 94), the joking between such *sènènkunw* is primarily sexual, in my experience in Bamako it mostly revolves around mutual claims of slavery. That is, one of the partners in the relationship will accuse the other of being good-for-nothing, just a slave, and of performing slave-like behaviour (such as farting or eating beans, a food previously associated with slavery). The other will deny being a slave, and will argue instead that *her* ancestors enslaved her *sènènkun*'s forefathers, and therefore he should carry her purchases from the market, etc. Paulme (Ibid.) also reports a similar repertoire, but associates it with the *sènènkunya* between cross-cousins, or that of the last type, pacts between whole communities such as the Dogon and the Bozo, the Dogon and the Songhay, and the *nùmuw* and the Fulbe.

Sènènkunya between clans and communities is linked to a myth of origin, which typically involves two individuals – the purported ancestors of today's involved clans – on a journey. During the journey, one of the two individuals faces a situation of mortal danger and is saved by the other (Paulme, 1973 [1968], 74). Thereafter the saved individual pledges his (the protagonists, to my knowledge, are always male) and his descendants' allegiance and assistance to the saviour, and the pact is sealed by an exchange of blood. In the case of two *hɔɔn* clans, the relationship thus established stresses equality – Paulme (Ibid.) compares blood-brotherhood to the

¹³⁸ The Lieutenant I stayed with in Kalaban Koro had acquired his third wife in this fashion (presumably she had given her consent).

¹³⁹ Saskia Brand (1996) recently discussed an interesting case from Bamako where a young mother, having been disowned by her father and expelled from his house for becoming pregnant before marriage, cleverly used *sènènkunya* to her advantage, getting her father's *sènènkun* to argue her case with her father. Unlike several friends and even the imam who interceded on her behalf, her father's *sènènkun* was successful because "... a favour asked by a *senankun* can under no circumstances be refused..." (p. 6).

egalitarian and supportive relationship that unites those whose belong to the same age-set and are initiated together, and contrasts it to 'real' brotherhood, where siblings are ranked in the lineage according to birth order, as we have seen. However the dynamics are different when the *sènènkùnya* is between two groups with different caste rankings, as we will now examine in the case of the Fulbe and the *nùmuw*.

The *Sènènkùnya* between *Nùmuw* and Fulbe

Jean-Loup Amselle (1977, 37-49) has discussed the *sènènkùnya* between Fulbe and *nùmuw* in Wasulu. Joking relationships of various types, similar to those discussed above among the Mande, also exist among the Fulbe of Mali, some of them, such as that between the Jalo and the Jakite, allowing marriage (Ibid., 38). Amselle reports five different myths of origins explaining the *sènènkùnya* between Fulbe and *nùmuw*, all of them involving an exchange of services between the male ancestors of the two groups (Ibid., 42-3). I will present here the one that concerns circumcision, initially published by P. Doumbia (1936) and paraphrased by Amselle (Ibid., 42, my translation):

... in the beginning *nùmuw* were monkeys; their bodies were covered with hair and they had a long tail. The Fulbe, for their part, were not circumcised whereas the *nùmuw* and all other monkeys were. The Fulbe and the *nùmuw* helped each other: the Pulo shaved the monkey-*nùmu* and cut his tail, and the *nùmu* circumcised the Pulo. During this exchange of services their blood mixed and they swore on their mixed blood never to hurt each other again nor their descendants, whatever the cause. From then on a Pulo could not cause a *nùmu* to lose a single drop of blood, and vice-versa.

This prohibition against the spilling of blood allowed refugees into the Wasulu region in pre-colonial times to save their lives and avoid enslavement by claiming to be *nùmuw*.

While the Wasulunke Fulbe were certainly not duped by this stratagem, it worked to their advantage, as it provided them with dependents to perform the tasks that were not

considered honourable (Ibid., 45-8). In return, however, those who adopted *nùmu* identity lost their noble status and were not allowed to marry the daughters of their *hɔɔn* patrons.

Indeed, while the myths presented by Amselle stress the reciprocity of the relationship, he is the first to acknowledge that in Wasulu and elsewhere the relationship between *nùmuw*, as *nyamakalaw*, and Fulbe, as nobles, is hierarchical and ambiguous. Further, the usual proscription against marriage is reinforced by a taboo against sexual relations that threatens offenders with grave consequences: impotence for the Pulo, inability to forge for the *nùmu* (Ibid., 45).¹⁴⁰

During fieldwork I witnessed the Fulbe-*nùmu sènènkùnya* being activated on several occasions. For instance, a *nùmu* clerk from an office close to CMPF in Bamako used it to gain access to (and presumably obtain favours from, judging by his often victorious smile) the president of the association. While ranking visitors waiting for an audience was an extremely complex social calculus performed with great seriousness by Astan, who allowed access to the president's sanctum according to, among other factors, age, gender, class, and type of relation, this little clerk would just storm into the reception room, screaming "*Hé! La folle!*" (Eh! Crazy woman!), and barge into the president's office. No one ever reproached him – instead, most present were amused by this behaviour which relaxed the often tense atmosphere. It was not all *nùmuw* in the reception room however, who chose to activate *sènènkùnya*, probably because they did not wish to highlight their caste belonging. Indeed, for *nyamakala* or *jɔn/woloso* members of the elite, performing *hɔɔnya* is part of socio-economic climbing, as we will see below.

I have written elsewhere (Gosselin 2000b) about another instance during which the *nùmuw*-Fulbe *sènènkùnya* was activated, this time by the president of CMPF herself. This

was in Mopti in June 1997, at a CMPF ceremony during which *nùmùmusow* handed over their excision knives and pledged not to operate on girls anymore. Several times during her speech at the ceremony, the president highlighted her *sènènkùnya* relationship, as a Pulo, with the *nùmùmusow* present, reminding all that an oath between *sènènkunw* is sacred. A few months later, back in Bamako, the president told me that one of the *nùmùmusow* who had handed over her knife had suddenly died. The women of Mopti who related the news to her, she said, were adamant that the death was due to the fact that the woman had broken her pledge to her *sènènkun* and resumed excising.

The belief that death or other grave consequences can follow the breaking of a blood pact is common in popular discourse in Mali and in the literature. Paulme (1973 [1968], 77) reports the following belief: "... if I am deaf to my partner's call for help, the few drops of his blood which I have consumed will cause my death, because it is charged by a curse which will act if one of the partners breaks his word." The perceived efficacy of the curse, in her view, is due to the conviction that human blood (in fact, blood in general) has *nyama* (Ibid., 91).

Class and Clientelism

Class in Mali

Fundamentally, Mali is a peasant and merchant society where industrialization is extremely limited. It is difficult, if not impossible, to apply rigorous Marxist class analysis to such a society, as Claude Meillassoux (1970) concluded in his early attempt. If however, we conceive of class as an axis of social stratification linked to possession of wealth in the form of money and to control of the state apparatus, we can discuss this final stratification system which

¹⁴⁰ As is typical for the French ethnographic literature of that period, women are almost completely absent from the text – even here, where the sexuality that is alluded to is heterosexual, we are not given the consequences for the female taboo breaker.

intermeshes with the other hierarchies of the Mande and Fulbe worlds that we have discussed. In urban Mali, class is in fact becoming one of the most salient types of stratification.

The political history of the late colonial and early independence periods, as presented in Chapter 2, revealed a division within the elite between on the one hand, merchants allied with the rural aristocracy, and on the other hand, the bureaucrats who inherited power and eventually constituted themselves as a nomenklatura. Cultural as well as caste differences served to delineate these two groups: the bureaucrats were educated in French, familiar with the Western world through their involvement in the colonial system, and often from non-*hɔɔm* ancestry; while the members of the wealthy merchant class tended to be educated in Arabic and to emphasize the 'purity' of their Islam and the nobleness of their blood (see Amselle 1985a; Amselle 1985b; Cissé et al. 1981). This divided ruling class, though initially competing for political power, cooperated in the extraction of surplus from the rural sector.

Gradually after the 1968 coup however, the two elite groups started to merge, to the point where Amselle (1992, 632, my translation) concluded recently that "in Mali, there is in fact only one dominant class that is closely associated with the state." Yet this unification is not complete, and Amselle (Ibid.) still distinguishes between two "poles," a merchant pole and a bureaucratic one. Both continue to extract most of their wealth from the peasantry, although a large part of the state's budget comes from international development assistance.

Amselle (Ibid., 630-2), who has been working with Malian traders since the 1970s, now subdivides them into four categories, which I reproduce here with slight terminological modifications to allow the reader to imagine merchants of both sexes, since a lot of Malian women are involved in various types of trade:¹⁴¹

(i) the "traditional" merchants: generally older, illiterate, and having performed the pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*);

¹⁴¹ For instance translating "*hommes d'affaires*" as "business people" instead of "businessmen."

(ii) the “business people”: the children of the first group, generally educated abroad and often in management schools in the United States, back to manage and possibly transform the family’s businesses;¹⁴²

(iii) the “new entrepreneurs,” a product of the years of structural adjustment programs: young graduates who did not obtain a job in the public service and the civil servants who were forced out of it; and finally

(iv) the “foreigners”: the Lebano-Syrian diaspora who, despite having been present in Mali for generations, maintain a closed, internationally focused community¹⁴³, and other foreign investors.

Different attitudes towards the redistribution of wealth distinguish the first category from the second and third (Ibid., 631). While the first group tends to reproduce the behaviour of the aristocratic elite of the past and redistribute its wealth through chains of clientelism (see also Bagayogo 1987), the younger generation and the bureaucrats-turned-entrepreneurs, generally more Westernized, rebel to a degree and prefer individual accumulation for their own or their nuclear family’s benefit. Yet, as demonstrated by the constant flow of clients with requests in the CMPF office described in Chapter 2, such individual accumulation is very difficult to achieve and, in my experience, socially frowned upon. Indeed Amselle (Ibid., 629-30, my translation) himself writes that in Mali “... it is considered totally incongruous, even condemnable, not to steal from the State. An individual with access to capital who fails to redistribute to his relatives or friends, that is, within his clientelist network, would at best be considered a *tubab* (White), at worst receive maledictions from his close kin.” But before looking at clientelism more closely – and in our case, entering women into the analysis – let us have a closer look at class in Bamako, as experienced in daily practice.

The recent study by the Bamako non-governmental organization (NGO) MISELI (1998) provides us with an interesting look at class in Bamako. Having interviewed 904 women from

¹⁴² See also the magazine article in *Jeune Afrique Économie* by Pierre-Abel Dirat (1996) on the new generation of traders.

nine neighbourhoods of Bamako (mostly poorer peripheral neighbourhoods) with the aim of creating a portrait of the living conditions of the women participating in their projects. The analysts soon realized the importance of class distinctions (which they term "*niveau de vie*") as a variable affecting Bamako women's lives (MISELI 1998, 23). They created four categories of households based on the following variables obtained from their own survey: husband's activity level, interviewee's professional occupation, presence of a maid, ratio of dependent household members to income-earners (dependency ratio), home ownership, participation in a women's association, and declared financial difficulties (Ibid., 49). After analyzing results according to these criteria, they divided up their sample into four types of households (Ibid., 49-55):

Type A: "wealthy modern families"

This type represented 14 percent of the sample, and families were characterized by the following:

- medium size
- low dependency ratio (less than two economically non-active family members, including children, per income-earner)
- men and women have skilled occupations, either in public administration or in the private sector
- polygyny is less common than the average
- there is an important number of single or divorced women
- the home is owned by the family
- there is a large number of nuclear families in this group, and of women living with their own relatives
- almost all the families in this group employ maids
- almost all of the salaried women in the survey come from this type of family

Type B: "wealthy traditional families"

This is the least common type in the sample, with 12.5% of the total. The characteristics of this type are:

- a very large size: 75 percent of those families have more than ten members, and 49 percent fifteen or more
- the highest dependency ratio of all types, with each income earner supporting between three and eleven people; between 60 and 90 percent of the members of those families are economically inactive
- polygyny is very common, and the residence pattern is usually patrilineal
- male household heads are often retired
- women are very active economically, for the large majority involved in large-scale international trade
- these families do not employ maids
- women usually participate in women's associations
- the family owns its residence

¹⁴³ They would be a very interesting group to study: to my knowledge nobody has.

Type C: "poor but active"

This is the most common type in the sample (43.5 percent of interviewees' families). It is characterized by:

- a small or medium size
- the lowest dependency ratio of all types, with less than 60 percent of economically inactive members, as these families adopt a strategy of combining sources of income, however small
- the dwelling is often rented
- the women from these families tend to work in medium or small-scale trade or as craftspeople, and belong to women's associations
- no maids are employed in these families

Type D: "poor and dependent"

These families, which often rely on outside support for survival, represented 30 percent of MISELI's sample. These are depicted in the following way:

- a small family size
- a large number of widows, and a higher than average number of divorced women
- 45 percent of the small number of female-headed households are in this category
- the women in this category tend to be occupied with non-remunerated domestic work; some work in micro-trade and others are recipients of pensions or donations
- there are no maids in these families
- they tend to rent their dwelling, in compounds shared with strangers.

From this typology we remark that 73.5% of the families in the MISELI sample were considered poor, a fraction that is almost identical to the national percentage of Malians living under the poverty rate in 1996 as calculated by the government, that is, 71.6% (ODHD 1998a,1). Most of these poor men, women and children – and definitely those in category D above, for whom it is a matter of survival – include clientelism in one form or another among their economic strategies. These vertical relationships prevent class solidarity and political organizing amongst the poor, who owe allegiance to wealthier patrons, be they kin, friends, neighbours, employers, landlords, former 'owners' or others. In the next section I briefly discuss clientelism in Mali, and more specifically in urban milieus and within women's associations.

Clientelism

While the services offered and received in exchange may have changed, clientelism in today's urban Mali is inscribed within the ideology of the Mande and Fulbe caste systems.

Those with wealth, be they of the “modern” (or, as they call themselves, “*intellectuel*”) or “traditional” types above, no matter what their actual ancestry, generally adopt *hɔɔn* behaviour.

In fact, if they do not exhibit aristocratic behaviours, they will be socially pressured to do so, especially with regards to sharing wealth and employment opportunities with faithful dependents. In Mali, leadership is impossible without redistribution, which has been expected from political leaders at all echelons since pre-colonial times (see Bagayogo 1987).

Other adopted aristocratic behaviours include having one’s praise song performed by a *jèli*, who is publicly rewarded afterwards with money or other generous presents such as gold or even cars or houses. While the current President of Mali – an *intellectuel* – has broken with this practice, his two predecessors had their praises sung in the national media – with mixed results, as recently discussed by Dorothea Schulz (1997). Whatever one’s intentions however, *jèliw* and sometimes other *nyamakalaw* generally do not wait for an invitation to perform a praise song when they encounter a successful *patron*, even if it is in the middle of the street, and so even reluctant wealthy individuals are forced to play the game, as their honor would be tarnished if they failed to reward the *jèli* for her or his performance. Others also give for fear that in the next encounter the *jèli* will use his or her art to mock them and destroy their ‘name,’ or for fear of possible retribution, as there is *nyama* in *jèliw*’s speech, *nyama* that those *jèliw* who are versed in the arts of sorcery can turn against tightfisted patrons (see Hoffman 1995).

For those from *nyamakala* or *jɔn/wolosɔ* identity who choose to earn a livelihood or supplement their income by providing the rich with services (including praise-singing), a behavioural script is readily available, but for the poor who identify as *hɔɔnw* the situation is much more complicated. If they need to attach themselves to patrons, they must do so without appearing to be begging. In order to do so, they approach the elites of Type A above (who call themselves “*intellectuel-les*”), such as the president of CMPF in my examples above, or preferably elites of Type B (the traditional aristocracy), usually less individualistic and more

generous, and try to make themselves useful by whatever means possible. In the case of women's associations, this involves attending meetings and other gatherings when requested (see also De Jorio 1997; Gosselin 2000b). Rosa De Jorio (*Ibid.*, 285-322) has also discussed how class divisions between elite and poor women are enacted at the female-only celebrations that are part of name-giving rituals and weddings. It is mostly during such ceremonies that women's public redistribution of wealth takes place, in the form of competitively displayed gifts in cash and in kind. As I witnessed when participating at such celebrations, social hierarchies amongst women are also at such times acknowledged, challenged, negotiated and ultimately reproduced through other symbolic and cultural codes, such as seating arrangements and the order in which praise-songs are performed and refreshments distributed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed key literature on ethnicity in Mali, and provided ethnographic information on Mande and Fulbe cultural groups. I showed that even early colonial ethnographers such as Delafosse (1972 [1912]) and Monteil (1915) recognized that the frequency of inter-marriages and of population movements – due, amongst other factors, to warfare, slavery and migratory work – made the demarcation of ethnic boundaries problematic. Recently, Amselle (1990) famously proposed, for south-western Mali, a historical system of Fulbe-Bamanan-Mandinka ethnic conversions, and accused colonial ethnographers of congealing – even, inventing – ethnicities. I argued that ethnic conversions are and must have been in the past, first, more accessible to men than to women, and secondly and for historical reasons, more common in the Wasulu region that Amselle knows best than in some other parts of the country. When interviewing in Mopti, for instance, it was immediately obvious that Fulbe inhabitants adopted a sartorial code that marked their difference from others, and that, unlike the situation in the other cities where I worked, most of them primarily spoke Fulfulde instead of Bamanan.

There are several factors that might explain why Fulbe ethnic boundaries are more marked in Mopti than in the other cities, including political history (the rise and fall of the *Diina*), as well as the technical specialization detailed by Gallais (1962). Similarly in Segou, Bamanan identity was strongly highlighted, no doubt because of historical factors (see Djata 1997).

Where I strongly agree with Amselle (1990) is in his argument that similarities are greater than differences between Fulbe and Mande groups in Mali. Yet, this is the point of view of the outsider: no matter how similar the 'honourable' codes of behaviour of the two groups, for instance, appear to the analyst, to the individual person living and expressing the ethnic identity the differences can be crucial under certain circumstances. Further, ethnic boundaries can be emphasized for political purposes – a prospect that understandably alarms some (given recent events in northern Mali and in Africa generally), as demonstrated above by the case of the Letter to the Editor written in reaction to the festival of Fulbe culture in Bamako. The origin of ethnicities – whether or not 'invented' by colonial administrators and ethnographers – is a moot issue in current ethnicity construction, as the ethnic nomenclature first developed by Delafosse (1972 [1912]) has long been re-appropriated by Malians.

This being said, in the urban contexts where I worked and where 'mestizo logic' is at its strongest, the parallel construction of a national, 'Malian' identity is well advanced, most markedly amongst the internationally-oriented elite. Islam here acts as a unifying factor. Clearly, this constructed identity is strongly Mande: the local *lingua franca* is Bamanakan, top political leaders as well as state bureaucrats have long been predominantly drawn from the Mande cultural grouping, which is, furthermore, numerically dominant, and the very name 'Mali' invites the community to image itself as heir to the famous Mandinka empire. But the Fulbe contribution to Malian urban culture and to the emerging national identity should not be underestimated. Indeed in my own daily ethnographic contexts in Bamako and Kalaban Koro, Fulbe and Mande individuals and influences were inextricably intertwined – for instance at CMPF.

This ethnographic fact is one of the reasons why, instead of presenting only the literature on the Mande – the group I know best from learning a Mande language, Bamanakan – I discussed ethnographic characteristics of both Mande and Fulbe groups in this chapter. Those are also the Malian groups that universally practice excision, and those that are dominant numerically and culturally in the cities where I conducted fieldwork. Finally, it does not make sense to discuss Mande identity in Mali in isolation from Fulbe identity, since the two have developed largely in relation to one another through centuries of interaction (see De Bruijn and Van Dick 1997a).

I chose to present Fulbe and Mande cultures through their fundamental structural hierarchies, namely gender, age, caste and class, hierarchies that interconnect to form a grid of power relations. Here I have been influenced by the work of feminist scholars who have explored how gender interacts with race and class, and particularly by the discussion on “Black feminist thought” by Patricia Hill Collins (1991, 222-30), who argued forcefully for the necessity to conceptualize different systems of social hierarchy as “interlocking” rather than simply additive. However, for heuristic purposes it is necessary to take up each system individually, and this is what I did above, highlighting aspects that will become particularly significant in the analysis to come, that is, in explaining how excision practices are maintained and challenged. For if I am interested in power, it is because this dissertation is primarily concerned with an attempt at engineering social change – the campaign against excision – and in challenging the status quo, campaigners run up against power, at the same time as they partake in it.

With regards to gender, all Mande and Fulbe groups in Mali are currently patriarchal and patrilineal, and residence after marriage is generally virilocal. Male dominance is expressed in the household and at the levels of lineage, village and neighbourhood organization, and is sustained by law, ownership of resources, and cultural norms, including religion. Polygyny is frequent, marriages are for the most part arranged, husbands are almost always significantly older than wives, children stay with the father or his lineage in the case of divorce, and the husband’s authority over his wife or wives is guarded by socially sanctioned physical violence (performed

or threatened). Whatever the actual relationship between husbands and wives, married women usually express a degree of submission to their husband in public, as husbands are, culturally and legally, heads of households and owed obedience. This has a significant impact, as we will see, on the ability of women to make decisions for their children, for instance with regards to the excision of daughters. Both husbands and wives have clearly delineated roles, rights and obligations in marriage, and both lead fairly independent economic and social lives, as male and female spheres are largely separate – to the point that Jane Turrinin (1987) argued that Malian women live in a “sub-culture.” But while Malian women clearly cherish their female-only physical and social spaces and areas of authority, gender segregation also limits women’s access to important formal positions of power. Further, it is important not to overestimate the degree of female solidarity, as women are separated along ethnic, caste, class and seniority lines.

Fertility is highly valued in Malian society in general, and it is absolutely crucial for women, whose very identity is defined by motherhood. It is when a married girl becomes a mother that she truly becomes a woman, and as she goes through the life cycle she is owed increasing amounts of respect and obedience, for seniority is extremely important in Fulbe and Mande cultures. The idea that birth order determines relationships of authority is fundamental, and is at work both between and within generations. As such, the interests of older and younger women often diverge, especially in daily life where younger wives are strongly associated with their father’s lineage while post-menopausal wives’ interests are mingled with those of their sons. Post-menopausal women who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*) and who have wealthy and respected husbands and sons are at the apogee of female power in Mali. It is generally post-menopausal women (*mūsòkɔɓaw*) who are entrusted with enforcing excision practices within the multi-generational households in which most Malians live, and in the interview transcripts presented in Part II below it will become clear that it is almost impossible

for young fathers, let alone young mothers, to voice opposition to *mūsòkɔɔbaw*, at least with regards to girls' circumcision.

Mande and Fulbe groups have very similar caste systems, structured around the opposition noble/slave, which is sustained by the ideology of honour and shame. In an ambiguous position between these two extremes are the endogamous groups of artists and artisans (the Mande *nyamakalaw* and the Fulbe *nyeenyBe*) amongst whom are found those historically responsible for the circumcision of girls and boys: amongst the Mande, *nùmuw*. (Because the excisers I was able to interview were all, with one exception, from Mande groups, and because of the paucity of information in the literature on their Fulbe counterparts, my discussion here is for the most part restricted to the Mande world.) What is crucial here for our purposes is to understand that up until recently the practice of circumcision was the monopoly of certain endogamous lineages, who by right of birth owned the special knowledge required to perform an operation perceived to be dangerous not only for the circumcised, but also for the operators. More on the roles of *nùmuw* as circumcisers will be said in chapters 5 and 9. Here we note that *nùmuw*, and *nyamakalaw* more generally, are both feared and admired in Mali because of their esoteric knowledge and, in some cases, of their contacts with the spirit world. To a certain extent they are expected to behave 'shamelessly' – that is, their behaviour is expected to diverge from the code of behaviour of those who belong (or claim to belong) to 'noble' lineages. It is also important to note that the 'noble' code of behaviour puts serious limitations on the ability of anti-excision campaigners to talk about sexuality (as discussing such a topic in public is considered so shameless as to be slave-like). Finally, the same code, with the value it places on self-control, stoicism, and courage, helps to explain why the painfulness of excision is generally not seen by Malians as reason to abandon the practice.

Before addressing the last structural hierarchy, class, I presented the institution of *sènènkùnya*. These 'joking relationships' exist between various groups in Mali (between

different types of kin, different *hɔɔn* lineages, and different *siyaw*), but here I am mostly concerned with the *sènènkùnya* between *nùmuw* and Fulbe. This relationship will be important in further sections of this dissertation, particularly when analyzing the interactions between the Fulbe leader of CMPF and *nùmùmusow*. Partners in a joking relationship, *sènènkunw*, are linked by the blood pact of their emblematic ancestors, and failure to respect their mutual obligations or the taboos dictated by the pact is said to result in grave consequences. Another effect of *sènènkùnya*, when the jokes it encourages use the idiom of slavery, is to keep the image of the slave alive even in the minds of those – the majority – who have never known slavery in practice. In this way, *sènènkùnya* plays an ideological role.

In urban Mali where I worked, class is an increasingly important social marker. In this chapter my goal was not to conduct an orthodox Marxist class analysis of Malian society, but rather to explore the relationships between the small bureaucratic and merchant elite on the one hand, and the majority of the population, who are poor, on the other hand. Through the relationships between rich and poor, wealth is redistributed along long lines of clientelism. There is a close correspondence between class and caste, as the rich generally adopt ‘noble’ behaviour, and those who become clients do so at the expense of their honour. Class is crucial to the analysis of the campaign against excision, as activists (feminists) are drawn from the bureaucratic elite. Further, there are links between sub-groups of the merchant elite and some of the Muslim leaders who oppose the campaign. Meanwhile, it is clear that the majority of the women who join feminist organizations such as CMPF as ordinary members do not do so because of a congruence between their convictions and the organizations’ programmes, but rather because they are in immediate need of financial, legal or other support, and wish to become clients of the powerful women at the head of the organizations (see also De Jorio 1997). This will become obvious in the discussion on the campaign against excision. But before discussing this campaign,

in the next chapter I provide background information on the practice that some want to “eradicate.”

CHAPTER 5

EXCISION

Female genital surgery, called *excision* in Malian French, is common to all the Mande and Fulbe groups presented in the previous chapter, and knows no boundary of caste or class. While all girls are expected to subject to the cut, performing the operation used to be the prerogative of one particular caste/gender group: *nùmùmusow* (*nùmu* women). In this chapter I present the facts on excision as currently practiced in Mali, giving figures from recent surveys, including mine. I also review descriptions and analyses of the practice in the ethnographic literature. These analyses lead us into a discussion of the mechanisms by which excision is perpetuated from generation to generation. This background information is indispensable in order to analyze the campaign against the practice, the exercise undertaken in Chapters 6 to 11.

For the vast majority of Malians, circumcision of girls and boys (*bolokoli* in Bamanakan) is a normal part of life. When a child is born, people in most Malian communities expect that she or he will at some point (whether it is in infancy or at puberty) undergo this operation without which a Mande or Fulbe individual can not fully be adult. For the majority who do not consider themselves experts on *bolokoli*, it is not necessary to know *why* this needs to be done: it has been done to them, to their parents and their grand-parents and all their previous ancestors, and as a matter of course it will be done to their children. Most trust that the leaders of the community, who have access to the knowledge necessary to make such decisions, have good reasons to demand that this risky operation be performed, much like most Canadian parents trust that doctors have good reasons to recommend that their children be vaccinated. Malians know that *bolokoli* is painful, but for many, the pain is part of the experience, and transcending it part of growing up. And taking one's 'daughter' to the exciser is what is required of a good and responsible mother, grand-mother, or aunt.

Nevertheless, a counter-discourse on excision has now been heard by most urban Malians. Many know that some of their compatriots in France have been arrested, even imprisoned, for excising girls or hiring an exciser to operate their daughters.¹⁴⁴ They also know that *tùbàbuw*, particularly those of the French ethnic group, do not circumcise, not even boys. Some have attended, or heard on the radio or on television, debates over the harmful consequences of *bolokoli* for girls. A few courageous teachers have discussed the issue with their students. It is in the air that “some people” do not like excision, although for most who hear these rumours, it is not clear why. Part II of this dissertation will be devoted entirely to the Malian campaign against *bolokoli* for girls, and to the reactions that it has elicited amongst various groups in the population. But before moving on to the campaign and counter-campaign, in this last contextual chapter I wish to present some factual information on excision: who, where, how, and what is done, and why. I will also present the system of coercion and rewards that ensures that the practice is reproduced – a system linked to the structural hierarchies which we reviewed in the previous chapter.

Current Practices

Nearly all adult women in Mali today are excised. In Kayes, out of the fifty-two women in my survey, all were circumcised. In Mopti, seven women out of sixty-five (i.e., a little over 10%) had not undergone circumcision: four of them were Songhay, two were Dogon, and one was Bella – all members of groups or sub-groups outside of the Mande and Fulbe cultural spheres that do not traditionally (or do not always) circumcise girls. Finally in the old Bamanan capital of Segou, out of fifty-eight women interviewed in the general population survey, fifty-five had undergone *bolokoli*. Of the remaining three, one respondent did not answer the question, and a twenty-seven year old Songhay woman said: “Among the Songhay we do not circumcise girls – it

¹⁴⁴ For an analysis of these trials in France, see the book by sociologist Martine Lefevre-Déotte (1997).

does not exist.”¹⁴⁵ She was originally from Gao, and even though her husband was Fulbe, their daughter was not excised because, she explained, her husband was also from Gao. The other Segu respondent who was not excised was a twenty-five year old Bamanan woman, who explained that her “people” (i.e., her lineage), heirs of the *màsàkɛ w* (kings or heads of large chiefdoms) do not practice excision. She explained that the *màsàkɛ w* of the past did not allow the *jɔnw* or *nùmuw* who practiced excision in those days to “see” (presumably, see naked or see the genitals of) the members of their families, so they were not circumcised. This descendant of the Bamanan kings had a Grade 9 education and worked as a cook for a (development) “project.”¹⁴⁶

In total, out of my sample of 223 women selected at random in Kayes, Segu, Mopti and Sikasso and interviewed in 1997-1998, 214 or nearly 96% said they were circumcised. This is comparable to the results of the DHS conducted two years earlier on a national scale, which reported that 94% of Malian women were excised (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 185). Another similarity between the two sets of results is that the DHS researchers concluded that ethnicity was the only factor that affected prevalence in a statistically significant manner – a fact largely corroborated by my evidence above. Two groups in particular had significant numbers of uncircumcised women: the Tamacheq and the Songhay. Yet contrary to popular perceptions in Mali, it is not all Tamacheq nor all Songhay women that are unexcised: indeed, the DHS study demonstrated that 16.5% of adult Tamacheq women and 47.8% of Songhay women had undergone the operation (Ibid., 186). There is also a notable minority (16%) of Dogon women who are not circumcised (Ibid.). These ethnic differences are in turn reflected in regional differences. The DHS (Ibid.) reports the following percentages of excised women per region: Kayes (98.6%), Koulikoro (99.3%), Sikasso (96.6%), Segu (93.9%), Mopti (88.3%), Timbuktu

¹⁴⁵ Interview Gf18, 01/12/97.

¹⁴⁶ Interview Gf39, 04/12/97.

and Gao combined (9.3%), and Bamako (95.3%). Again, these results are compatible with mine, as only in Mopti did I find a sizable number of unexcised adult women.

Concerning the new generation, the DHS researchers (Ibid., 187-8) asked mothers whether their eldest daughter was excised: 74% were. For those eldest daughters who were not excised, the mothers were asked whether they planned to have the operation done in the future: 19% did, and only 6% of the girls had mothers that had no plan to excise them. In other words, 92% of the eldest daughters of the female respondents either were or will be excised, demonstrating the strength of the practice in the country overall.

My approach was different: for those parents who had more than one daughter, we asked them whether all their daughters were excised, with the result that some of them answered that some daughters were excised, and others not. The results appear in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Excision of the daughters of survey respondents, Kayes, Mopti and Segou

location	number of parents of daughters (n)	all daughters excised	no daughter excised	some excised, others not
Kayes	36 ¹³⁷	33 (91.6%)	3 (8.3%)	--
Mopti	65	49 (75.4%)	13 (20%)	3 (4.6%)
Segu	59	42 (71%)	9 (15%)	8 (14%)
TOTAL	160	124 (77.5%)	25 (15.6%)	11 (6.9%)

Before interpreting these numbers as a sign that excision is declining, we must factor into the equation the fact that out of the thirty-six respondents who had non-excised daughters, eleven later said that they were planning to excise the girls eventually. This still leaves us with a higher percentage (15.6% as opposed to 6%) of parents of daughters who have non-excised daughters that they are never planning to have excised. This is probably due to the main difference between my survey and the DHS: unlike the DHS researchers, I interviewed men as well as women on this

issue, and found that more fathers than mothers were opposed to excision. Some of those cases will be presented in more detail in the section below on decision-making within the family.

These case studies will also illuminate situations where some of the daughters are excised and others not. While this is sometimes simply a reflection of the young age of the junior sibling(s), or of the lack of resources to have the operation done, in other cases it reflects a change of household policy with regards to excision.

Concerning mothers' plans to have their eldest daughter excised, the DHS (Ibid., 187-8) researchers concluded that four factors influenced this decision: urban residence, education level, religion and ethnicity. The influence of ethnic belonging on daughters' excision was similar to that on the respondents' excision themselves, that is, the prevalence of excision amongst Tamacheq, Songhay and Dogon daughters was similar to that amongst adult respondents of the same ethnic groups.¹⁴⁸ Among urban mothers, 12% did not wish to excise their daughter, compared to 4% of their rural counterparts. These numbers give some credence to the widely held view amongst Malians that it is the "people from the bush" (*les gens de la brousse* – the villagers) that insist on perpetuating excision. With regards to religion, Christian mothers were less likely to want their daughters excised, with nearly one-fifth of them not planning the operation for the girl. This could be consequential were it not for the fact that Christians are a tiny minority (roughly 3%) in Mali (Ibid., 26). The most significant finding concerns mothers' education level: while at the national level only 6% of mothers with no education had no plans to have their daughters excised, 17% of mothers with a secondary or post-secondary level of education planned to leave their daughters uncut. Coulibaly and his colleagues (Ibid., 187) concluded that "... the education level of the mother ... seems to be one of the most influential elements on behaviour with regards to this practice." Whether such intentions will be converted

¹⁴⁷ In Kayes, only mothers of daughters were asked this question. The questionnaire was subsequently changed so that fathers were also asked in the other towns.

into practice, though, depends on patterns of decision-making within the household and the family: my findings, presented below, indicate that very few mothers have the authority to enforce their decisions with regard to their daughters' excision.

What I have been calling "excision" throughout this dissertation, following the popular Malian usage in French, is technically speaking more often clitoridectomy (ablation of the clitoris), and very rarely infibulation. Of the 9,704 women interviewed for the DHS, 52% of those circumcised said they had undergone clitoridectomy, 47% excision (in this case defined as ablation of the clitoris and the labia minora), and less than 1% said they had been infibulated (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 185). In her doctoral thesis Malian physician Habibatu Diallo (1990, 50) reported 54.3% cases of "Type I" circumcision, 38.9% of "Type II," and 6.8% of "Type III" (n = 352). Following Verzin,¹⁴⁹ Diallo defined her three types as follows (Ibid., 5, my translation and my emphasis):

Type I: "... true female circumcision, consisting in the ablation of the clitoral prepuce:"

Type II: "... ablation of the clitoral glans *or of the whole* of the clitoris and *usually* accompanied by the ablation of *part or all* of the inner labia;" and

Type III: "... infibulation or pharaonic circumcision, consisting in the partial closure of the vaginal orifice after incision, and ablation of *a variable amount* of vulval tissue. *It can be accompanied* by a partial clitoridectomy."

Reading these definitions carefully (note highlights) one notices that this attempt at arriving at a neat typology in fact reveals a continuum of practices which vary considerably from place to place, from one circumciser to the next, and even, from one operation to the other, as the amount of cutting and closure will depend on, amongst other possible factors, the age and movements of the girl and how the healing proceeds. For instance, cases of accidental sealing of the labia were reported to us.

¹⁴⁸ It is important to realize (and the DHS does not make this clear), that it is normally the ethnic group of the *father* that determines whether or not his daughter will be excised, as daughters inherit their fathers' ethnic belonging. I look at some such inter-ethnic cases below.

¹⁴⁹ Diallo does not give the full reference for Verzin, only writing that her source is Gleviczky (1980). The original source must be Verzin (1975).

Diallo (1990, 3-4), who worked in maternity wards and clinics in all the regions of Mali except Koulikoro and Timbuktu and whose sample consisted of parturient women, arrived at her numbers based on clinical examinations of the external genitalia. This research method, obviously only available to medical researchers, is more reliable than that of asking women to describe the operation done to them. Indeed, for my part I was not able to produce statistically significant information on this, and dropped the question from the questionnaire after Kayes. I marvel at the ability of the DHS researchers to obtain such information from women, and in fact I doubt the accuracy of their numbers, since in our case the question was clearly not understood. Women from the general population in Kayes seemed unaware that there were different “types” of *bolokoli*. Further, even when we explained the typology, they did not seem to possess the kind of anatomical knowledge that would allow them to know the extent to which their bodies have been transformed – in other words, they do not have access to visual representations of uncircumcised female adult genitals to which they could compare themselves. In Kayes, where most girls are excised in infancy, the most common answers to our question “What type of excision was done to you?” were along the lines of ‘How could I know? I was too little,’ or ‘What the *nùmuw* do.’

If in popular imagery excision is still the work of *nùmuw*, in fact the operation is increasingly often performed by medical personnel in Mali. In my survey, men and women in all cities except Segou reported a high level of medicalization. Table 10 below presents the answers to the question “Who practices excision in your community?” for Kayes, Mopti and Segou:

Table 10. Excision practitioners according to survey respondents

location	traditional casted excisers ¹⁵⁰	medical personnel	both traditional excisers and medical personnel	others ¹⁵¹	no answer / does not know
Kayes (n=100)	44	23	21	3	9
		44			
Mopti (n=100)	47	15	9	1	19
		24			
Segu (n=100)	63	1	5	15	16
		6			
TOTAL (n=300)	154 (51.3%)	39 (13%)	35 (11.7%)	19 (6.3%)	44 (14.7%)
		74 (24.7%)			

Out of the three cities it is in Kayes that the practice seems to be most medicalized, with 44% of the respondents indicating that medical personnel perform excisions (when the answers “medical personnel” and “both traditional excisers and medical personnel” are combined). In Mopti, nearly a quarter of the respondents indicated the same phenomenon. In Segu on the other hand, the practice seems to be more firmly in the hands of the *nūmuw* (61 of the responses) or other *nyamakalaw* (2 answers). These results indicate a slightly higher level of medicalization of the practice than that reported in the DHS (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 192-4).

Another aspect of excision that is changing in Mali is that girls in general are circumcised at a younger age than their mothers and grand-mothers were, a phenomenon reported in most African countries where female circumcision exists (Shell-Duncan and Herniund 2000). Coulibaly and colleagues (1996, 189) report a significant generational difference: while the median age at excision obtained for the mothers interviewed is 6.3 years, for their eldest daughters it is 2.1 years.¹⁵² This tendency is more notable in urban as opposed to rural locations.

¹⁵⁰ Under that category are included the following answers: for Kayes, *nūmuw*; for Mopti, *nūmuw*, *fulajɲw*, *nyamakalaw*, *maabuuBe*, and *sakkeeBe*; for Segu, *nūmuw* and *nyamakalaw*.

¹⁵¹ Under this category are answers such as “old women” or “women.”

¹⁵² The researchers (Ibid.) caution that these results are slightly biased since eldest daughters who were not excised at the time of the survey but will be excised at a later age are not taken into account.

and especially in Bamako where 90.6% of respondents' daughters who are excised were operated on before they reached the age of four (Ibid., 191). Table 11 below provides my survey results on age at excision and reveals regional differences.

Table 11. Age at excision of female respondents

site / age in years	< 2	2-5	6-9	10-14	15+	does not know
Kayes (n=52)	61.5%	3.9%	9.6%	7.7%	1.9%	15.4%
Mopti (n=47)	23.4%	12.8%	23.4%	17%	2.1%	21.3%
Segu (n=55)	47.3%	10.9%	12.7%	7.3%	0%	21.8%

The higher number of women circumcised under the age of two in Kayes as opposed to Mopti and Segu concurs with the fact that, as we will review below, the Soninke differ from other Mande groups in that they have a tradition of circumcising babies. The DHS (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 189) also reports a lower age at excision in the region of Kayes as opposed to the rest of the country, with the median age being 0.9 years. Lowering of the age at which *bolokoli* is practiced amongst other groups – there has been a parallel phenomenon for boys – is related to the disappearance of puberty initiation rituals, and to Islamization, medicalization, urbanization and literacy, although the cause-and-effect relationships among these various factors are not clear (see below and Coulibaly et al. 1996, 189-92).

In the next section I review descriptions of excision practices found in the colonial and early ethnographic literature for Malian Mande and Fulbe groups. However fragmentary and localized, these descriptions provide us with a sense of the kinds of practices that inform the Malian imaginary when they say that excision is one of their *làadaw* (sing. *làada*)¹⁵³ – that is, one

¹⁵³ According to Bailleul (1996, s. v. *làada*), the etymology of this word is from the Arabic *al-ada*, which means “habit” or “custom.”

of their customs or traditions. Such fragments of the past also allow us to discern better how this imagined immutable 'tradition' has in fact changed over time.

Excision in the Colonial and Early Ethnographic Literature

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest published mention of excision in Mali¹⁵⁴ is that of Maurice Delafosse (1972 [1912]) in *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*. Delafosse's account, which aims at generalization for the whole region of the Senegal and Upper Niger valleys, is not very instructive. He briefly writes (Ibid., Vol.I, 331, my translation):

Among women, excision of the clitoris is, I believe, absolutely universal amongst all the white and black populations of Upper Senegal and Niger, except perhaps amongst the Tuareg, ... and some Fulbe groups. The period at which it is practiced varies from one population to the other: amongst the Moors, girls are operated on the seventh day after birth, among the Fulbe and the Soninke it is done when the girls are around three years old, a little later among the Tukulors (around four years old) and generally at puberty (around ten or twelve years of age), or even only at the time of marriage, amongst the other peoples.

In the third volume of his work, Delafosse (1972 [1912], vol. III, pp. 176-7) specifies that it is only the *tip* of the clitoris that is amputated. He is at that point concerned to fit what he now calls a "mutilation" into his black/white evolutionary scheme, as he writes that while all the "black" tribes of Upper Senegal and Niger practice excision, those belonging to the "white" race only "exceptionally" do. Further, he argues that the practice is "certainly not" of Muslim origin – and for him Islam is the religion of the "white tribes" of the region – as excision practices "... are found amongst populations that are unamenable to Islam and that have had very little contact with Muslims, while they are not practiced by others who have lived for centuries in contact with Muslims" (Ibid., 176, my translation). In any case, he continues, excision is part of animist initiation ordeals (Ibid., 177).

¹⁵⁴ I have not had the opportunity to conduct archival research.

After Delafosse, French and French-trained scholars of the region that is now Mali writing on excision abandon the regional perspective in favour of the “ethnological reason” which Amselle (1998, 5-24) so passionately denounces, isolating ethnic groups in the elusive search for their essential, pure characteristics. that is, untouched by Islam or the practices of neighbouring groups. Colonial administrator Charles Monteil provides us with the first example in his 1915 monograph on the Khassonke of the Kayes region. Monteil (1915, 225-35) gives a detailed and instructive description of excision rituals, some of which he attended himself. At the time, the circumcision of boys and girls was a collective project undertaken jointly in good years at the instigation of the village leader, during the cool season after harvest. From the moment that the rite was confirmed, nightly entertainment of drumming and dancing was organized by the young circumcised but unmarried men (*kamalenw*, sing. *kamalen*) for the whole village and their guests to attend.

All selected girls were excised on the same day. Monteil (Ibid., 226-7, my translation) describes the operation in words that reveal his disgust: “The girl aged ten to thirteen is seated on a rock; the operator, the wife of a blacksmith, goes behind her and slices her clitoris with a bad knife. This takes place inside of a courtyard, with only women in attendance. The bleeding, usually not profuse, is stopped with the application of plant ashes on the area.” The girls were then taken together into a room where they were to stay until fully healed. An old *woloso* woman,¹⁵⁵ whose medicinal expertise was recognized by the term *semamuso*¹⁵⁶ (which Monteil translate as “erudite” or “doctor”) was in charge of their upkeep and care. The girls were made to wear distinctive clothing for the seclusion period, clothing that was only washed at their public coming-out ceremony. For the first seven days¹⁵⁷ they were not allowed outside of the

¹⁵⁵ Monteil (Ibid., 227) writes “*captive de case*.”

¹⁵⁶ From *sema* = man in charge of newly circumcised boys (Bailleul 1996, s.v. *sema*).

¹⁵⁷ The number seven is ubiquitous not only in the magico-religious practices of most, if not all, groups in sahelian West Africa but also in North Africa as well as in judeo-christian traditions, indicating historical circulation of cosmological ideas (Amselle 1998, 130).

confinement room at all; afterwards they were allowed a little more freedom of movement, but had to walk shaking rattles to warn passers-by of their coming so that they could clear the way.

On the eighth day after the operation, a colourful character, the “*mama-dyombo*” entered the scene. This role was performed by a male *nùmu* or *woloso*, whose main function was to seek out sorcerers by achieving clairvoyance through trance during evening dances; those he accused – usually older women, Monteil deplors (Ibid., 227) – were condemned to death. The presence of sorcerers near the newly-excised girls was considered likely since “... it is said that evil spirits delight in the flesh of young girls” (Ibid., 229, my translation). Every night after that, the newly excised girls sat in front of their room, where their male and female friends came to tease and entertain them, dancing and singing with the “*mama-dyombo*.”

Once the girls were fully healed, the day for the purification ceremony at the river was set. Girls were ritually bathed in the river, while the “*mama-dyombo*” entertained the whole village nearby. Afterwards the girls returned home to be adorned with new clothes and jewelry. The beautified initiates were then paraded through the village to the sound of drums. A few days later, preferably on a Friday, the newly excised were formally and individually presented by a *jèli* to the assembly of noble patriarchs in front of the whole community. At this point they received presents from friends and family, and the *jèli* displayed and announced the gifts, encouraging a competition for generosity amongst gift-givers. Days of feasting followed in the households of the initiates at great expense, which is why such celebrations were only held in good harvest years. Even so, “... it often happens that, incapable to cover the considerable expenses of the ritual, some families proceed with the excision in the intimacy of their home and without celebration, but this is no doubt contrary to custom, done with regret, and youth do not easily accept it” (Ibid., 234, my translation).

Nine years later, Monteil (1977 [1924]) published another monograph, this time on the Bamanan peoples of Segu and Kaarta. The communal rite he described (Ibid., 240-8) bears many similarities to that of the Khassonke. In Segu and Kaarta also, expenses were a concern, and it

was not every year that circumcision took place. When the assembly of male heads of households decided that it would be held, it involved girls and boys concurrently and there was much feasting, and evening singing, drumming and dancing for the whole community. Differences between the Bamanan and Khassonke descriptions include abundant consumption of millet beer by men in Segu and Kaarta, and the fact that Bamanan circumcision customarily took place, according to Monteil (Ibid., 240) on the third day of “the feast of the sheep” – that is, the Muslim festival of *'Id al-adha*, called *Tabaski* in Mali – in an early example of the incorporation of Islam in local rituals.¹⁵⁸

On the day of the surgical operations themselves, both boys and girls were circumcised (separately) under a tree outside of the village by *nùmuw*. In the case of the girls, Monteil (Ibid., 243) specifies that birth attendants assisted the “wives of the blacksmiths” in the operation, holding the girls and “presenting” them to the *nùmùmuso*. Monteil does not describe how the ablation of the clitoris was performed, but he specifies that once removed “... it is deposited in a sort of small basket: it is kept as something precious from which to make talismans” (Ibid., 244, my translation). The success of the operation was announced to the village, as for the boys, by firing guns into the air, and an offering was made by the head of the *kɔmɔ* society on the altar of the girl’s family. Once excised, the girls stayed together in a designated room under the supervision and care of an old *semamusu* (caste unspecified). Bamanan girls of Segu and Kaarta at that time were also required to make noise with a specific instrument to alert villagers of their presence when they left the room to answer nature’s call in the bush.

According to Monteil, the most important event – the one that relatives and friends, even from far away, would make a point of attending – consisted in a large celebration on the sixth night after the operation. This was the ceremony at which the newly circumcised were presented to the community and received presents. The girls were reintegrated in a manner emically

¹⁵⁸ For other examples and a discussion see Amselle (1998, 117-35).

interpreted as signifying a rebirth: wrapped in a cotton blanket with their heads freshly shaved. the girls lay between the legs of their (classificatory) mothers¹⁵⁹ on a white sheet (Ibid., 245-6). This was followed by dancing and ritual steps. The next morning (the seventh day) the girls washed their clothes in the river. They remained in the care of the *semamuso* until all were fully healed (usually for a three week period), and at that point everything that was used for their care was burned and “magical” rites were performed to ensure that the final reintegration of the circumcised into society took place safely. Before being allowed to go home, the newly circumcised had to jump three times over the fire where their liminal possessions were being burned. They and the whole village then got ready for one last celebration, during which the newly circumcised boys and girls danced attired in adult clothing, the girls covered with jewelry. They received presents. Afterwards the circumcised, young men and young women separately, traveled through the region to thank those who assisted them.

Writing nearly thirty years later after conducting research among the Bamanan of the Bamako (Koulikoro) and Segu regions, Germaine Dieterlen (1951) of the Griaule school was more interested in the metaphysical aspects of excision. Let me quote her description at length (Ibid., 188, my translation):

The operation is performed by a potter, the wife of a blacksmith, with a little knife made of iron. The blade is male and represents the sun; the haft is female, representing both the clitoris and the moon. The woman protects herself from the *wanzo*¹⁶⁰ of the operated girls by wearing bracelets and amulets and putting a black paste on her eyes.

The operation takes place in the daytime, near the village, in front of the relatives. In certain communities, it takes place near the potters' firing place. Each girl is in turn seated on an upside-down pot, and operated while prayers are recited. ...

The young girls must not cry nor moan; to the contrary, they sing to celebrate the departure of the *wanzo*.

¹⁵⁹ It could be a relative or friend of the biological mother.

¹⁶⁰ Dieterlen (1951, 64) defines “*wanzo*” as an evil force present in children of both sexes until removed by circumcision. It would have originated in the impurity of the mythical character Mousso (*Muso*) Koroni, the first circumciser (see below). I never heard the term in the field, but it is also reported by Fellous (1981), who worked in Koniobla, a village south of Bamako. While the word *wanzo* does not appear in Bailleul's (1996) dictionary, a related term, *wàansòfili* is translated as “ancient celebration for girls in Beledugu” (Ibid., s. v. *wàansòfili*, my translation from the French). As for the etymology of the word, “*fili*” means “throw away,” whereas Bailleul only provides a question mark for the meaning and origin of the first particle, “*wàansò*.”

During the retreat, they wear around their heads a piece of white cloth, colour of Faro [Bamanan god of water, according to Dieterlen].... They agitate a calabash, ... filled with eight grains or small rocks, the sound of which keeps passers-by away from their path. The jumps they make over the fire where clothes, calabashes and garbage are burning terminate the retreat period and rid them of their *wanzo* that migrates to the altars of the *ndomo* [secret society of uncircumcised boys].

It is said of a well-excised girl that she is well-behaved and holds herself in a dignified manner. On the contrary it is said of a loose girl that ... her excision was defective.

In her description Dieterlen highlights the danger of excision for the operators, which we will discuss in Chapter 8, as well as their identity as potters. She also is the first to stress that girls, just like boys, had to prove their stoicism and courage during the operation. Like Monteil above, she notes that during the liminal phase, the newly-circumcised must spare others the danger of a chance encounter by making noise while walking.¹⁶¹ Another similarity between the two authors is that both report that jumping over the fire terminated the liminal period. Finally, Dieterlen briefly mentions the belief that excision affects the capacity for *hɔɔnya* (dignity, control of sexuality) of a young woman.

Concerning the Mandinka, we have an early description from a colonial administrator, Georges Chéron (1933), who does not indicate the exact source area for his data. His description bears a family resemblance to all the ones above. *Bolokoli*, he said, normally took place every two years approximately three months after harvest;¹⁶² the decision to perform the rite and its exact date were announced by the village leader. The girls' operation took place on a Thursday, and the boys' on a Friday, and the male and female circumcisers were *nūmuw*. A large communal celebration was held the night before

¹⁶¹ During fieldwork I did not see girls with circumcision rattles, but once while being driven between Segu and Bamako I saw a group of (presumably newly-circumcised) boys walking along the side of the road carrying these distinctive instruments and dressed in a special manner (i.e., traditional clothing made of home-woven cotton bands as opposed to the usual Western T-shirts or tank tops).

¹⁶² Chéron notes that previously *bolokoli* took place in the years when Venus was particularly bright, but that this custom is no longer observed, except for the circumcision of eldest sons. This demonstrates that

the operations, with lavish eating, drinking, drumming and dancing. Mid-way through the night the girls were taken into a seclusion room where they spent the rest of the night chewing on kola nuts. In the morning they bathed and shaved off their pubic hair, before being taken to the *nùmùmuso*.

Chéron (1933, 301, my translation) is the first to mention that things could go wrong: “if the blood flows abundantly, which sometimes happens, the blacksmith-woman cleans the wound with water and a bundle of palm bark fibers.” And again, after describing the manner in which a piece of cloth is wrapped between the girls’ legs to form a sort of “diaper,” he adds: “In case of hemorrhaging another cloth is wrapped around the girl in the regular skirt-like manner” (Ibid., my translation).

The actual operation is described in some detail, with Chéron (Ibid.) even providing us with the dimensions of the excision knife. He reports that the operation took place inside the mother’s courtyard, sometimes in the bath and latrine area. Reinforcing age hierarchies, the eldest girl in the group was operated on first, and given the title *kùntigi* (chief, leader or head). Girls were excised naked, sitting on a flat rock, and interestingly, facing east.¹⁶³ Instead of a birth attendant holding the girl as in Monteil’s Bamanan case above, Chéron says that this was done by the girl’s mother, her closest female relatives and her family’s favourite *jèlimuso* (female praise-singer). In a role typical of her *siya*, at the end of the operation the *jèlimuso* declaimed that the girl had been courageous and the *nùmùmuso* skillful (Ibid.).¹⁶⁴ At this point the girl’s mother expressed her joy and relief by rolling on the ground and covering her shoulders with dust, while the sister or aunt of the excised girl massaged her chest and back with shea butter. Then the excised girl went to the nearby circle of singing and dancing women to perform a few dance steps

even in a period (1930s) that acts as a reference point for the purity or immutability of tradition for today’s informants, changes were taking place.

¹⁶³ Chéron does not explain the symbolism of this spatial orientation; east in Mali, of course, is the direction of Mecca towards which a Muslim prays. Chéron does not say whether the Mandinka whose customs he is describing were Islamized or not.

before being taken into seclusion. The *nùmumuso* received ten to thirteen francs for the operation, as well as the head and back of the animal killed by the family during the previous night's feast.

As in the Khassonke and Bamanan cases above, Chéron (Ibid.) reports that during seclusion the newly circumcised girls were in the care of a woman titled *semamuso*, and he specifies that the seclusion room was in this woman's courtyard, who received food and eventually the girls' sleeping mats in exchange for her services. Chéron reports that a younger, non-excised girl stayed with the initiates to run their errands – a typical younger sister role, as discussed in Chapter 3. The Mandinka retreat lasted two months. During the first two weeks – the period it usually took for the wound to heal – the girls were not allowed to do anything, and when they went out of the seclusion room to go to the latrine they had to cover their heads with a veil (Ibid., 302); there is no mention of rattles in Chéron's account. If they encountered a man, speaking to him was forbidden and could result in corporal punishment, unless the man gave the girl some money.

Although Chéron (Ibid., 300) writes that at the end of the period of seclusion boys received new, adult clothing, he does not mention anything equivalent in the case of the girls. He does not describe any reintegration ceremony or celebration: for the boys, the male *sema* takes them back home individually where they receive special clothing; nothing is said about the manner in which the girls return home. He specifies however, that the group of excised girls, after the retreat, goes to neighbouring villages to visit relatives (Ibid., 302).

Concerning other Mande groups, almost no information is available on excision practices of the Bozo and Somono fisherfolks. N'Diaye (1970a, 431, my translation), who does not

¹⁶⁴ While Chéron (1933, 299) wrote that a boy's successful circumcision was announced by the firing of guns (as in the case reported by Monteil above for the Bamanan), he does not mention that the same was done for girls.

consider that the Somono are an ethnic group.¹⁶⁵ simply informs us that circumcision (for boys) and excision (for girls) are mandatory among the Bozo, "... especially that they [these practices] are required by Islam which is said to be their fundamental religion." Some of my data from Somono and Bozo informants indicate that at least in some of their communities, excision was structured, as with the cases above, as a puberty rite of passage. For a Somono widow in her sixties, interviewed in Mopti in March 1998, excision was associated with graduating from school at age fourteen; she did not, however, provide us with a description of the rite.¹⁶⁶ Another respondent in Mopti, a 45-year old Bozo woman whose livelihood came primarily from making bracelets,¹⁶⁷ shared this with us about her excision: "It has been a long time! I was eleven or twelve. It was at that age that it was done. And for the boy, he was circumcised, and sometime later, he was given a wife." She also indicated that excision took place in the dry season in her village of origin, around the time that we were interviewing (March) and until the rains came, but never during the rainy agricultural season. Another Bozo woman in Mopti, age 37, described her excision in this way: "Everybody else healed before I did. We had to jump a wall, and when I jumped I got hurt. There were two or three hundred girls. They bring you to the river. All Bozo went there at that time."¹⁶⁸ A forty-two year old Mopti trader who said her *siya* was *numu* for the Somono and the Bozo informed us that at the time of her excision – when she was about 15 years old, that is, around 1971 – "... it was done on the shore of the river."¹⁶⁹ Finally, the case a twenty-one year old Bozo student in Segou, originally from Maasina (in the Mopti region), reminds us that while the age at excision in Mali in general has declined, this is not universal: this informant was excised when she was thirteen years old. Asked to describe the rite, she answered "I forgot."

¹⁶⁵ He writes (N'Diaye 1970a, 419, my translation): "... strictly speaking, there does not exist a Somono ethnic group, nor are there Somono customs. In fact, from an ethnic point of view, this group is composed of a mixture of different races: Bamanan, Soninke, Bobo, etc. Therefore the Somono, for the most part, had kept the customs of their group of origin before adopting the rules of the Qur'an following the conquest of their homelands by El Hajj Umar's Tukulors."

¹⁶⁶ Interview Mf36, 06/03/98.

¹⁶⁷ Interview Mf31, 05/03/98.

¹⁶⁸ Interview Mf49, 07/03/98.

¹⁶⁹ Interview Mf16, 04/03/98.

Asked about the possible consequences of excision, she said “death”; of non-excision, “shame.”¹⁷⁰

The case of the last Mande group reviewed here, the Soninke of the Kayes region, differs markedly from the rest. N’Diaye (1970a, 200), whose source appears to be the colonial monograph by Saint-Père (1925), explains that excision is practiced on very young infants, sometimes the day after their name-giving ceremony, with no celebration whatsoever. The operation is performed discretely by a “*forgeronne*” (blacksmith-woman), sometimes without the father’s knowledge. In their 1971 monograph on the Soninke chiefdom of Dyahumu (Kayes region, Yelimane *cercle*, near the border with Mauritania), anthropologists Eric Pollet and Grace Winter (1971, 449) report on excision in almost exactly the same terms, with some more details. The operation, they report, was practiced fifteen days after birth, with a knife. No ceremony accompanies the cutting, which is only attended by the infant’s mother, occasionally accompanied by a few kinfolk. The exciser, they say, was paid with a measure (*nudd*) of millet or with a piece of soap; she was generally the “wife of a blacksmith” or a Moor woman. Rarely, according to Pollet and Winter (*Ibid.*), the operation was performed by a blacksmith. It is interesting to note that, according to Delafosse above, N’Diaye (1970a, 50) and more recently Aline Tauzin (1988, 31), excision is also practiced in infancy without any accompanying ceremony nor celebration among the Moors, the Soninke’s neighbours.

As for Fulbe groups in Mali, information on excision in the literature is extremely scarce, and it appears that practices varied from one region to another. We saw above that Delafosse (1972 [1912], Vol.I, 331) reported that not all Fulbe groups practiced excision, and that those who did, circumcised girls at around age three. Neither Dupire (1963) nor Riesman (1974), who worked with Fulbe groups in, respectively, the neighbouring countries of Niger and Burkina Faso, mention excision. N’Diaye (1970a, 76, my translation) writes:

¹⁷⁰ Interview Gf61, 07/12/97.

According to some of my informants, in some regions [of Mali] circumcision [of boys] is not marked by any celebration worthy of note whereas excision [for girls] is accompanied by major festivities. This custom is very rare since the majority of the Fulbe have the same customs as most of the other peoples when circumcision and excision are concerned.

As a matter of fact for the majority, it is circumcision which is accompanied by joyful ceremonies whereas excision is done discretely while the girls is still young, either an infant or a very young child.

N'Diaye (Ibid., 76-7) concludes that whatever the case may be, circumcision and excision are part of Fulbe traditions, and he proceeds to describe the festivities and rites surrounding boys' circumcision, which include opening and closing nights of dancing, drumming and feasting, a seclusion period, and at the conclusion of the rite, the donning of adult clothing. Concerning the Tukolor or Futanke Fulbe who arrived in Mali as members of al-Hajj Umar Tall's armies or entourage, their excision and circumcision practices, as described by N'Diaye (1970a, 458-9) are similar, with excision done discretely to female newborns while boys were circumcised at the age of ten or twelve as part of a rite of passage.

Producing Women: Rites of Passage and the Socialization of Sexuality

Donbelekuni can no longer insult me
the barely nubile girl
she cannot answer me disrespectfully
I who am a woman

At the time of eating the evening porridge
I was very worried
on the Sunday night, at the time of the evening porridge
I was very worried, eh!

Early in the morning, I washed myself
on Monday, early in the morning, I washed myself, eh!
at sunrise, I became a woman
on Monday, at sunrise, I became a woman, eh!

Somebody ran as fast as possible
to tell Numudyon [the *nimu* and the *jɔn*?]
the little girl no longer has parents
she has become a woman

Somebody ran as fast as possible
to tell Ba about me, Ba of Sengala
the little girl no longer has parents
she has become a woman

Donbelekuni can no longer insult me
the barely nubile girl
she cannot answer me disrespectfully
I who am a woman

*Excision song collected in the period 1964-72
in the Bamanan village of Beleko, south-east of Bamako
(Luneau 1981, 38-39, my translation from the French)*

It is obvious from all the descriptions of Mande excision presented above – with the notable exception of the Soninke – that excision for girls was one event in a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, that is, the moment at which adult productive and reproductive responsibilities started. The simultaneous circumcision of boys was similarly structured and performed the same function. Recent scholarship on excision in Mali – all of which concerns the Bamanan (Amal-Soumaré 1996; Brett-Smith 1982; Diarra 1992; Koné 1997) – concurs, by and large, with this analysis, but all authors face the analytical difficulty of explaining the persistence of the cutting while the attending initiation rites have in many cases (especially in urban areas) disappeared with the lowering of the age at which excision takes place.

Tiéman Diarra (1992), who conducted research between 1977 and 1983 in 146 villages in the Beledugu area and himself underwent initiation, is not too concerned with the physical operation itself. For him, the initiatory act is only a pretext for socialization, and the main goal of the period of seclusion and of the fraternities and sororities that are formed afterwards amongst those circumcised together, is to teach the values of Bamanan agricultural society: hard work and discipline, respect for biological and social seniors, communalism as opposed to individualism, and fertility. Some of these teachings are gender-specific, and relate to the socialization of sexuality: adolescent boys are taught which women are off-limits as “friends” (Ibid., 196) and girls are instructed in their duties as wives. More specifically: “It is asked of them to

consolidate social relationships [probably matrimonial alliances], not to endanger them by their behaviour, and to respect and execute the husband's orders whatever they might be" (Diarra 1992, 197, my translation). Faithfulness to their future husband is also exhorted, and the new women are told that their submissiveness will be rewarded through the success and good character of their children.¹⁷¹ In his article, Diarra notes the lowering of the age at which boys' and girls' circumcision takes place and the elimination of some of the steps of the rites in a significant number of villages, but does not offer an explanation for it.

Kassim Koné (1997) originally from the Beledugu area, who identifies himself as Bamanan and bases his paper mostly on personal experience, reports an emic explanation for performing the ablation of prepuces and clitori at a younger age. Informants explained to Koné that the mortality rate of those circumcised as teenagers was too high, because they were more likely to be the victims of sorcery (evil magic) attacks. The author goes on to explain that while for pre-pubescent girls, excision has been disassociated from initiation into womanhood, this initiation has not disappeared, but has simply been postponed until the *fura*, a step in the Bamanan marriage ritual. In this ceremony as described by Koné (Ibid.), a *nùmumuso* ties four times around the waist of the (long excised) bride a *basiya* cloth, which is a special type of mud-dyed cloth that acts as a talisman against evil in the affines' household and village (if the groom is from a different village) (cf. Brett-Smith 1982). The fact that it is this ceremony that marks the transition from childhood and the father's household to womanhood and the husband's household is apparent in the fact that according to Koné (Ibid.), "the end of this ceremony is marked by long and sustained cries of the girls' immediate relatives who see in this act the end of her childhood innocence and the beginning of a [*sic*] laborious life that is expecting her in her husband's compound." In such cases then, excision and final transformation as an adult woman – a wife – have been separated in time, but excision still appears to be a necessary, if not sufficient,

¹⁷¹ I continuously heard this 'common-sense' notion that children's character depends on their mother's in Mali.

condition for womanhood among the Beledugu Bamanan. Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1989), who conducted fieldwork in the Sana province of the Segou region (Sansanding *arrondissement*) among Bamanan people in 1981-1982 argues that it was always marriage, and not excision, that turned girls into women. Among the villagers with whom she worked, excision, unlike boys' circumcision, did not bring about a formal change in status (Ibid., 173-4).

Grosz-Ngaté (Ibid., 174) states that what is equivalent in boys' and girls' circumcisions is that in both cases, the ablation removes the substance of the opposite sex, therefore socially setting their previously ambiguous gender. It is not clear from her article how Grosz-Ngaté arrived at this conclusion, a common symbolic interpretation of circumcision rituals in various African societies, perhaps most famously presented, for the region with which we are concerned, by Marcel Griaule (1965, 155-61). Germaine Dieterlen (1951, 187, my translation), a student of Griaule, takes up the androgyny argument briefly in her discussion of Bamanan male circumcision, writing "the child at that time loses the physical support of the female sex, that is, the prepuce: he becomes a man, (*vir*), ready to perform his male reproductive role." No parallel exegesis is presented for excision, and no other evidence is offered to support the argument that uncircumcised children are considered androgynous; indeed, Dieterlen (1951, 87) reports that hermaphrodites are considered exceptional individuals and that a special metaphysical interpretation of their personhood exists (i.e., they have no *dya*, the 'double' or twin of the opposite sex that is apparent in one's shadow).

What Dieterlen (Ibid.) is clear about, as seen in the quote in the previous section, is that a dangerous invisible substance, *wanzo*, is believed to be located in clitori and prepuces, and is removed with circumcision. Michelle Fellous (1981, 205, 212, my translation), who studied the socialization of Bamanan village children near Bamako, reports that until circumcision, "the child is considered to be possessed by a force, the *wanzo*, that makes the child asocial and irresponsible," and that "at the moment of circumcision, the *wanzo* is liberated from the wound of

the circumcised youth and accumulates in the mask of the junior society, that of the *bilakoro* [*bilakòrow* – the uncircumcised].” Koné (1997) has recently used this emic interpretation (he cites Dieterlen), to support the androgynous exegesis, equating the irresponsibility of young children and their apparent immunity to the breaking of taboos with androgyny, and *wanzo* with unassigned gender.

During the entire length of my fieldwork, after talking with over 500 Malian men and women from all walks of life, some of whom were considered experts on excision, not a single person interpreted the operation as removing the male part of the female body.¹⁷² One woman in Segou, however, was convinced that left uncut, the clitoris would grow long. Usually I did not contradict informants, but on that day I lost my patience and said to her: “I am not circumcised and I can tell you that it does not grow any bigger than this”: (I showed her the tip of my pen). Unfazed, the woman counteracted with evidence of her own: one of their maids, she said, was uncircumcised, and one day she saw her and “it” was the length of an index finger, and sticking up.¹⁷³ The regional government officer for the Status of Women in Segou told me that “... the problem in Segou is that there are ancient conceptions that cause people to say that non-excised girls look like men” (“*ressemblent à un homme*” – interview conducted in French).¹⁷⁴ A few women also reported the belief that an uncircumcised woman would have problems “with her husband” (i.e., during intercourse) or at parturition.¹⁷⁵ Most interestingly, a Marka woman, born in 1954 in Nioro and now living in Segou explained: “If a girl is not excised, the Sarakole [Soninke] used to say that at the time of giving birth, what is cut, it would be placed at the exit and would prevent birthing, to the point that they used to tie it up [the clitoris]. This was because

¹⁷² Sarah Brett-Smith (1982) is categorical that the Beledugu Bamanan villagers with whom she worked in the late 1970s had no notion of circumcision erasing the attribute of the opposite sex in children.

¹⁷³ Interview Gff18, 01/12/97.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Mme Diarra Kadiatou Samboura, Segou, 09/12/97, who did not want her answers to be anonymous.

¹⁷⁵ Interviews Kf53, 20/09/97 and Gf67, 08/12/97 with two Bamanan women; more women in Sikasso reported such beliefs, but this area is not covered here.

they were ignorant.”¹⁷⁶ This woman had traveled extensively throughout the region as a trader, to Dakar, Lagos and Abidjan, and so was well aware that some large ethnic groups, such as the Wolof in Senegal, do not excise girls and yet Wolof women give birth without undue difficulties, as several informants from Kayes (close to the border with Senegal) remarked.

Latent androgynous perceptions are indicated in the work of Freudian analyst Dominique Lutz-Fuchs (1994), who in the 1970s practiced psychotherapy for two years on female patients in Bamako. Lutz-Fuchs (Ibid., 65, 89, *passim*) concurs with the analysis that in Mali, womanhood is motherhood, and she concludes from her case studies that the purpose of excision is to emphasize fertility as opposed to sexuality, to “forcibly vaginalize women.” One of her patients, Kadiatou, a thirty-two-year old Bamanan woman married to a Pulo and mother of seven children after ten pregnancies, was ‘badly’ excised. Kadiatou (Ibid., 58) recalls that the exciser became angry when she found out that her family had got a male nurse to give her an injection (unspecified) before her excision at age fourteen or fifteen in a medical centre. In retaliation, the exciser left part of the clitoris uncut. Far from considering herself lucky for this partial ablation, Kadiatou has always suffered from feeling different from other women. She came to Lutz-Fuchs because she felt abnormal in that unlike her friends, she did not achieve vaginal orgasm, but instead had a clitoral climax. In her words (Lutz-Fuchs 1994, 57, my translation from the French): “I do not pour at the same time as the husband, but after intercourse, tightening my legs together,” and further “I achieve orgasm [*je jouis*] even when the husband is not there. I have pleasure [*je jouis*] with my legs tight. Otherwise, I do not come [*je ne jouis pas*]; I wonder why...” Kadiatou felt intense shame about her little piece of uncut clitoris, which she compared to a penis in these words: “I am ashamed, I am like a man, because apparently it can be seen” (Ibid., 63, my translation).

Certainly Malian women’s discourse on sexuality is oriented towards the vagina. All of the sexual lore that my Bamako women friends shared with me had to do with vaginal

¹⁷⁶ Interview Gf53, 07/12/97.

lubrication. Before my marriage ceremony in Bamako in February 1998 (to a Canadian), my sexually experienced (not necessarily married) female Malian friends told me that I should eat large amounts of “*bouillie*,” a viscous white rice- or millet-based sweet porridge, because it would make me “pour.” Traditionally, they explained, this is all the bride would consume during the seven-day retreat before she was taken to the ‘honeymoon’ chamber.¹⁷⁷ Other than *bouillie*, there are some roots and seeds that are said to achieve the same result, and they are readily available in Bamako markets. This knowledge is in the public domain, and now even in print, as two recipes for herbal drinks thought to increase lubrication were published in *Faro*, Adame Ba Konaré’s new women’s magazine (Anonymous 1999). When such preparations fail to make them “pour” (*verser*), women do go to the hospital for consultations, as a midwife we interviewed in Kayes told us.¹⁷⁸

Vaginal dryness is associated not only with unpleasurable intercourse but also with infertility. Symbolically, this association between dryness and infertility is not surprising in a Sahelian subsistence agricultural society where drought brings death and rain is the source of life. Lutz-Fuchs, who as a therapist was able to have much more detailed and intimate discussions with women about sexuality, reports that her patients’ theory of conception assigned a fecundating function to vaginal secretions: “The woman pours, the man pours after, the two liquids come together and it makes a child,” one of her patients explained (Lutz-Fuchs 1994, 94, my translation). Another one of her patients, Rokia, reported that she lost three lovers who feared that her failure to have pleasure and “pour” meant that she would not be able to conceive and therefore did not want to marry her (Ibid., 106). Another indication that a number of people in Mali think of vaginal secretions and sperm as playing equivalent roles in conception is the fact

¹⁷⁷ A young, Western-educated bride whose wedding I attended in Kati near Bamako told me that in fact, the main purpose of this custom was to weaken the bride so she could not resist the husband’s advances nor run away from him. Another informant, a thirty-some year old single Mandinka male friend in Bamako commented, when I shared this interpretation with him, that a groom who really loves his bride will clandestinely bring her meat during the seclusion period.

¹⁷⁸ Interview Kff45, 20/09/97.

that one of my expert informants, a *numu* exciser in her forties in Kayes, used the Mande word for sperm, “*lāwa*” (which can also mean “desire”), to talk about the vaginal secretions that she insisted are absolutely necessary for sexual pleasure – unlike the clitoris, in her view.¹⁷⁹

A sexually-frustrated, rejected first wife is made responsible for the invention of female and male circumcision in a Bamanan myth of origin reported by Germaine Dieterlen (1951, 1-33). In this myth, the spirit of the primordial vibration (« *yereyereli* ») produced a male being called Pemba. Initially contained in an acacia seed, after 7 years Pemba landed on Earth, and grew to become a *balansan* (a type of acacia) tree, which quickly died due to drought. Pemba, present in a remaining desiccated branch, grew tired of his solitude and created a female being, *Mūsòkɔɔnin* (literally, “little old woman”).¹⁸⁰ *Mūsòkɔɔnin* copulated with the desiccated branch – in the process mutilating herself – and gave birth to a disorderly creation of plants and animals. To better dominate his creation, Pemba reappeared as a mature tree, the *balansan*, who was not satisfied in a monogamous relationship, and *Mūsòkɔɔnin* became the mythical archetype of the jealous co-wife,¹⁸¹ who created circumcision and menstruation (Ibid., 18, my translation):

But the *balanza* [*balansan*] was no longer satisfied with Mousso Koroni. He required that all the human females also make love to him, which they did from then on. This added to his vitality and his power as he was nourished by their sap in the same way as he had been from the sap of his first female companion. But she, filled with jealousy, introduced ill will in all things; she refused to share him, and did not come close to him any more, refusing him the love and faithfulness she had promised. She isolated herself and not only did she stop contributing to creation, she started to work to undermine it. This was the origin of her demise, of her poverty and her tiredness, as the *balanza* banished her.

She was then possessed by such nostalgia and despair that she became crazy. She traveled across sky, space and earth, from West to North and from South to East. ... During this voyage, Mousso Koroni, who had been mutilated on the *pembele* [the desiccated branch] when she had had sexual intercourse with it, decided to harm the others in the same way : in a fury, she circumcised and excised with her nails and teeth all the human beings she encountered. The violence of these acts caused the first menstruation to appear in her.

¹⁷⁹ Interview KE1, 11/09/97.

¹⁸⁰ Dieterlen spells her name “Mousso Koroni.” *Mūsòkɔɔnin* is a pejorative term for an elderly woman, as opposed to *mūsòkɔɔba* (“very old woman”), a term of respect (Baillieu 1996, 283).

¹⁸¹ It should be noted that in Bamanakan, one of the words for jealousy literally means “the state of co-wifery,” or “the condition of being a co-wife,” *sināya*.

There are many obvious lessons to be drawn from the story of *Mūsòkɔɔnin* in a polygynous, patriarchal and virilocal society such as that of the Bamanan. *Mūsòkɔɔnin* refuses to share her husband with her co-wives and protests by refusing to continue “creation” – or we could say *procreation* – and she is punished by social ostracism. In her jealous fury she sexually mutilates all humans who have stolen her husband the *balanza* from her. The origin of circumcision (and of menstruation, hence periodic infertility) is therefore blamed on the folly of a bitter and isolated old woman – the typical profile of the sorcerer. However, when women’s sexuality is properly controlled by the husband, their “sap” nourishes him, and by extension, his descendants.

The necessity to socially control, to tame female sexuality, is reflected in another myth concerning the origin of excision, told to my assistant and me in September 1997 in Kayes by a *nùmu* exciser in her forties, who, aside from excision, earned a living as a hairdresser (a typical occupation for *nyamakalaw* women). Married, a mother of eleven children, she said that she was Muslim and had no formal education. Both her patrilineal and matrilineal kin were circumcisers, and it was her *tɛnɛmuso* (father’s sister) who had taught her how to excise when she was young, “before my marriage,” she said. She related this story:

In the past there was a woman with a lot of *nyama*. When her husband wanted to touch her, he would see light like fire coming out of his wife’s sex. Because of that he couldn’t take her but he wanted her so badly that he lost weight. People asked him what he was suffering from. They sent a *jɔn*, Bilal, to ask him what he was suffering from. The husband explained and told Bilal: ‘If you really want to know you stay close by tonight and I will try to touch my wife.’ Bilal stayed. When the husband tried to lift his wife’s skirt, the *jɔn* saw. He told the old men and the old women. They returned the woman to her parents. The elders said: ‘In order to fix this go to Dufaïlo, since smiths know how to fix things. Take the woman to Dufaïlo.’ So Dufaïlo’s wife, Mariam, she cut the *nɔgɔ* [the “dirty thing” – in this case, the clitoris]. Once she had cut the *nɔgɔ* she threw it and ‘pft!’ it caught on fire. The woman returned to her husband. After that the husband did not

have any problems. Then Mariam said that men who want to marry shouldn't do it unless the woman has been cut.¹⁸²

Here, the uncut clitoris, because of the *nyama* it emits, prevents intercourse with the socially approved sexual partner and genitor of one's future progeny, the husband. That *nùmuw* be responsible for handling the "fire" of unsocialized sexuality is consistent with their main traditional occupations as smiths and potters, two crafts that require the use of fire to transform matter. The circumcision of both boys and girls liberates dangerous amounts of *nyama*, as evidenced in the precautions that both male and female *nùmuw* take prior to and during the operation (see Chapter 8). I believe this is because of the bleeding, since blood (of all animals including humans) is one of the sites of *nyama* – hence its use in sacrifices. The fact that excision is usually performed early in the morning because this is believed to reduce the amount of bleeding could therefore be seen not only as a measure to protect girls from hemorrhaging, but also as a protection for the exciser, if I am correct in locating *nyama* in the blood of the newly circumcised.

The clitoris is also "dirty" in the above story. Starting from Mary Douglas' (1975) premise that dirt is "matter out of place,"¹⁸³ we can argue that if, as some of the data presented above suggests, the clitoris is considered a male organ, then it is, indeed, 'out of place,' 'dirty' on a woman's body. Another possible explanation for my informant's choice of the word *nɔgɔ* to designate the clitoris is suggested by the work of Sarah Brett-Smith (1982) on the meaning of *bolokoli*. She argues that "excision for the Bamana is a spiritual and physical cleaning, a voyage from the disorderly dirt of childhood to the regulated cleanliness of adult life" (Ibid., 15). She notes that one of the phrases used euphemistically to designate circumcision, *ka bolokò*, literally translates as "washing the hands." Further, young children "revel in dirt" (Ibid., 18), and indeed another author working in a Bamanan village reported that dirtiness is considered to be a

¹⁸² Interview KE1, 11/09/97.

¹⁸³ In fact Douglas (1975, 50) attributed this observation to Lord Chesterfield, without giving a reference.

characteristic of the uncircumcised (*bilakòrow*) (Fellous 1981, 205). My data, however, does not allow me to corroborate Brett-Smith's thesis that dirt is *nyama*-filled, and that *bolokoli* functions as a sacrifice which through the shedding of blood, removes the *nyama* of childhood (acquired, she says, partly through contact with dirt). More simply, I would note that *bilakòrow* are primarily unsocialized, and that an important aspect of proper social behaviour – at least for *hɔɔnw* and *nyamakalaw* – is to keep oneself scrupulously clean (all Malians I came to know well bathed twice a day). This is part of the reason why, as we will see below, it is so insulting for an unexcised adult woman to be called “*bilakòro*.”

While Brett-Smith (1982, n.2) attempts to extirpate all Muslim influences in her informants' exegeses – rejecting some of her own data because it is “influenced by Islam” and therefore “somewhat inappropriate” in an article that “attempts to discuss a pre-Islamic matrix of beliefs” – I cannot do the same with my data from Kayes, the place where the above myth was collected, since that region has been Islamized for over a thousand years. During the entire length of fieldwork, only two of my informants used the word “*nɔɔɔ*” to designate the clitoris,¹⁸⁴ and both were Khassonke *nùmùmusow* in Kayes. I believe both these women were referring to the Muslim notion, often articulated with regards to boys, that the uncircumcised are not *ritually* clean, that is, not clean for prayer, impure. The same woman who recounted the “light like fire” myth later told us another story about a “nomad” with an unexcised wife (the full story appears in Chapter 9), in which she specifies that it was the *moriw* (Islamic teachers and healers) who told the nomad that his wife had “filth” (*nɔɔɔ*) that harmed her babies at birth.¹⁸⁵ The other, younger

¹⁸⁴ Dominique Lutz-Fuchs (1994, 98) wrote that this word is used to designate leukorrhea. While this is another example of the word “*nɔɔɔ*” being used in connection with female genitals, before concluding, as Lutz-Fuchs does, that this is another example of women's bodies being denigrated, it is important to realize that the primary meaning of “*nɔɔɔ*” is, according to Bailleul (1996, s. v. *nɔɔɔ*), “viscous matter,” and that *nɔɔɔji* (*nɔɔɔ* “water”) can mean spit, saliva or sperm (Ibid., s. v. *nɔɔɔji*).

¹⁸⁵ Interview KE1, 11/09/97.

exciser who used the word “*nɔɔɔ*” explained: “What we remove we call ‘*nɔɔɔ*.’ That way you are clean and purified when it is removed. The fact of being a Muslim is confirmed.”¹⁸⁶

In the “light like fire” myth above, it is not *all* women who have too much *nyama* in their clitori, but *one* wife who has this particular condition. In my interviews with *nɔmu* excisers. I asked them directly what they thought of Brett-Smith’s (1982) hypothesis that children possess dangerous levels of *nyama*. Some did not want to answer, but the same woman who shared the myth above explained: “In my household even if I did the excision myself, there were old women who really knew women and clitori. They looked beforehand to see whether when you cut the *nɔɔɔ*, whether the *nyama* will hurt you. Because some girls have a clitoris with a red tip or divided into two.” I then asked her who excised these girls with the dangerous clitori. She answered:

We do it ourselves, but the price is different. Here is an example of a danger: I could lose my eyes. Therefore I ask the mother of the girl to give something to counteract the effect – these are secrets. If you do not do this [give something], we can do something else, for instance make the clitoris come back or cause the child to die – if you have not kept your word – for revenge.

Another *nɔmu* exciser in the Khasso in Kayes, from the Kanté lineage, also said that only exceptional cases have too much *nyama* in their genitals, and she specified what it is that the parents must give in sacrifice. She explained:

There are children whose clitoris is straight with a small thing at the top the shape of a hat. This is a bad sign: there is *nyama*. You cannot excise such girls. You tell the parents that they must give things with four feet, for example a sheep, a goat or two roosters or two chickens. Otherwise, *nɔmuw* will take a piece of charcoal, pronounce incantations over it, throw it towards what they have to cut, and if she cuts, something will happen to the girl – when the parents do not fulfill the conditions. But if the parents agree, the charcoal, they throw it in a hole and then excise and it’s fine.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Interview KE5, 17/09/97.

¹⁸⁷ Interview KE2, 12/09/97. I think it is possible, even probable, that this exciser was referring to biological hermaphrodites with clitoral penes. To my knowledge, there has not been any research done on this form of ambiguous sex in Mali.

A third *nùmu* exciser in Kayes, who described her occupations as pottery-making, hairdressing and marriage counseling (acting as a “*manyon magan*”), and was married with eleven children, was less talkative but said that in cases of *nyama* in the child’s genitals, she asked for a cow before performing the operation.¹⁸⁸ Finally, a *nùmu* exciser in Mopti believed that it was children who were ill who had too much *nyama*, and in this case performing circumcision could cure the boy or the girl – just as it could quiet a baby who cried too much, said another *nùmu* woman in Kayes.¹⁸⁹

Leaving aside the issue of children who have too much *nyama*, the message of the myth of the woman with “light like fire” is clear: the socializing knife of the *nùmu* must remove the fire of untamed, male-like clitoral pleasure in order for female sexuality and fertility to be safely controlled through the institution of marriage, still to a large degree arranged by lineage heads (or minimally, fathers) in Mali. Controlling women’s sexuality – usually expressed as reducing women’s desire or more positively as making it easier for a woman to have self-control in the sexual sphere and remain a virgin until marriage and faithful once married – was one of the few purposes of excision that was verbalized by interviewees in the four cities where I administered the evaluation survey. The most common types of answers given by survey respondents have been grouped and summarized in Table 12 below:

¹⁸⁸ Interview KE3, 14/09/97.

¹⁸⁹ Interviews ME1, 07/11/97 and KE5, 17/09/97.

Table 12. Reasons why excision is performed, according to survey respondents in Kayes, Mopti and Segu (by gender)

4 most common types of answers	Kayes		Mopti		Segu		Total (%)		
	men n= 48	women n= 52	men n= 35	women n= 65	men n=4 2	women n= 58	men n= 125 (%)	women n= 175 (%)	men and women combined n= 300 (%)
It is our tradition	22	20	11	23	11	21	44 (35.2%)	64 (36.6%)	108 (36%)
To allow women to control their sexuality	9	7	7	6	9	4	25 (20%)	17 (9.7%)	42 (14%)
Islam requires it	7	4	5	11	9	5	21 (16.8%)	20 (11.4%)	41 (13.6%)
I don't know / I don't understand	5	6	5	13	5	14	15 (12%)	33 (18.9%)	48 (16%)

I will discuss how to make sense of the large number of people who are apparently satisfied to know that excision must be performed because it is a tradition, and the significant cases of those who state that they do not know or do not understand, in the last chapter of this dissertation. The case of Islamic requirements will be examined in Chapter 9. Here we simply note that when the responses of men and women are combined and the “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand” responses are excluded, the control of women’s sexuality is the second most common response to the question “why is excision practiced?” It is interesting that proportionally more men than women perceive excision as performing this function, although that is not to say that women have not internalized this argument, as the following quotes on the purposes of excision reveal:

- “Here some say that it is good; others say it is not good. Now people say it is not good. I have a daughter, my father said not to have her excised, because the way that excision is done now is not good. But here when we do not excise a girl, one man will not be sufficient for her, she will be forced to sleep with another man.” (Interview Gf29, 2 December 1997, with a

Marka woman in Segou, age 28, wife and mother of five children, with a Qur'anic education, working at home.)

- "For me it [excision] is good because here in Mali it is said that girls, if they are not excised, it gets too excited, too fast, and they are always ready to have sex." (Interview Mf32, 5 March 1998, with a 28-year old Mandinka woman in Mopti, married but childless, with a *Fundamental 2* [junior high school] education, working at home.)
- "It [excision] is a good thing because it allows the girl not to become a prostitute." (Interview Mf24, 5 March 1998, with a Bozo homemaker in Mopti, age 43, married with six children including five girls, who has completed Grade 9.)
- "My daughter here, she was circumcised; but the little one who is over there [the girl looks about 9 years old] – I take care of her – she has not been circumcised. Her mother, my sister, has raised her with white people. [Here the question, "why is excision practiced?" was repeated.] Our grand-parents, in the past, they said that if a girl is not circumcised, she will be too sensitive. She will look for boys. For us, this is shameful: it is boys who look for girls – a girl who looks for boys, it brings shame. Others say that it is ugly, that when you grow up it will grow. Others say it will be in the way at birthing." (Interview Kf34, 19 September 1997, with a 41-year old Fulbe woman in Kayes, divorced with two children, who speaks French but has never been to school, and does a little trading.)

The last quotation above, as well as the song with which I opened this section, remind us of the strength of the ideological constructs of honour and shame as self-disciplining mechanisms. From the way that informants speak in Mali, it seems that the psychological pain of shame is nearly unbearable, even if it is experienced in private and does not bring social ostracism – which is rare. There are even women who decide that the shame and humiliation of being unexcised is more painful than the physical operation itself, as we will discuss below in the section entitled "*bilakoro*." There are also others who fear Godly retribution. While shame and shaming are important social control mechanisms everywhere, they might be experienced more deeply in societies such as Mali where more value is placed on communalism as opposed to individualism, where privacy is almost non-existent, and where everybody – kin, co-wives, colleagues, friends, neighbours and even strangers on the bus or at the market – feels entitled to monitor and either praise or reprimand others' behaviour. While it is true to say that acceptance by the group is crucial everywhere, in a society like Mali where production and re-distribution of food and

wealth are largely organized through kin groupings and clientelist chains, rejection can threaten one's livelihood.

In the next section I look at hegemonic systems that perpetuate the practice of excision, from shaming the unexcised by calling them "*bilakòrow*," to men's attitudes towards marrying a non-excised woman. I end by reconsidering decision-making within the household, looking more specifically at who has the authority to enforce their decisions concerning the excision of girls they are responsible for.

Coercion and Rewards

Hence non-excised girls, there is the possibility that society will reject them to a certain extent: that her girl friends will tell her that she is non-excised. There is also the reaction of the husband: if she ends up with a conservative husband... I have a five-year old daughter who is not excised – my husband was in agreement. Now she is starting to have consciousness. Recently a cousin told her that she was not like her. I told her it did not matter, but...

Interview with a regional government officer for the Status of Women, 1997

Excision continues to be practiced by the majority in Mali mostly because the hegemonic structures and super-structures for ensuring conformism are still in place¹⁹⁰ (cf. Mackie, 1996). The above quote is rich in revealing those mechanisms. Even if the woman interviewed feels strongly about the harmfulness of excision – it is part of her job to educate others about the health risks of the practice – she fears that her unexcised daughter will feel rejected by her peers, and possibly in the future, by her husband. While a non-circumcised Mande or Fulbe woman in Mali will probably find a husband (and some men – but by no means all – say that they prefer uncircumcised women), she might always be stigmatized as *bilakòro*. This is the word that female friends and kin, and perhaps most cuttingly, co-wives, use to "tell" a girl that she is not excised, to let a woman know that she is different – and inferior. Finally, those who are most

receptive to the arguments of the campaign against excision often lack the authority within their household to prevent the excision of their daughters. This is why the civil servant interviewed above lets us know that she needed her husband's support in order not to excise her daughter. Any day however, she could come home from work and find, in a typical scenario, that a kinswoman who feels responsible for the girl (or sorry for her) has taken her daughter to the exciser, despite her and her husband's wishes.

Bilakòro

In translation, "*bilakòro*" means "uncircumcised," and strictly speaking, it should be used only for males, although urban Malian girls and women currently use it amongst themselves.¹⁹¹ The word has different connotations in different situations. When applied to young children it can be used descriptively, even fondly or amusingly. My host in Kalaban Koro, Safiatou, often lovingly called her baby son "*bilakòro*" when he had done something non-sensical, such as trying to eat something non-edible. In this sense, *bilakòro* refers to the lack of sense of young children, to their lack of integration into the world of responsibilities that comes with social puberty. Michèle Fellous (1981, 205, my translation and my emphasis) very perceptively studied Bamanan conceptions of childhood and processes of socialization, and her comments on the "collective representation of the *bilakoro*" are instructive: "The child has no conscience, people say, he cannot reason, '*bilakoro* are wild,' a young villager told me. They can cause harm. They roam around in groups, looking for animals that they kill and eat, something that a circumcised boy would never do. People say that they are dirty, that they eat a lot and dirtily. Also, *they do not know 'shame'.*" In other words, *bilakòrow* have not been socialized.

¹⁹⁰ A view also held by sociologist Assitan Diallo, as communicated during her presentation during the governmental seminar on excision (*Séminaire national pour la définition de stratégies d'éradication des mutilations génitales féminines*) held in Bamako 17-19 June 1997.

¹⁹¹ The *bila* used to be the clothing that boys would wear until circumcision (Chéron, 1933, 297, n.5). The equivalent piece of clothing for non-circumcised girls was the *npògo*, hence in that sense the synonym of

Given this conception of the *bilakôro*, it is easy to see why such a term would be felt as an insult by a youth old enough to have been circumcised, an even more so by an adult. Like slaves, *bilakôrow* have no capacity for shame. For some of my informants, the fear that their daughter be stigmatized as *bilakôro* was enough of a reason to have the operation performed. For instance a forty-seven year old Marka woman who was born in Côte d'Ivoire and now lived in Segou where we interviewed her in December 1997 gave the following answer to the question "why is excision practiced?": "We were born and found that it is done amongst our people. In Islam it is allowed to do it and if you do not have your daughter excised, people will say that she is *bilakôro*. This is why we excise here." When asked immediately afterwards what the consequences of excision were, she said: "There are consequences that are not good. But we do it here because if you have a co-wife that is excised she can make fun of you."¹⁹² This woman had a Grade 8 education and used to work in a drugstore, but had lost her employment. After five pregnancies, she had three surviving children, one boy and two girls. Both her daughters were excised, following the wishes of her husband's parents.

While anybody wanting to hurt or ridicule a non-excised woman might call her *bilakôro* – even the husband, if you have a fight and he has a big mouth, said one woman¹⁹³ – it is from the mouths of a woman's most common rivals, her co-wives, that the insult seems to hurt the most. In Sikasso we interviewed a non-traditional exciser, a sixty-two year old Bamanan *hɔɔn* woman. She and her co-wife had been trained by their husband, a surgeon, to perform clitoridectomies. She related the following: "If you have co-wives and the first one is excised and you are not excised, she can use this to sabotage you. To the point that three women who had already had

bilakôro for a girl is *npògòtigi* (owner of the *npògo*), but in the cities where I worked this term, just like the piece of clothing it refers to, were not commonly used.

¹⁹² Interview Gff63, 07/12/97.

¹⁹³ Interview Kff43, 19/09/97.

children have come here to be excised because they were too harassed at home. One of them we did her baby in the morning, and she afterwards.”¹⁹⁴

In Kayes we encountered an even more direct method of ostracizing non-excised women: two *nùmu* excisers reported that there was a taboo against eating food prepared by a non-excised woman. The same woman who told us about the “things with four feet” shared the following story from her neighbourhood: “Just last night, there were these two co-wives: one is a Songhay, she is not excised. The other one told her: ‘Every day you give us *bilakòro* food.’ The Songhay woman was insulted. She got up and they started to fight.”¹⁹⁵ Another elderly *nùmu* woman reported that the “men of religion” (Islamic scholars and teachers) say that one should not eat food prepared by a non-excised woman, hinting here at a notion of pollution.¹⁹⁶

Marriage

In mono-ethnic contexts where female circumcision practices are the norm, such as Somalia and northern Sudanese rural communities, several authors have noted that the future marriageability of daughters is one of the motivating factors for parents (or lineage representatives) to commission the operation (Abdalla, 1982; Boddy, 1982, 1989; El Dareer, 1982; Hayes, 1975; see also Mackie, 1996). In the urban contexts of 1997-1998 Mali, I found this factor less marked partly, I would argue, because of the practice of marriages between men from Mande and Fulbe groups with non-excised Songhay and, in Kayes and Bamako, Wolof women. Even as staunch a proponent of the practice of excision as my host father in Kalaban Koro – who insisted that his daughters be excised by a *nùmumuso* in the “traditional” way because such was the wisdom of the elders – had taken an unexcised Songhay woman as his first wife. While there is obviously a different expectation placed upon Mande and most Fulbe brides – the expectation that they be excised – the fact that a number of men have had sexual or marital

¹⁹⁴ Interview SE1, 24/10/97.

¹⁹⁵ Interview KE2, 12/09/97.

relations with non-excised women, in Mali or while gone “à l’aventure” (literally, “seeking adventure,” i.e., temporary migration), opens the door of tolerance in the multi-ethnic urban context, demystifying through empirical evidence to the contrary some of the sayings concerning, for instance, the danger of the uncut clitoris during intercourse and/or birthing. Some of the men I surveyed even expressed a preference for non-excised women.

In the survey for the general population administered in Segou, Mopti and Kayes, we first asked men whether it was important for them that their wife or wives be excised. The results appears in Table 13 below:

Table 13. Answers to the question, “Is it important for you that your wife or wives be excised?” by city (Mopti, Segou, Kayes)

city / type of answer	Yes	No	I don't have a choice	I don't know	Question not asked
Mopti (n= 34)	12	10	4	1	7
Segou (n= 42)	15	16	1	2	8
Kayes (n= 48)	16	19	8	--	5
TOTAL (%)	43 (34.7%)	45 (36.3%)	13 (10.5%)	3 (2.4%)	20 (16.1%)

Here we have a slightly higher percentage of men for whom having a wife who is excised is not important (36.3% of the sample). These results should however be interpreted with caution, because of the high number (16.1% of the sample) of men who were not asked the question, due to the norms of propriety in Malian society that dictate what categories of people one can talk about sexuality with. Generally, to respect the tenets of *hɔɔnya*, one should restrict such talk to one's agemates of the same gender: hence, it was extremely uncomfortable – and at times impossible for fear of insulting the respondent – for Mariam and I, two relatively young, unmarried women, to ask such a question to older men, unless of course they were *nyamakalaw* or *jɔnw*. The other category of answers, “I don't have a choice,” came either from those with a

¹⁹⁶ Interview KE4, 15/09/97.

practical orientation who asked rhetorically “Where will I find an unexcised woman in Mali?” or from junior men conscious that the decision as to whom they should marry was not theirs to make.

We asked men who felt that their opinion mattered (those who answered Yes or No), to explain their rationale. In Kayes, those who wanted the women they married to be excised (n= 16) gave the following reasons: I am in favour of excision (4), it is our tradition (4), so that she will be faithful (2), Islam requires it (2), it makes having children possible (1), to avoid problems with the co-wives (1); the last two did not elaborate. In Mopti (n=12), half of the men did not give a specific reason for their preference for excised women. The others had the following reasons for their preference: so that she will be faithful (3), Islam requires it (2), and, it makes the woman “clean” (1).¹⁹⁷ Men from Segou who preferred an excised wife (n= 15) gave similar rationales, more specifically: so that she will be faithful (3), it is our tradition (2), Islam requires it (1), and I am in favour of excision (1); eight did not provide a reason for their preference.

The men who said that whether or not their wife or wives were excised did not matter to them were even less voluble as to why, possibly again, because of the sex and age of the interviewers. For example, a 42-year old Bamanan manual labourer in Segou said enigmatically “If I had understood earlier, I would have married a non-excised woman.”¹⁹⁸ A fifty-seven year old Bamanan librarian in the same city disapproved of excision “... because of what science says.”¹⁹⁹ In Mopti, one man said that he could not tell the difference between an excised and a non-excised woman; another said that all that mattered was that the man loves the woman. Finally, in Kayes, out of the fourteen men for whom it was not important that their wife or wives be excised, three argued that those unexcised were healthier, and another three said that they

¹⁹⁷ As we will discuss in Chapter 9, this most likely means *ritually* clean, i.e., for the performance of prayers.

¹⁹⁸ Interview Gh08, 30/11/97.

¹⁹⁹ Interview Gh57, 07/12/97.

were more interested in sex (which in this case they considered a positive characteristic); the others did not give a reason for their opinion.

Another indication that the fear of unmarriageability is not the main motivation for excision in urban Mali is given by the answers to the question “what will happen to a girl if she is not excised?” While a large number of respondents were concerned about such a girl’s capacity for self-control in sexual matters, about her future ostracization as *bilakoro*, and about potential reproductive problems, only five people out of 300 (one woman and two men in Kayes, one woman and one man in Segou, and nobody in Mopti) responded that an unexcised girl would have difficulties finding a husband.

As demonstrated above by the few young men who replied that realistically, their opinion about their future bride would not matter much, important decisions affecting one’s life in Mali are still for the most part taken by male, and to a lesser extent, female elders in the lineage and in the household. Where the elders allow some individuality, at the very least they reserve the right to disapprove of the choices of those living within their walls. This veto power they can enforce with the menace of maledictions, repudiation, or even physical violence. One of the problems with the campaign against excision in Mali is that it has mostly targeted youth and married women of reproductive age, two groups who have very little authority if they live – like the majority of the Malian population does – in the extended patrilineal and patriarchal household. Even if they were convinced by the arguments put forward by activists, younger fathers who are not household heads generally lack the authority to prevent their daughters’ excision; as for mothers of baby girls, it would take extraordinary courage (many would say, foolishness) for them to oppose their husband’s, in-laws’ or elders’ wishes where the circumcision of their children is concerned.

Decision-Making Within the Household

Interviewer: Do you think that excision is a good or a bad thing?
Marka mother of three,
47 years old: Eeh! You follow the tradition of where you live! For instance if you are married here [in Segu] like me, if the parents of the child [i.e., her husband's classificatory parents] tell you to have your daughter excised, can you say no?²⁰⁰

All the Mande and Fulbe societies in Mali are patrilineal, hence a woman's children do not "belong" to her, but to her husband's lineage. The children of brothers, and at least among the Mande, of paternal parallel male cousins, are called brothers and sisters, and to a certain extent are interchangeable. This was demonstrated most poignantly for me in the case of a young woman who, when asked whether her daughter was excised, could not answer. She explained that her husband's older brother had decided to send her child to one of his sisters in a richer neighbouring country where she could have a better life – she received only infrequent news of her daughter. Such cases of fosterage are common in Mali, and take place for various reasons – for instance children will be given by a fertile woman to her barren sister.²⁰¹ The exchange of children is accepted by some parents better than others, and several mothers offered me their child during my stay in Mali. I believe their offers were serious. Yet the informant above, even though verbally she made a valiant effort to toe the line of respect for and obedience to her husband's older brother, betrayed a tangible grief through her eyes.

Mande and Fulbe groups in Mali are also virilocal, therefore wives generally live with the representatives of their husband's lineage, who monitor their everyday deeds and spoken words. This monitoring is made easier by the fact of living in the outdoors and performing many of the daily female tasks in the communal space of the enclosed courtyard in view, and often in the company, of the other women of the household. Here, unmarried, divorced, widowed or visiting married sisters act on behalf of the patrilineage, and indeed it is theoretically, among the

²⁰⁰ Interview Gf63, 07/12/97.

Bamanan, the father's sister (*tenemuso*) who is responsible for the excision of her "daughter" (Koné, 1997). Whereas we would consider the girl to be the *tenemuso*'s "niece," it is not only symbolically that she is a "daughter" in Mande cultures, but jurally as well since, should her brother divorce his wife, the *tenemuso* would be likely to be the one to raise the weaned children from that terminated marriage.

Keeping in mind these normative patterns, let us look at who, in practice, makes the decision to have a girl excised in contemporary households in Segou, Mopti and Kayes, according to survey respondents. What was most surprising to me in this regard is the fact that a number of respondents *could not remember* who had made that decision, indicating that in their household, this is a routine, uncontested, non-remarkable practice. Answers concerning daughters' excision also revealed that in most cases, the mother herself takes her daughter to the exciser, either because she is herself convinced of the benefits of excision or else resigned to its necessity. The second most common decision-maker was the father of the girl. In Mopti, one regional difference appeared: six respondents explained that their daughters had been circumcised during the "*fâso bolokoli*," literally, "the circumcision of the father's house," meaning a group excision organized by a council reuniting lineage heads and, in the case of the Bozo, all the household heads of the ethnic group in the city. The low prevalence of resistance to the practice²⁰² means that rarely do the elders or the agnates have to step in to enforce compliance.

Looking at the few cases where some or all of the informants' daughters have not been excised is more revealing of decision-making processes within the household. I offer here a series of illustrative vignettes:

- *A 57 year old man, father of five daughters, who works as a librarian in Segou and said that although he is Bamanan he grew up among the Songhay: "The first two daughters are excised. Their maternal grand-mother ... it was her ideas, her way of thinking – it was done*

²⁰¹ My data does not allow me to say whether in such a case the fostered child's kinship affiliation changes.

²⁰² The DHS researchers found that in only 3.3% of the cases in their sample, were there reported objections to the excision of the informant's eldest daughter. The frequency of objections was higher in Bamako (11.1%), among mothers with a secondary or post-secondary education (14%) and amongst mothers in the 20-24 age group (6.5%) (Coulibaly, 1996, 195)

without my knowledge, in fact. The others are not excised. It's me. Because science severely condemns it, and I say science is right. And also because in Islam it is optional. There are many Muslim Arab countries where women are never circumcised."

- *A 39 year old mother of six daughters, from the Bamanan ethnic group, who is now completing her secondary (lycée) education in Segou:* Her first three daughters are excised. She took the decision herself, "because it is our tradition." The last three are uncut. Their father and his family made the decision. She explains: "One of my daughters at excision she had problems. A lot of blood flowed. Afterwards, they did not want to have them [the other daughters] excised."
- *A 16 year old woman with two daughters, who farms on the outskirts of Pelengana (Segu) and who has a primary school education,* explained that while her eldest daughter is excised, her husband decided not to have the second one circumcised. Why? "He did not tell me why," she said.
- *A forty-year old male civil servant in Segou, from a Bamanan lineage, who had two daughters:* His eldest daughter is excised, but not her younger sister. It is the respondents' parents who insisted. He explains: "I did everything possible at the time, but they [his parents] could not understand me." As for the second daughter: "It was my decision. Since mom and dad had passed away ... I now make my own decisions, I am the household head."
- *A Fulbe woman with no education, around forty years old, mother of three daughters, interviewed in Segou:* "Some of them [I believe she was responding for all the 'daughters' of the household, not just her biological daughters] are excised but since we heard that it is not good, since the time of Roukiatou Sow [a well-known early Malian feminist] of UNFM, those that are with me [? perhaps some of her children have been given away as foster children or in marriage] they have not been excised."
- *A 37 year old Bozo homemaker, mother of two unexcised daughters, with a Qur'anic education, interviewed in Mopti:* "My father refused. [He said that] if ever we do that, we'll see!! [implied threat]. Their father [her husband] says that he agrees with what people say, therefore he does not have his daughters excised."
- *A 65 year old retired male nurse, from the Dogon ethnic group, living in Mopti, father of nine daughters:* "The first ones are excised, because my mother was alive. Afterwards no, because it is not necessary, it is not religious [Islamic]."
- *A young Mandinka woman, living in her husband's family's extended household in Mopti, whose daughter is not excised:* She explained that her daughter is not circumcised "... because we were told that it is not good. There is a woman from CMPF here [in the household where she lives as a wife]."

In Mopti, two other women said that their husbands had forbidden girls' circumcision: one did

not know why, and the other said it was because her husband is from Timbuktu. Finally, in

Kayes there were only three informants who had unexcised daughters. A Khassonke *jɔn* woman,

aged 18, with a primary education, explained in these words why her young daughter was not

excised yet: “My grand-mother tells me to wait until she is older, that it is not our *siya* [to excise babies]. If we excise them when they are very little, they will not have a long life.” The other two cases in Kayes represented real departures from the excising norm, and in one case it was the mother (the respondent herself) who had made the decision not to have her daughter excised; in the other case it was the father of the girl.

Conclusion

The numbers presented at the beginning of this chapter show beyond doubt that being ‘excised’ (i.e., having had a clitoridectomy, with or without the ablation of the labia minora) is currently the norm for adult women in Mali, except for Tamacheq women and those from some Songhay and Dogon communities. Changes have occurred in recent history: the operation is increasingly practiced by medical personnel, and the age at which girls are operated on is dropping, with an attendant loss of the rites surrounding the cutting. Statistics also reveal a slight decrease in circumcision practice in the new generation, particularly, we learned from the DHS, for girls whose mothers are urban and educated. My survey data revealed that more fathers than mothers prefer non-excision for their daughters, and in Part II of this dissertation I will discuss some of the reasons why. Already we have seen in this chapter that fathers, particularly when they head their household, are more likely than mothers to have the authority to ensure that their choice on excision is respected.

In the rest of this chapter I reviewed the ethnographic literature on excision in Mali, starting with a regional overview taken from Delafosse (1972 [1912]) in the early colonial period, up to recent work in various regions where the Bamanan are dominant. These historical and geographical fragments come together to form a mosaic which clearly reveals excision to be – or to have been – a puberty rite of passage amongst Mande groups, with the notable exception of the Soninke. With regards to the Fulbe, there are gaps in ethnographic knowledge concerning their

excision practices, past and present, with some indications that they may have adopted whatever was the dominant practice in the various regions where they settled.

Passage to adulthood involves the socialization of sexuality for both males and females, but in this chapter I focused on the socialization of female sexuality. Controlling female fertility is of paramount importance in lineage-based patriarchal agricultural societies where a man's path to success lies mostly in his control of the productive and reproductive labour of dependents, children included. The Mande and Fulbe clitoris is constructed as an organ that must be removed in order for a girl to be able to acquire respectful, socialized sexuality – sexuality reserved for reproductive purposes. Various conceptions of the clitoris circulate: that it is the site where dangerous powers are located; that it is "dirty"; that it is male. In my opinion, given the orality of the societies in question, and their 'mestizo logic,' it is no longer possible to disentangle these perceptions to reveal their archeology. Rather, I have tried to show how they reinforce each other, and together contribute to the belief that without excision, female sexuality is wild, dangerous and extremely difficult to control, even for the self. While there are numerous reasons to doubt this common-sense notion – particularly where unexcised Tamacheq, Songhay or other women offer counter-examples – the words of several informants, women and men, indicated that they have internalized this ideological construct and contribute to its constant reconstruction in the face of counter-hegemonic challenges.

In the final section of this chapter I presented some of the mechanisms that ensure compliance with the requirement to have the girls in one's care excised. I want to stress here that there are significant rewards for conformity – paramount amongst which, I believe, are social acceptance and the construction of the self as 'honourable' – and that the coercive mechanisms need rarely be used. But disciplining mechanisms do exist, such as the exercise of elders' authority within the household, sometimes taking the form of excisions of girls without their parents' consent; stigmatization of the non-excised as "*bilakòrow*;" and, less common now in urban Mali, failure to find a husband. It is likely that the first two of these disciplining

mechanisms have intensified in the last fifteen years since the national campaign against excision has been launched.

Two of the informants quoted above were affected by the anti-excision campaign, first carried out modestly by UNFM, the women's branch of the party under Moussa Traoré, and more recently and more aggressively, by non-governmental organizations such as CMPF. In the next part of this dissertation I turn to this campaign and to its reception by various groups in the population. The quotes above already point to some of the themes that we next examine: access to knowledge about Islam and about groups of Muslims who do not circumcise girls; personal, empirical experience of the harmful consequences of excision; lack of communication on this topic between husbands and wives; and the fact that the decision to stop excising daughters, when taken by patriarchal authority figures, is not necessarily empowering for women as a group. But before turning to the analysis of the limited success of the anti-excision campaign in Mali, we need to review some of the theoretical tools that will allow us to better comprehend the practice of knowledge production and circulation in the communities under study (after Lambek, 1993).

PART II

**THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST EXCISION:
HEGEMONY AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE**

CHAPTER 6

ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS

The particular shape that my fieldwork project took due to my commitment to feminist action-research produced data that were more “sociological” in character than I had originally expected to collect. Administering a half-hour survey to four hundred respondents was far from the kind of intimate knowledge and empathic rapport with informants evidently acquired by the authors of the ethnographies that marked me most in my graduate training (most particularly Abu-Lughod 1986; Boddy 1989; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Shostak 1983; and Stack 1974). With the data from such limited encounters with such a large number of people, how was I to portray Malian men and women as active agents and to avoid the trap of overestimating the hegemonic power of structure by assigning the perpetuation of excision to the ‘blind’ following of tradition? Such an argument is a feature of the activist literature against female genital mutilation that I have much criticized elsewhere (Gosselin 2000a). I was perplexed by my own set of data, yet I felt that I owed it to all of those who took the time to answer my survey, and to myself for all the efforts involved in administering it, to ‘write it up.’ While in the field I realized that Gramscian notions of ‘common-sense,’ of the role of ‘civil society’ in the production and reproduction of hegemony, and of the role of ‘intellectuals’ in bringing about social change – all rather vaguely remembered while in Mali from a 1989-90 course on the Sociology of Education – would be helpful, but something was missing. It was only five months after returning from fieldwork, while reading Michael Lambek’s (1993) book, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte*, that I became aware of a deceptively simple analytical tool extremely useful for my purposes: Alfred Schutz’s (1964) essay on the social distribution of knowledge, which Lambek uses very fruitfully in his analysis. This tool helped me to frame the relationship between the individuals I interviewed and the circulation and reception of a discourse, in this case the critique of excision.

The Social Distribution of Knowledge

Schutz's (1964, 120-1) point of departure is an observation on the partial nature of the knowledge of social actors. The sum of knowledge present in society cannot possibly be mastered by any one human brain, not only because it is obviously too large, but also because the juxtaposed fields of knowledge – be they technological, social, philosophical, etc. – "... are neither coherent nor even compatible with one another" (Ibid., 120). Social actors are aware of this, and they acknowledge that to function in society and to pursue their practical interests, they must rely on the knowledge of others, those who, through their experience, training, or both, have acquired expertise in a specific field of knowledge – for instance mechanics who can fix aeroplanes or surgeons who can fix hearts. In areas where social actors do not actively pursue expertise, but "... are satisfied with [their] knowledge that certain means and procedures achieve certain desired or undesired results" (Ibid.), they develop a certain sense of the predictability of the effects of certain actions. "a relatively natural concept of the world" (Ibid., 121) – something akin to Gramsci's (1971) 'common-sense,' a concept I discuss further below. There are moments however, when certain individuals decide to pursue knowledge beyond their sphere(s) of expertise, subjecting some parts of their natural, taken-for-granted world to scrutiny while holding the rest static in the background, as it were.

As an analytical tool to explore this social distribution of knowledge, Schutz (Ibid., 122-23, 129-34) constructs three ideal types: the "expert," the "man on the street," and the "well-informed citizen." (While the first and last are gender neutral, the second runs the risk of excluding women from the mind of the reader so I transform it to "person on the street.") These three types do not correspond to specific roles in society, but to the position of individuals vis-à-vis specific zones of knowledge, so that everybody plays all three roles in daily life at different moments. While the notion of "expert" may seem intuitive – and I have already used it a few times in the preceding chapters – it is helpful to recall here Schutz's reflection on her or his

characteristics. Perhaps most importantly, the expert must be recognized as such by others (Ibid., 134). His or her knowledge is clear and distinct, but limited to a specific field, a field that has a particular history and epistemology – in Schutz’s (Ibid., 130) words, “the expert ... is at home only in a system of imposed relevances – imposed, that is, by the problems pre-established within his field” and further, “the expert starts from the assumption not only that the system of problems established within his field is relevant but that is the only relevant system.” Finally, an expert does not expect anybody but a fellow expert in the same field of knowledge to have the ability to judge or challenge her conclusions (Ibid., 123).

In the role of “person on the street,” an individual “... has a working knowledge of many fields which are not necessarily coherent with one another” (Ibid., 122). This “working knowledge” amounts to following procedures in order to achieve pragmatic, instrumental results. Such “recipes” are trusted to “... bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means.” without the person-on-the-street knowing, nor bothering to find out, why the procedure works – such as myself now trusting that the text I type into the computer will be intact when I print it without a clue as to how this works. One can be relatively comfortable in such ignorance because one knows (or rather, assumes) that should there be a problem in achieving the desired results, there are experts who can be consulted for advice.

The last of Schutz’s three ideal types is the “well-informed citizen,” short for “the citizen who aims at being well informed” (Ibid., 122). In this role, one does not aspire to becoming an expert, yet one is no longer satisfied with following procedures: one questions the taken-for-granted world with regards to a specific domain of knowledge. The aim of the well-informed citizen is “... to arrive at *reasonably founded* opinions in fields which as he knows are at least mediately of concern to him” (Ibid., 122-3, emphasis in the original). The well-informed citizen forms her opinion by listening to a variety of experts, in the end feeling qualified to decide who amongst them is competent. Whereas the expert limits intellectual effort to one specific frame of reference, the citizen who aims at being well-informed, in her or his quest for knowledge,

explores numerous such frames (Ibid., 130-1). As for the expert, the well-informed citizen's knowledge comes to be socially acknowledged (Ibid., 134).

What determines in which spheres of knowledge one will become an expert, strive to be a well-informed citizen, or be content to be a person-on-the-street? First, Schutz (Ibid., 124-5) distinguishes different "zones of relevance," which are comparable to concentric circles of decreasing perceived importance to the immediate interests of the particular social actor. Further, individuals rank fields of knowledge based on another, important factor: the power to have an impact on them, so that for instance, we attempt to develop expertise in "... that part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us *and also at least partially dominated by us* – that is, changed and rearranged by our actions" (Ibid., 124, emphasis mine). At a second level of analysis, the process of ranking by degree of relevance the different fields of knowledge responds to two types of motivations: those based on personality and one's own interests ("intrinsic relevances"), where one develops what feminists would call "ownership;" and those imposed from outside, which "because they are imposed upon us they remain unclarified and rather incomprehensible" (Ibid., 127). The personal interests that determine 'intrinsic relevances' will often conflict based on one's different roles and positionings in society, such as father, citizen, member of a particular religion or profession, etc., meaning that even the fields of knowledge that become relevant "intrinsicly" will shift regularly (Ibid., 125).

One last element of Schutz's essay merits attention here: his discussion of "socially derived" and "socially approved" knowledge (Ibid., 131-4). Schutz reminds us that the larger part of 'our' knowledge in fact comes from the experiences of others, contemporaries or figures of the past, who have shared this knowledge with us – this is what he terms "socially derived knowledge." In order to accept, or "believe" this knowledge, we must assume that the experience at the base of the expert's or ancestor's knowledge is not linked to the specificity of that person but rather can be generalized to the group – in other words, that another person following a similar procedure or experiencing a similar event would have achieved the same results or

reached the same conclusion. But beyond this implicit assumption, the type of person that is communicating the knowledge, and how this communication takes place will greatly influence its perceived plausibility. Schutz explores various factors which affect how information-seeking citizens will evaluate the knowledge that is being communicated to them: whether the knowledge-sharer is considered an expert; how his or her knowledge was acquired; the degree of conformity between the emitter and receiver's systems of relevance; the type of signs, symbols or artefacts used to communicate; the relationship between the emitter and the receiver; and how the communication takes place (face-to-face or not) (Ibid., 131-3). Finally, the degree of variance with common-sense will also affect reception: "any knowledge, our own ordinary experiences as well as any kind of socially derived knowledge, receives additional weight if it is accepted not only by ourselves but by other members of our in-group" (Ibid., 133). This socially approved knowledge is the source of prestige and authority, and "the home of public opinion" (Ibid., 134).

Since Schutz's three ideal types constitute a terminology of "shifting phenomenological perspectives," in Lambek's (1993, 69) words, focusing on one particular societal phenomenon – excision – allows us to momentarily "freeze," for analytical purposes, the shifting and complex reality of the social distribution of knowledge in Mali. By doing so we can identify, *with regard to excision*, who is socially considered an expert; who exhibits a "person-on-the-street" approach; and who indicates through her or his responses that s/he is actively seeking knowledge, critically evaluating the opinions of various and competing experts – in other words, seeking to become a well-informed citizen *on this issue*.

Yet before I do this, it is necessary to discuss ways in which the social distribution of knowledge is linked to power, and to the specific axes of hierarchy in the society under study – something which Schutz (1964) does not dwell on in his short essay, but which Lambek (1993) is very concerned with in his analysis of overlapping yet competing fields or 'traditions' of knowledge in Mayotte and the power that possession of such knowledge affords experts. Here I want to discuss Gramsci's concept of hegemony and his analysis of the role of intellectuals in

promoting social change (in political struggle),²⁰³ before finally indicating how these various analytical tools help to frame the analysis of the campaign against excision and of its reception in the urban population.

Hegemony, the Role of Intellectuals, and the Campaign Against Excision in Mali

Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and *such a compromise cannot touch the essential*; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.
(Gramsci 1971, 161. emphasis added)

Although Antonio Gramsci was not the first intellectual from the European tradition to use the concept of hegemony, it is his elaboration of it that has most influenced Western-trained social scientists. In his immensely insightful *Prison Notebooks* (1971), he does not grace us with a definition of the term; instead, the meaning he assigned to the concept of hegemony must be teased out of passages such as the one above, dislodging it, for our purposes, from the specifics of the historical time and space in which Gramsci was writing – bourgeois, industrialist, fascist early 20th century Italy – and remembering the political project to which these notebooks were devoted: that of bringing about a communist revolution.

Perhaps because of his concern with class-based conflict, hegemony for Gramsci is never static: instead, it is the end goal of dominant groups, who emerge because of specific historical circumstances, seek to usurp power from previously hegemonic or dominating groups (I discuss this distinction below), and succeed in their project to various degrees and never completely, as

²⁰³ Here I wish to thank Gavin Smith for encouraging me to pursue this avenue of investigation when I gave a paper in March 1999 at one of a series of graduate seminars he organized in the Anthropology

they are battling with more or less serious counter-hegemonic threats from without or within. In this project they seek to secure access to economic resources (the 'structure') as well as to ensure that the ideology that is supportive of their claim to power infiltrates the various organs of what Gramsci called 'civil society,' as well as the fields of morality (the 'superstructure'). In this, they seek to produce consent, so that the use of the instruments of domination (basically, the use of brute force) is no longer necessary, and so that the ideology which sustains the structural hierarchy of which they are at the top becomes the prevalent – yet never without its contradictions – “common-sense.”

As a heuristic device Gramsci (1971, 180-5) distinguishes 'moments' in the 'relations of force.' The first concerns the social relations of force in the economic structure. It is the second 'moment,' that of “the relation of *political* forces” (Ibid., 181, my emphasis), that is instructive of how dominant groups strive to arrive at hegemony. In this moment, “... one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests ... transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too” (Ibid., 181). This realization sets into motion the following process:

... previously germinated ideologies ... come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail to propagate itself throughout society – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups (Ibid., 181-2).

The dominant group which succeeds in becoming hegemonic takes control of the state apparatus, and presents its project as a 'national' project, good for all (Ibid.). Yet the equilibrium is forever unstable, and some compromises must be made to pacify subordinate groups, as made clear in the passage with which I opened this section. There are historical moments where the equilibrium ruptures, leading to a “crisis of hegemony,” which can be resolved by the dominant group re-

Department at the University of Toronto. As will become obvious in the next section, I am greatly

establishing hegemony, or when a new group establishes a new hegemony. However when none of the groups vying for hegemonic control succeeds, this crisis can lead to a “static equilibrium” by default (Ibid., 210).

I posit that the creation of a modern, bureaucratic nation-state in Mali and the parallel effort to establish capitalism as the dominant mode of production, with its attending ideologies of consumption, individualism and liberalism – processes set in motion by colonialism and continued by the bureaucratic class (the *nomenklatura*) since independence, with the support of the international aid community – have led to such a “crisis of hegemony,” which has failed to be resolved and has resulted in a stultifying “static equilibrium.” These twin processes (of bureaucratization and of the introduction of capitalist modes of production) are subsumed in the concept of ‘development,’ which makes them appear desirable and ‘natural,’ good for all and common-sensical (cf. Ferguson 1994). If the campaign against excision – which is inscribed, by its Malian promoters, within an evolutionist interpretation of ‘development’ – has had so little success in reducing the number of excised women, and has generated enough resistance that a counter-campaign has been organized, it is partly because it threatens to upset this unspoken equilibrium between the relatively old and the relatively new by touching upon, to refer to the emphasized phrase in the opening quote from Gramsci, “the essential” for the peasant patriarchal gerontocracy: the social control of the reproductive power of women.

Yet this political analysis of the reception of the campaign against excision is not enough – or rather, only illuminates the macro level of analysis. To understand how this is played out in practice, in the day-to-day lives of individuals, it is helpful to go back to the sociology of knowledge, and to look at who are the transmitters of the arguments that present excision as a harmful practice and how, to whom and for what reasons the message is communicated. Whether or not the campaigners are recognized as experts vis-à-vis excision is as important as are their class, caste and gender positionings in explaining the limited success of the campaign. Here,

indebted to the discussion of hegemony in the seventh chapter of his latest book (Smith 1999, 228-70).

Gramsci's discussion of the role of the intellectuals in hegemonic projects is a helpful link, and it is possible, following Gavin Smith (1999, 255-62), to establish a parallel between Gramscian and Schutzian concepts.

When, following Smith (*Ibid.*, 240, *passim*), we conceive of hegemony as "an identifiable social-political project," this implies the active, self-aware engagement of social actors in such a project. Of chief importance amongst such actors (and of chief interest to Gramsci), are the intellectuals. Gramsci made a famous distinction between professional intellectuals at the employ of the state or of civil society institutions (such as Catholic priests in Italy), and what he termed "organic intellectuals," those who are produced by a social group and "... give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but in the social and political fields" (Gramsci 1971, 5). Such intellectuals "... are conscious of being linked organically to a national-popular mass," and become its leaders and organizers, whose job is on the theoretical side of the theory-practice continuum, specializing "... in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas" (*Ibid.*, 204, 334).

Smith (1999, 241, 255-62) elaborates on the role of the organic intellectual by stressing the similarities between what he calls Gramsci's "phenomenological view of social enquiry," that is, his epistemological perception that "... hegemonic processes can only be understood in terms of a notion of truth that makes it emergent from social praxis," and the "phenomenology of practice" of Schutz and others. In other words, truth's potential is actualized – or not – in practice. This view is linked to a strong sense of the partiality of the social actor, who is aware of an incompleteness (Smith 1999, 242) – and here is where Gramsci and Schutz's analyses of the social world are at their most congruous. By taking as a point of reference then, Schutz's non-coherent and non-compatible systems of knowledge (sciences, common-senses...), of which one becomes most acutely aware when seeking to become well-informed, Smith (*Ibid.*, 258, emphasis in original) is able to elaborate on the role of the organic intellectual: "By bridging the space *between* the taken-for-granted world of one sector of project-oriented people [experts, persons-

on-the-street] and that of another, the intellectual performs an organic task in the hegemonic [or counter-hegemonic] process: making connections between one set of common-sense ideas and another.” And further (Ibid., 260, emphasis in original): “A distinctively *organic* intellectual, then, refers to the ability, minimally, to render partial experiences in broader generic terms and, more extensively, to then tie those more broadly identified experiences to underlying systems of relevances that were not immediately available at the level of daily experiences....” Here, Smith is not talking about professional intellectuals, necessarily, but about any social actor who comes to take on this role.

Smith (Ibid., 258-9, 261) notes that moments of crisis – crises of meaning, crises of hegemony – lead to a disruption of common-sense which may (but not necessarily does) lead to a critical re-evaluation of common-sensical notions. Yet, as many of the quotes from my informants attest, such re-evaluation can be very distressful, as one’s certainties (that excision is beneficial, for instance), are thrown into question, especially when one has no power to act based on the newly-acquired knowledge. Gramsci (1971, 423, 339), as a revolutionary political organizer, was very much concerned with this problem of the ‘neophobia’ of common-sense,²⁰⁴ and in the following passage he tried to understand the conservative point of view of “the man of the people” (the twin brother of Schutz’s “man on the street”):

... he has formed his own opinions, convictions, criteria of discrimination, standards of conduct. Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments better than he and really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? ... In that case he might find himself having to change ... every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior.

On what then does the person who is ‘on the street’ with regards to a specific field of knowledge (for Gramsci, Marxism; for me, excision), base her views, her knowledge, her practice, and resolve (even temporarily) such intellectual turmoil? Schutz has provided us with two scenarios: either she follows the procedures advocated by one set of socially-approved experts: or else,

²⁰⁴ He wrote: “... common sense is crudely neophobe and conservative” (Gramsci 1971, 423).

(conditions allowing), she embraces the challenge and aims to become well-informed on the issue by comparing different experts' views. Gramsci, for his part, focused on another element: the strength of the consensus of one's social peers – those whose spheres of relevance, in Schutz's terms, are most congruous with one's own – a consensus ultimately backed by the knowledge of experts within the group. This, Gramsci (Ibid., 339) named 'faith in one's social group.' To return to his hypothetical "man of the people" caught up in an argument (Ibid.):

... [he] thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong, not so radically, as the man he is arguing against would like him to believe; he thinks that, while he himself, admittedly, is not able to uphold and develop his arguments as well as the opponent [say, the anti-excision activist], in his group there is someone who could do this [an expert] and could certainly argue better than the particular man he has against him....

Here we are confronted with the comfort of consent/consensus, adding another layer to the understanding of the factors that lead to the perpetuation of the practice of excision, along with that of power and authority of social superiors, and of the disciplining ideology of honour and shame. Hegemonic processes do not only coerce: they also offer societal and psychological rewards for compliance, not the least of which is the feeling of belonging.

In Part I of this dissertation, an effort was made to situate urban Malian actors in the cultural, political and economic arena in which they live. Now, keeping this context in mind, we plunge directly into the campaign against excision, equipped with the above analytical tools. I start by taking a closer look at the production of the feminist campaign against excision in Mali, a campaign which both borrows from and informs the global feminist discourse on female genital mutilation. In Mali, the feminists who carry out the campaign form a sub-group of a specific elite class, that of the Western-educated urban bureaucrats and capitalist entrepreneurs who call themselves the "*intellectuel-les*." When I next turn to another group of experts on excision, the professional intellectuals at the employ of the state in the fields of law, administration and health, I demonstrate that the gender-based subgroup of feminists have not been able to convince their "*intellectuel*" brothers that banning excision should be included in the hegemonic project of their

class. The majority of the organic intellectuals in the nomenklatura, indeed, reckon that such a stance would endanger the unstable equilibrium that they have reached, on the one hand with the landed aristocracy and on the other hand with the professional intellectuals of Islam in Mali.

Two other groups were recognized by informants as experts on excision: *nùmu* women (*nùmùmusow*) and Islamic scholars. I devote a chapter to each, investigating, in the case of *nùmùmusow*, how the campaign threatens their identity, their credibility as experts on women's health, and one of their sources of income. In Chapter 10, I try to situate the responses of Islamic scholars to the anti-excision campaign within an alternative socio-political project, that of a realignment, for Mali, with militant Islamic states against the Western path of modernization promoted by state actors and the international agencies that provide them with their daily rice. The final chapter explores the reception of the messages of the campaign against excision by those who are, in this field of knowledge, well-informed citizens and persons on the street.

CHAPTER 7

EXPERTS ON EXCISION I: FEMINISTS

... excision is a mutilation, and with regards to the constitution of the [Malian] Republic, we talk about the physical integrity of the female body. All the conventions ratified by Mali talk about the inviolability of this physical integrity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the convention on children's rights, on women's rights. It is as if you take someone, and you cut her ear. You will be put in jail for voluntary assault and battery; it is the same thing. ... Excision is a mutilation and like every mutilation it only has negative effects, it presents no advantage Because everything that has been said to support excision and all the reasons given have fallen one by one with the evolution of Malian society.
Fatoumata Siré Diakité.

President of the *Association pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits des Femmes Maliennes*,
quoted in a Bamako newspaper, December 1997 (Anonymous 1997b, my translation)

Paris, June 12, 1997

Madam President,

Dear Madam,

I have the great pleasure to inform you that I have decided to appoint you to the rank of Knight of the Legion of Honour.

This high distinction, which I was bent on conferring on you, comes to crown the very courageous action that you have undertaken, in Mali, against excision.

(...)

(signed) Jacques Chirac

President of the French Republic

Letter addressed to Fatoumata Siré Diakité in Bamako, reprinted in *baarakèla*, the newsletter of the UNTM, Bamako, July 28, 1997, p. 4 (my translation).

"The white man is more powerful than us and is colonising us again. They do to us whatever they want... How can you condemn a woman for circumcising young girls?"

Assetou Sissoko, a 62 year-old widow in Bamako, quoted by PANA (Pan-African News Agency), in a news article published on the Internet on February 20, 1999 and entitled "Maliens React to Paris Circumcision Sentence." Ms Sissoko was commenting on the sentencing by a court in Paris of a Malian exciser operating in France named Hawa Greou.

Malian feminists such as Knight of the French Legion of Honour Fatoumata Siré Diakité, quoted above, tour the world on speaking engagements at which they present on "female genital mutilation." While they are recognized as experts in this field of knowledge by the "international" (Western) community and by some of their *intellectual* peers in Bamako (notably, by the journalists who interview them on this topic), they have not yet succeeded in acquiring

such recognition in the general population, for numerous reasons. From the start they face a formidable challenge, because arguing that excision is harmful in a country such as Mali where nine women out of ten (and ninety-nine out of a hundred in a region like Kayes) have been excised – women who have survived to adulthood, have married and borne children and consider themselves reasonably healthy – goes right up against common-sense, as we will explore in more detail in the last chapter of this dissertation. Secondly, Malian feminists are for the large majority rich educated women from the urban elite, who do not share the same fields of relevance as the majority of poor, often uneducated women whose “progress” they are promoting. Their discourse, with its references to “international human rights,” United Nations’ “conventions” and other such concepts, is for the most part incomprehensible to the person on the street. While they may understand the words, an entity such as the United Nations in New York City is not part of the sphere of relevance of the average hard-working mother of seven children in Mali. Further, feminists’ non-*intellectual* audiences are very much aware of the class differences between themselves and those who set out to “educate” them on excision. Lest they might forget, class differences are enacted in such educational encounters through the Mande cultural repertoire, with *jèli* women singing the praises of successful leaders of women’s organizations, who, independently of their actual lineage genealogy, adopt *haranya* and behave as patrons to the women who join their organizations in the hopes of economic betterment. Client women are also suspicious of the manner in which feminists have acquired their knowledge on excision, that is, through close association with Westerners, particularly with the French, who notoriously do not like circumcision, going to such extremes as putting excisers in jail and advocating non-circumcision *for boys*, which is seen as a direct attack on Islam. Let us now take a rapid look at one of the fields of knowledge of Malian feminist experts on excision, that of the global discourse on “female genital mutilation.”

Global Feminist Forums: “Female Genital Mutilation”

“Female genital mutilation” was discussed as a form of violence against women at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 1995), where violence against women was defined in the following terms: “... any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations 1995b, 51). The Conference document proceeds to give examples of types of violence against women, including “female genital mutilation,” which is listed in the paragraph concerned with “physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family” (Ibid., 52). There is a total of nine references to female genital mutilation in the *Platform for Action* resulting from the Conference (Ibid.), in the sections on health, violence against women, human rights, and the girl-child. Governments are urged to legislate against the practice, to support the efforts of organizations to eliminate it, and to include discussion of “female genital mutilation” in formal and informal educational programmes for girls and women (Ibid., par. 107a, 124i, 232h, 277d, 283d).

The term used here to refer to various types of female circumcision practices, “female genital mutilation,” the conceptualization of such practices as a unified “type” of “violence against women,” their explicit discussion and condemnation in a United Nations official document, and the urging of member states to act to “eradicate” the practice are the result of at least three decades of intellectual and political work by African, North American, European and other feminists (see Dorkenoo 1994, 59-82; Toubia 1995, 45). As I (Gosselin 2000a) have reviewed elsewhere, collaboration between feminists of various geographical and theoretical homelands has been far from easy on this topic, but after thirty-some years of a global dialogue, greater mutual understanding has been achieved and compromises have been made, although controversies remain (see also Boddy 1998b; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000; Walley 1997).

While the World Health Organization (WHO) started in the late 1950s to sponsor a number of studies, seminars and conferences on what was then termed “traditional practices affecting the health of women and children,” it was not until most African countries had been free from (direct) colonialism for a decade or two that specific recommendations for African governments to eradicate such “harmful traditional practices” as female circumcision were formulated at a 1979 seminar in Khartoum, Sudan, organized by WHO. Efua Dorkenoo (1994, 61), a world-renown activist against “female genital mutilation,” credits the renewal of interest in the topic after a lull in the 1960s to the momentum created by the United Nations’ Decade for Women (1975-85). The issue was raised during the 1980 mid-decade United Nations Conference, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, where the official terms used were “female circumcision” and “infibulation,” and the entry point to discussing such sensitive topics was women’s health (Ibid.). Probably in reaction to the publications of American and French activists such as, amongst others, Fran Hosken (1979), Gloria Steinem (Morgan and Steinem 1979), Mary Daly (1978) and Benoîte Groult (1975), the pre-conference review document distributed to official participants noted that while a 1979 Conference on ‘the Integration of Women in Development’ had condemned ‘sexual mutilation practices,’ it ‘... was also critical of uninformed international campaigns against these practices’ (quoted in Dorkenoo 1994, 61). Despite this mention of the issue in the preparatory Conference documents, no government except for the Swedish delegation took it up in the official conference (Ibid., 62). It was in the parallel Copenhagen NGO Forum, which brought together 8,000 women from 120 countries, that “female circumcision” was addressed. At least ten workshops were held on the topic, generating a lot of interest not only on the part of participants, but also on the part of journalists, who produced sensationalist stories detailing the physical procedures and their health consequences (Ibid., 62). West African delegates, according to Dorkenoo (Ibid., 63), “... were at first shocked and unable to understand the interest shown,” and “... stressed that abolition of these practices was not a priority for them, sufficient food and clean water having a far greater importance.” Western concern they

perceived as neo-colonial interference, and representatives from Burkina Faso left a meeting in protest (Ibid.). Most Western feminists and other external actors tamed their language after this experience, and began to seek out African women who could take up the fight in a more culturally-sensitive manner.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other United Nations agencies (UNICEF, United Nations Commission on Human Rights and UNFPA) took stances and started to fund, design and manage various initiatives against female circumcision. Bilateral aid agencies joined the fray, including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in 1987. A significant layer in the archaeology of this global phenomenon is the creation, at the 1984 NGO Seminar on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, held in Dakar, Senegal, of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC) (Dorkenoo 1994, 71-4). This seminar was organized by the NGO Working Group on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, an entity formed in 1977 in Geneva and comprising 26 international NGOs having consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The first co-ordinator of the NGO Working Group, Isabelle Tevoedjre, the wife of a senior representative of Benin to the UN based in Geneva, engaged in international diplomatic lobbying, accompanied by the UN representative of the London Anti-Slavery Society, Margareta Linnander. Together Tevoedjre and Linnander approached African presidents, senior politicians and women's organizations, promoting village-level anti-circumcision projects within a health education framework. In 1983 Ethiopian Berhane Ras-Work, also the wife of a UN diplomat in Geneva, took over the leadership of the NGO Working Group and her predecessor's diplomatic advocacy. She is currently the president of the IAC, a position she has held since the organization's founding in 1984.

The IAC, which came into existence with the support of WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF, works on various beneficial and harmful "traditional practices," promoting the former and condemning the latter. The range of practices concerned encompasses issues such as pregnancy-

related food taboos and child marriages, but the main focus of the organization has always been “female genital mutilation.” Headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with an active “liaison office” in Geneva, the IAC is considered by the international development community to be the main NGO working in the ‘field’ of “female genital mutilation,” and it has affiliates in twenty-six African countries, including Mali. It was with a grant to this organization that CIDA first funded anti-female circumcision work in 1987, and it was by creating a national chapter of the organization in 1984 that the Republic of Mali first joined this global campaign.

For Sudanese surgeon and respected “female genital mutilation” activist Nahid Toubia (1995, 45), another significant step took place when “traditional and cultural” practices harmful to women were officially labeled as a violation of human rights at the Second World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. Nahid Toubia herself made a powerful presentation at that Conference (Sullivan and Toubia 1993), entitled “Female Genital Mutilation and Human Rights.” At the same venue the president of CMPF rose and made a noted, moving speech on women’s human rights in Mali.²⁰⁵ Advocates were also successful at the next gathering of the international women’s rights community in Cairo a year later, where “female genital mutilation” was integrated into discussions of family and reproductive health at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The resulting ICPD *Programme of Action* urges governments to prohibit “female genital mutilation” and to collaborate with community and religious organizations in education and counseling programmes (Nations Unies 1994, par. 4.22, 7.6. 7.40).

There were Malian delegates at all of these conferences, including CMPF participants. The participation of these Malian women no doubt contributed to the development of the global discourse on “female genital mutilation,” at the same time as it provided them with a source of, and a claim to, expertise on the topic when they came back home. With participation in such

²⁰⁵ Joanna Kerr, editor of *Ours by Right* (1993) and a participant in Vienna, personal communication. Toronto, May 1998.

international forums came contacts, ideas, concepts and the awareness that Western audiences could be significantly moved by the topic of excision, moved enough to open their chequebooks. It is through attendance at these UN world conferences that the president of CMPF became known by feminist Canadian NGOs and individuals who then invited her to Canada to participate in the speaking tour on women's human rights at which I first met her in 1996. Further, by the time I arrived in Bamako in 1997, CMPF was in contact with both the IAC and Nahid Toubia's New York-based organization, RAINBQ.

I now take a look at the parallel development of the campaign against excision in Mali over the same years, before analyzing a specific educational activity in Mopti where the international discourse gets translated into the Bamanan language and into Mande and Fulbe concepts, in an effort by CMPF to bridge fields of knowledge that have a low degree of coherence and compatibility.

The Malian Campaign Against Excision

The national campaign against excision in Mali²⁰⁶ is a fairly recent phenomenon that has been led mostly by local NGOs since 1991, with the support of international development agencies. Before that, however, the women's branch of the political party under Moussa Traoré's regime, the *Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali* (UNFM) did organize some research and educational activities in the 1980s and in 1990, before it was dismantled in the wake of the events

²⁰⁶ My account is based mostly on interviews at the Malian government's department for women (the *Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* at the time) in May 1997 and April 1998, and on presentations at the National Seminar on FGM (Bamako, June 1997) by various women's groups and by seminar organizer Assitan Diallo. Diallo is a Malian sociologist who has been working on this issue for over twenty years (Diallo 1978); unfortunately when I was in Bamako her thesis on excision amongst the Bamanan (Ibid.), along with all the other theses on excision, had mysteriously disappeared from the FLASH (Faculté des Lettres, des Arts et des Sciences Humaines, Université du Mali) library.

of 1991. The UNFM conducted a study on the phenomenon in 1984²⁰⁷ (reported in Yattara 1990), which is also the year that COMAPRAT²⁰⁸ was founded. COMAPRAT was the Malian chapter of the IAC, and it brought together a small group of *intellectuelles* from government institutions, political organizations, and humanitarian groups such as the Red Cross and the Centre Djoliba, an organ of the Catholic church in Bamako (at the time, the formation of NGOs in general and of women's organizations independent of UNFM was not permitted). It is not clear to what extent COMAPRAT was active outside of UNFM; the most likely scenario from the information I was able to gather was that it functioned as an ad hoc committee that was activated when participation at some IAC activity was required, but it was the government machinery that organized concrete activities. An intervention by Malian historian and feminist Bintou Sanankoua during the opening session (which she chaired) of the National Seminar on FGM (Bamako, June 1997) gives an indication that these activities, where they had an impact, represented a form of state domination and failed to achieve hegemonic strength.²⁰⁹

And there was a whole programme that was undertaken in [inaudible] by UNFM that had started to bring about results, because it had become forbidden, people were no longer allowed [to excise their daughters]. We educated, we informed people but they were stubborn, finally it was perceived as a type of obligation, people were no longer allowed to excise. Well, they did it, they continued to do it, in a clandestine fashion, and so when the events of March 1991 [the overthrow of Moussa Traoré] took place, it was liberation in all its aspects, it was freedom rediscovered, and people said well, freedom for freedom I am free to dispose of my daughter, and to do what I want. And unfortunately after March 1991 we saw, truthfully, a [pause] blaze of excisions....²¹⁰

In an interview with a Malian government representative at the *Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* in Bamako in May 1997 I had heard the same story, with my interlocutor specifying that in 1991, parents circumcised girls who were "already ten years old," taking them to excisers

²⁰⁷ I was not able to locate the UNFM study in Bamako – it appears that the *Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* did not inherit all of the files of its predecessor, or if it did, it was not making them accessible to researchers in 1997-1998.

²⁰⁸ I think this acronym stood for *Comité Malien sur les Pratiques Traditionnelles*, but I have been unable to confirm this.

²⁰⁹ To the best of my knowledge, a formal review and evaluation of the 1984-1991 UNFM anti-excision activities was never conducted.

reportedly saying ‘it was UNFM that was forbidding us to excise our daughters and now UNFM no longer exists.’

Aside from these state initiatives, some individuals of the *intellectual* class were early catalysts of the campaign against excision.²¹¹ It is likely that their reflections were inspired by the publication out of Paris, in 1978, of the book by Senegalese Awa Thiam (1978), prefaced by French feminist Benoîte Groult, which was probably the first published work to give voice to West African women (from Mali, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana and Nigeria) on their experience of “clitoridectomy and infibulation,” and was considered polemic in “Africa” (Walker and Parmar 1993, 289). One should also note the depiction of excision in the works of fiction of Malian novelist Yambo Ouologuem (1968) – whose writing, interestingly, Benoîte Groult (1975, 97) utilizes in her argument against “female genital mutilation” – and more recently of Malian film-maker Cheik Oumar Sissoko (1990). From the 1970s onwards, a few research projects on the subject were undertaken by graduate students in Mali, mostly under the auspices of the School of Medicine and of ENSUP (*École Normale Supérieure*) where, notably, Bintou Sanankoua was teaching.²¹² Some teachers and the Centre Djoliba organized panel presentations and debates for students, and so did the Jamana cultural co-operative, with which the current President of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konaré, was closely associated. As well in the same period (1980-1997), the Malian state television and radio station broadcasted programs on excision in Bamanakan and in French, some of which were sponsored by UNFM, others by Jamana and still others by private individuals. From my data it appears that these activities and cultural productions had little impact outside of Bamako, except in the fact that it is less difficult now to discuss this previously taboo topic in public spheres – a breakthrough in itself.

²¹⁰ Author’s transcription and translation of a recording of the Seminar proceedings, June 17, 1997, tape 1A at 357.

²¹¹ This paragraph is based mostly on Assitan Diallo’s presentation on the second day of the above mentioned National Seminar on FGM (June 18, 1997, author’s transcripts, at 165.5).

²¹² Claude-Stéphanka Arnal-Soumaré (1996) has reviewed most of these hard to find works (when I was in Bamako, all the ENSUP ones were missing altogether from the library).

Even prior to all of these state and individual efforts, the earliest organized attempt at stopping excision practices in Mali of which I am aware was undertaken by the Catholic Church in San (an area of the country with a higher concentration of converts to Catholicism), which started in 1966 to “educate” church members.²¹³ The Centre Djoliba in Bamako, a Catholic development organization, started a women’s promotion program in the capital city in 1981.²¹⁴ In 1982 it was visited by the enterprising diplomatic lobbying pair from the Geneva-based NGO Working Group on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, Isabelle Tevoedjre and Margareta Linnander, who persuaded the Centre Djoliba to initiate a program aimed at the “eradication” of excision in Mali, a program which started in 1983. This program has since 1984 received funding from a Swedish organization, Radda Barnem, the same organization that financed the research on which Habibatou Diallo’s (1990) School of Medicine thesis was based. Until 1986 the Centre Djoliba focused on designing pedagogical tools in collaboration with an NGO from Burkina Faso, and tested these materials in public information sessions in the greater Bamako area. In 1987, in collaboration with Assitan Diallo (then working for the Malian office of Population Council, an American organization), the Centre Djoliba organized a conference on excision which, according to the Centre itself, was extremely controversial and received a lot of local media attention. After 1987 the program was extended from Bamako and its region to all of the administrative regions of Mali except for the North where excision is rare.

After the effervescence in civil society at the 1991 overthrow of Moussa Traoré that saw the creation of a very large number of development NGOs and women’s organizations in a very short period – several of which, including CMPF, were interested in anti-excision work (a relatively well-funded area of intervention by then) – the Centre Djoliba continued to exercise

²¹³ Assitan Diallo, see footnote # 202.

²¹⁴ The information on the Centre Djoliba work is from the mimeographed document “Expérience du Centre Djoliba en matière de lutte contre ‘les mutilations génitales féminines’,” dated 12 June 1997, and distributed on the first day of the National Seminar on FGM, Bamako, 17-19 June 1997 (author’s files).

leadership in this area. It has offered training to the newcomers to the campaign, and commissioned studies – notably, those by Touré, Koné and Diarra (1997), and by Touré and Koné (1997). It organized, again with funding from Radda Barnem, the 1997 NGO Seminar on FGM (Bamako, 24-27 June) that I was privileged to attend. Towards the end of my fieldwork in 1998, it had started to host inter-agency meetings, in collaboration with Plan International, an American-based NGO that had just hired French feminist anthropologist Claude-Stéphanka Amal-Soumaré (1996) to co-ordinate an ambitious and relatively well-funded national excision eradication campaign in Mali to be implemented by various local partners. CMPF sent a representative to those exploratory meetings that aimed at encouraging competing women's organizations and NGOs to work jointly.

Indeed, since 1991 a host of Malian organizations have competed for the funds available from the international aid community for anti-excision projects. Among these organizations are AMSOPT, the *Association Malienne pour le Suivi et l'Orientation des Pratiques Traditionnelles*, created in 1991 to continue the work of COMAPRAT, and the organization I call CMPF. It cannot have been difficult for the cosmopolitan *intellectuelles* leaders of these organizations to realize that Western donors, who by then had learned that they should play a more subdued role in the campaign against female circumcision, were actively looking for African partners to fund. In fact, the funding is literally coming at them: I met a young German woman at the 1997 Centre Djoliba Seminar who had been dispatched to Bamako by a rich private German foundation to seek out anti-excision organizations to fund.

At the origin of this supply of aid money is not only global feminist lobbying and personal conviction but also public pressure on Western donors at home. Indeed, part of my work in the Africa Branch of CIDA in 1994 and 1995 consisted in answering letters from the public asking what Canada was doing to eradicate such 'horrible customs.' Such letters would inevitably wind up on my supervisor's desk whenever a documentary on "female genital mutilation" aired on

Canadian television or was featured in a popular magazine.²¹⁵ Sometimes the public bypasses aid agencies and writes directly to local organizations. I remember the day that a letter from a Texas church group found its way to the Bamako office of CMPF, asking what they could do to help the cause. The president of CMPF dictated the response to me, without even cracking a smile: the best way to help, I was to write them, was for them to send her the money to purchase a new jeep; they could simply wire the money in American dollars to the CMPF bank account.

After the dismantlement of UNFM in 1991, there was a hiatus during which the Malian government was not directly involved in the campaign against excision, partly for logistical reasons, as the state apparatus was reorganized in the transition from the Second to the Third Republic, and partly for strategic reasons which will be discussed at length in the next chapter. In May 1993, the *Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* (CPF) was created. This structure was attached to the office of the Prime Minister, and was put in charge of advising the government on women's issues and of conceiving a national strategy for the improvement of the status of women. One of the first tasks facing the Commissariat was the production, in preparation for the World Conference on Women at Beijing (September 1995), of Mali's National Report on the situation of women in the country, a task which required "technical and financial support" from a host of multilateral, bilateral and private development organizations (*Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* 1994). Excision was mentioned twice in that Report, under the "health" and "violence against women" rubrics (*Ibid.*, 39,40), simply to note that the practice persisted.

The Action Plan for the promotion of women was finally ready in January 1996, and addressed excision within the health sector, within the "fight against practices that are harmful for the health of women and children."²¹⁶ such as "excision, infibulation, early marriage, home births and food taboos" (*Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* 1996, my translation). A year later, on 31 December 1996, the Prime Minister created by decree a National Committee for the

²¹⁵ Janice Boddy (1998b) has lucidly discussed why female circumcision so viscerally affects Westerners, and why it is such a popular 'cause' in the West.

Eradication of Practices Harmful to Women's and Children's Health, comprised of a total of twenty-two members including representatives from the Health, Justice, and Culture and Communication ministries, from the National Institute for Research in Public Health, and from civil society. This National Committee held its first meeting in May 1997, and at that time it had no funding for its work. By June 1997 it had secured funding from Plan International to hold the National Seminar on FGM which I was allowed to attend. In the middle of my fieldwork, more precisely in September 1997, the Commissariat was replaced by a new Ministry for Women, Children and the Family. This re-organization, accompanied by a physical move to a new part of the city, greatly disturbed progress on the implementation of the Plan of Action, and when I conducted an interview at the Ministry in April 1998, the June 1997 Seminar remained the only concrete activity that the National Committee had conducted on excision.

When I asked my informant at the Commissariat in May 1997 whether I could attend the June Seminar she was helping to organize, she politely refused, exemplifying the fact that bureaucrats are aware that the general population is highly suspicious of the motives behind the campaign against excision. She wanted to avoid having white (she said "foreign," after some hesitation) participants in the audience, because, she explained, "Our populations perceive the campaigns against excision as something that is imposed from the outside. They think that Westerners find our women, Malian women, too chaste, because of this, their education, of excision. ... and, not wanting this, they want to bring us to have attitudes more conformable with their culture than with ours." I was in agreement with her and consoled myself about this missed opportunity with her offer to send me the final report of the Seminar, but when I told the combative president of CMPF about the Commissariat staff's response, she disagreed. She got on the phone and somehow managed to convince the organizers that I should attend as an observer. In the end, there were four other *tùbàbu* women participants, two United Nations staff and two Peace Corps volunteers. Once at the Seminar, I understood my Commissariat informant's worry even better:

²¹⁶ Interview at the Commissariat, 13/05/97.

the Malian television film crews were present, and they were filming the audience as well as the presenters. Over the year I would come to realize that all such 'development' seminars are televised in Bamako, and that the chance of appearing on television is not a negligible incentive to participate at such events, along with the per diems.

From Mohamed S. Yattara's (1990) article on the UNFM campaign against excision it appears that the main arguments used by early campaigners concerned the dangers to adult women's reproductive health, and secondarily to girls': hemorrhaging, sometimes to death, and infection. Indeed, Yattara (*Ibid.*, my translation) opens his article with the following lines: "The main health problems of Malian women are linked to complications of pregnancy and of delivery. Some of these complications are caused by some traditional practices strongly anchored in people's heads. First and foremost of which is excision...." In fact, one of the two main issues that were discussed at the National Seminar on FGM of June 1997 was the fact that such a line of argument had backfired, causing informed parents not to abandon excision, but to demand that it be done by medical personnel in clinical settings – a demand many underpaid health workers had favourably met. Some delegates at the Seminar argued that in response, the campaign needed to be reoriented towards an understanding of excision as a violation of the right to bodily integrity, or as a form of violence against women. However, for such an approach to be effective, some concluded, the discourse would need to be backed with legislative measures. This leads to the second main issue to be debated at the Seminar: whether the Malian state should, or could, legislate against excision, and if it decided to do so, what the content of such a law would be. We will discuss the hesitation of *intellectual* men in this regard in the next chapter. For now we turn to the analysis of ethnographic material from a concrete educational event in the anti-excision campaign, during a CMPF ceremony in Mopti at which *nùmùmusow* pledged to stop excising and to 'convert' to other income-generating activities.²¹⁷ This ceremony took place only one week before the National Seminar on FGM, but we will see that even though CMPF was one of the

organizations that argued strongly at the Seminar for the conceptualization of excision as a type of violence against women and as a violation of human rights, this discourse is not utilized by them when addressing non-*intellectual* women in Bamanakan; rather, fears of difficulties at parturition, of excessive bleeding at excision, and of painful intercourse are stressed. CMPF thus placed itself in the position of mediating knowledge across internal divisions, to say nothing of its role in translating from Western discourses to Malian national ones.

Performing the Campaign (Mopti, 1997)

As referred to in Chapter 4 above in the discussion on the *sènkunya* between Fulbe and *nùmuw*, a public ceremony was organized in Mopti in June 1997 by the Bamako office of CMPF, in collaboration with the local CMPF cell. During this ceremony a group of *nùmu* excisers handed over their excision knives to the national president of the association, pledging to cease operating on girls. There were two catalysts for the event: first, the excisers, grouped into an association, had written the Bamako office to say that since a 1993 CMPF Seminar in Mopti during which they had learned about the damages excision causes for girls and women, they had hung up their knives, but that they urgently needed an alternative source of income. Receipt of this letter happened to coincide with the preparations for the June visit of one of CMPF's funders, a Canadian feminist NGO, coming in with a filmmaker as part of an international production destined for television and for fund-raising that showcased the work of their partner organizations around the world. The president of CMPF, a woman with a remarkable flair for marketing and a keen understanding of *tùbàbu* culture, was quick to realize the visual and emotional potential – the 'media op' – of a group of robed elder *nùmùmusow* dramatically handing over their instruments of 'mutilation.' Indeed *nùmuw*, from their healing and ceremonial work, generally

²¹⁷ I have published other excerpts from this ceremony elsewhere (Gosselin 2000b).

have a keenly developed *dramatis personae* (see McNaughton 1988, 15), perfect, in its flamboyant exoticism, for the eye of the Western camera.

I was granted permission to audio-record the ceremony, and here I present a segment of the president's speech to the audience. She took the microphone after a brief introduction by a local organizer, and started by locating herself socially, stressing her *buranya* (type of affinal relationship involving reserve and respect; these affines are called collectively *burankaw*) with the people of Mopti, and her *sènènkunya* relationship, as a Pulo, with all the *nùmuw* present. Next, she explained that she had come at the request of the excisers, and thanked Allah that their initiative had coincided with the visit of her Canadian collaborators. She reviewed her understanding, acquired during the 1993 Seminar, that *nùmùmusow* practiced excision mostly for economic reasons, and explained that the Canadian partners, not the measly revenue acquired from the sale of CMPF membership cards, would be the source of the money for the planned income-generating project for the excisers who would pledge to cease the practice. But, she continued, the foreigners did not have all the money available yet: first they needed to make this film, which would serve to prove the excisers' good will and would help the Canadians raise the money back in their country.

Next, she announced that she would review the ways in which excision is harmful for women, which she presented in the following words:²¹⁸

It is not said in the Qur'an that it is mandatory; whether you do it or not you will not go to hell. Because in Islam there are certain things: praying five times a day, going to Mecca, giving alms. Those things are essential in Islam, but the circumcision of girls is not. For boys it is mandatory because it purifies the boy. But it is not mandatory for girls, hence it is not Islamic. Therefore we do it because we have received it, it is a custom. But we have seen that if the world moves forward, people move, ancient things are transformed. Hence we have seen that excision brings suffering to the child, even once she becomes an adult.

What is this suffering? First, once you become an adult, labour will be more difficult for the mother. Everything that has to do with giving birth, there are women whose labour is very, very, very difficult. Also – excuse me, my mothers

²¹⁸ Her words were spoken in Bamanakan, and later transcribed and translated into French by Mariam Diakitè, working from my recording. I am now translating them from French into English, referring back to the Bamanakan transcripts.

and my *burankaw* – sometimes they rip, this is due to excision, because during healing, during healing, the way that excision was done, it was difficult. Because there are four types of excision: with some women a little is removed, with others everything is removed, everything is taken. With others it is even sewn. Hence this custom, everywhere it brings suffering to women. Because when it is done, there are children who have an hemorrhage. When there is hemorrhaging, cow dung or another medication is put on, and this makes the infection worse: sometimes there is tetanus. Then we say: ‘It is my co-wife who is a witch, she has killed my child,’ or ‘I had a fight with this one, she is a witch, she killed my child.’ But the cause is the way that it was done. In other areas – forgive me because my elders are here, my mothers, my *burankaw* are here – between the man and the woman, the woman suffers a lot. Because there are women, every time they – excuse me, really, it is very difficult for me to say this – the contact between the man and the woman, as soon as their husbands touch them, they become upset. it hurts them but they cannot say that, therefore it becomes suffering.

A number of things deserve comment here. First, it should be noted that Adame (the pseudonym I give to the president of CMPF), as a good communicator, attunes her speech to what she considers to be the spheres of relevance of her audience – an audience comprised of elderly and younger *nùmu* women, of a few local CMPF members (all *intellectuelles*), of various (mostly female) relatives, friends, and children of the above, and of a few curious observers who had wandered in from the street. She must also have been mindful of the rolling video camera, but I doubt whether she expected the film crew to have her words translated – in fact she offered to translate herself. When opening the part of her speech quoted above, she assumes (rightly, in my experience) that an important zone of relevance for her listeners is Islam, that their desire to be good Muslims is genuine and that their fear of eternal damnation is real. This is why she attempts to establish herself as knowledgeable in this field, reviewing the pillars of Islam (actually, three out of five), when arguing that female circumcision is not a religious requirement.

Next, she addresses what is a serious cause of concern for Malian women in their reproductive age: parturition. On average, a woman in Mali will give birth seven times, only 24% of these births will be attended by health personnel trained in the Western medical tradition, and for every one thousand births, twelve mothers will die in labour (UNDP 1998,177,157). Understandably then, to say that excision contributes to this high level of obstetrical risk is one of

the most powerful arguments that can be used against the practice in Mali.²¹⁹ This concern was manifest amongst the women I interviewed: many of them asked me at the conclusion of the survey whether it was true that excision could hamper fertility or delivery. Not a single woman, in contrast, asked me whether it was true that unexcised women have more pleasure (although a number of young men took malicious relish in discussing this with me in the presence of my assistant, in the process shaming her).

This apparent lack of interest in “sexuality as recreation,” to borrow Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hemlund’s (2000,21) phrase, partly explains a resonant silence in Adame’s presentation: nowhere is there a demand for the right to clitoral pleasure, a pleasure most international activists and their supporters assume has been lost by excised women. Even when further into her presentation Adame, going down the list of the reasons given for excision in a manner very much reminiscent of the activist literature on “female genital mutilation” (see Gosselin 2000a; also Shell-Duncan and Hemlund 2000), says that “they told us that they did it to diminish women’s pleasure, because men take up to four wives,” she does not proceed to claim this lost pleasure back.

There are many reasons for this silence: first, as Adame herself stresses twice, the presence of women older than herself, and of people she considers being in a *buran* relationship with, prevents her from discussing sexuality or even female genital anatomy openly. Not even the presence of her joking partners (*sènènkunw*), the *nùmuw*, can neutralize the demands of age and affinal hierarchies in this regard, so strong is the shame attached to discussing sexuality in the presence of social seniors in Mali. Yet Adame is not a young woman, and she has some leeway here due to her higher class positioning as a wealthy, successful women’s leader from the capital

²¹⁹ Whether this is in fact the case is another question. From her doctoral research Malian physician Habibatu Diallo (1990) concluded that there was a link between excision and obstetrical complications, but it is worth heeding the cautions of physical anthropologist Bettina Shell-Duncan and colleague Ylva Hemlund on the limitation of such research and conclusions (Shell-Duncan and Hemlund 2000, 14-17). I revisit this issue in the section entitled “Implications for the Campaign” in the final chapter of this dissertation.

city who has often appeared on state television: indeed she successfully uses euphemisms to get her point across with regards to the pain at intercourse that she attributes to excision.

The last sentence in the excerpt above gives an indication of how most Malian women seem to experience sexuality, when Adame says “it hurts them *but they cannot say that*” (emphasis added). Here, she is matter-of-factly referring to the lack of communication between married sexual partners – here again, the wife, as social junior (female, almost always younger) cannot openly discuss sex with her husband, a social senior (male, almost always older). Indeed, psychoanalyst Dominique Lutz-Fuchs (1994, 67, my translation), after providing therapy for two years to several Malian women with reproductive and sexual problems, concluded that:

Between husband and wife, there is no real intimacy. Rare, extremely rare are the women who discuss sexual problems with their husband, even in intellectual circles. This is so because sexual intercourse is not an acknowledgment of the desire of two subjects, but rather the summoning to existence of a child. Speech is not part of it.

That this requirement for silence is widely respected even during sex between a husband and wife was confirmed to me by one of my most trusted married male informants. Further, it is absolutely unthinkable that a wife could refuse a husband’s sexual advances, even if they cause her pain: intercourse is considered part of the spouses’ duties towards each other, but as we saw previously, it is considered shameful for the wife to initiate it. This is not to say that Malian women never enjoy sexuality – recall here our earlier discussion on vaginal pleasure and lubrication – but often I would venture they enjoy it more in premarital affairs with men closer to them in age with whom they can have a more egalitarian relationship. Sometimes, especially in Bamako among the *intellectuels*, these relationships lead to marriage. Once married though, all the women I came to know shifted their emphasis from sexuality to fertility (see also Lutz-Fuchs 1994; cf. Boddy 1982; 1989, 47-60; 1998a; 1998b).

The lack of reference, in Adame’s speech, to the right to bodily integrity is also telling. We saw in an earlier chapter that most Malian women do not know exactly what it is that has been removed from their bodies, and that if they have been told anything at all about it, it is

that it was a “dirty thing,” likely to grow to penis-like proportions if left uncut, and not, as in Alice Walker’s (1992) famous phrase, “the secret of joy.” They do not, therefore, express a sense of having had their bodily integrity violated. In fact, as raised by a participant at the Centre Djoliba NGO Seminar on FGM in Bamako in June 1997, speaking from experience, it is *after* participating in awareness-raising discussions led by anti-excision activists that some women come to feel that they have been the victims of a “mutilation.” This participant noted with concern that after the health educators pack up their educational materials and leave the community, there is no support available for the women they have thus made aware of a loss.

When Adame talks about the dangers to girls, she is finally in common-sense territory. Most Malians are aware and obviously concerned that excision can lead to heavy bleeding; most have heard about, and a few have actually witnessed, cases of such hemorrhaging leading to death. Where the field of knowledge of the *intellectuelles* diverges from common-sense however is with regards to the answers to the question famously raised by Evans-Pritchard (1976 [1937]): why *this* girl, *here*, *now*, when hundreds of other girls have been excised without complications? Whereas the prevalent common-sense explanation in Mali can be seen to at least serve psychological and social purposes – there is a reason for my daughter’s death: my enemy killed her through witchcraft – all that Western medical science has to offer as an alternative is vague notions of risk and probability, less likely to bring closure. Adame does not get into this, but blames the operator: “the cause is the way that it was done.” Here she is taking the risk of insulting the women who are about to hand over their knives to her. *Nùmuw* are the competing experts who encourage the common-sense belief that excision casualties are due to witchcraft; indeed, the president of AMSOPT cited in her National Seminar presentation that the fact that “excisers do not feel responsible in case of hemorrhaging”²²⁰ is an impediment to the success of the anti-excision campaign in Mali. Whether *nùmùmusow* offer witchcraft explanations because

it protects their individual and corporate interests; because it shields them psychologically from the pain or guilt that acknowledging responsibility would bring; or because they themselves *believe* that the girls were victims of witchcraft is a Pandora's box that I do not wish to open here (for a related discussion see Lambek 1993, chap. 9).

It may surprise some readers that when Adame discusses the dangers of the operation to girls, she does not mention pain. Indeed, when I tell Westerners about the topic of my research, the most common response is along the lines of 'Oh but it must be so *painful!*' But Malian society, as mentioned previously, is not determined to anesthetize children from pain the way that North American society is, and in fact values stoicism, something that children must be trained to acquire. Further, a certain heuristic value is attributed to pain. One day, the Lieutenant, my host in Kalaban Koro and a six-foot tall, muscular man, impatient with the rate at which I was learning Bamanakan, said to me in French: "Kadiatou, if you were my daughter I would beat you a little so that you would learn faster." To this day I fear that he was serious. Learning to overcome pain was a central part of initiation into Mande male secret societies (see especially Zahan 1960) – the type of initiation(s) to which, as an active member of the *kɔmɔ* society in Kalaban Koro, my Mandinka host would have himself been subjected – and of both male and female circumcision rituals when they were linked to puberty rites of passages. Today, Malians are well aware that excision is painful – it goes without saying – but that in itself is no reason to stop doing it.

Similarly, some readers may find it surprising that Adame would feel that her compatriots need to be told about the health consequences of excision: as excised women, would they not know them from personal experience? In fact, that is generally not the case. The AMSOPT representative at the National Seminar in Bamako in June 1997 was categorical: "Female genital mutilations are not perceived as a health problem."²²¹ At the NGO Seminar on FGM a week

²²⁰ From the printed version of AMSOPT's presentation at the National Seminar on FGM, entitled "Les expériences de l'AMSOPT en matière de conscientisation sur les mutilations génitales féminines" (author's files).

²²¹ From the AMSOPT document cited above.

later, experienced health outreach workers were mostly concerned with one practical stumbling block in their work: how to convince the population that excision is a problem. I asked all my circumcised female survey respondents whether they had had health or sexual problems caused by excision: of the respondents in Mopti, Segou and Kayes, a resounding 88.5% said no, while 7% did not know whether to attribute problems they had experienced to excision.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the first group of experts on excision in Mali, the feminists who carry out the campaign against excision. While these elite women are recognized as experts on excision by Westerners and by some of their fellow *intellectuels*, they are struggling to establish their credibility as experts in the eyes of the general population. The source of this difficulty lies partly in their class location, but also in the particular history and content of the field of knowledge from which they derive their expertise: the international feminist and human rights campaign against “female genital mutilation,” which is linked to the former colonial power and whose logic diverges significantly from local common-sense. In my brief outlines of first, the global campaign and second, the national one, I showed how the two are intimately related through the circulation of knowledge, individuals, and, importantly, capital. Indeed, the ‘national’ campaign against excision in Mali is largely a case of ‘supply-side development,’ to borrow a term from development studies, despite the fact that it has a small number of individual supporters in Mali.

Next I provided an ethnographic example of the cultural translation, by CMPF, of the campaign against excision for a Malian audience that included a competing category of experts on excision, *nùmùmusow*, as well as some ‘people on the street.’ The analysis of the content and of the silences of a speech delivered by the president of CMPF at the ceremony during which *nùmùmusow* handed over their knives revealed that significant aspects of the international and

elite discourse against excision are dropped in local adaptation, while other aspects are highlighted. This selection reflects the appraisal, by the campaigner, of the content of her audience's 'zones of relevance,' namely, religion and reproductive health. Arguments concerning the right to bodily integrity, violence against women and pain are completely dropped from the discourse, while the discussion of sexuality is severely constrained by Mande and Fulbe norms of propriety and by the local meaning and experience of sex. Even though CMPF is one of the organizations that argue, in elite international forums in Bamako, for a 'human rights' and legal approach to replace the focus on health in the campaign against excision, in the ethnographic example presented health risks are given as the main reason to discontinue the practice. Here the activist still faces the challenge of convincing her audience that commonly feared problems of reproductive health are long-term consequences of excision. The audience is more familiar with possible short-term consequences of the cutting, such as hemorrhaging and infection, but here the difficulty lies in replacing local concepts that attribute such complications to sorcery with biomedical notions of random risk.

The awareness that most of the population does not perceive excision to be a problem, and that in fact some highly value the control it is said to allow on female sexuality, is the main reason why state agents, the next set of experts I discuss, often hesitate to publicly support their feminist *intellectuelles* sisters in their anti-excision campaigns. As I show in the next chapter, what state agents do openly share with Malian feminists is the discourse on – perhaps the sincere belief in – *évolution*, a particularly strong evolutionist view of development, apparent in Adame's presentation where she states that "the world moves forward," and that people must get on with it and transform "ancient things" such as excision. *Évolution* is a concept genealogically linked to the colonizers' "civilizing" project, and it thoroughly permeates the autobiography of one of the mothers of feminism in Mali, colonial midwife and political organizer Aoua Kéita (1975). For those who self-describe as *évolués*, excision is often an embarrassing remnant from a living past that is the antithesis of the cosmopolitan modernity to which they aspire.

CHAPTER 8

EXPERTS ON EXCISION II: STATE AGENTS

Here we turn our analytical eye to the bureaucratic class proper: state agents. Before examining their roles in the debates around excision, it is necessary to discuss characteristics of the state in Mali, local conceptions of power, and the extent to which the bureaucratic class in control of the state apparatus has succeeded in its hegemonic project. We will see that in fact, the very legitimacy of the central government is in doubt in Mali, and the capacity of state agents to promote bureaucratic values and interests outside of the capital city is severely limited. After this discussion I present the point of view on excision of Malian law-makers and law-enforcers (administrators). Extracts from interviews reveal a significant level of ambivalence towards excision within this group, with some informants even rejecting their social location as experts on this matter. Finally I discuss the case of health workers, again based on original interview data. This group, composed mostly of men, does claim expertise on excision, actively rejecting alternative claims made by feminists and *numumusow*, and the very fields of knowledge upon which these women's claims to expertise are based.

The State and Hegemony in Mali

The Malian state's current hegemonic field does not extend much beyond Bamako. This is recognized by the ideologues of the current government. In a recent glossy publication obviously meant for donors (since it is available in French and English but not in indigenous languages), and written in collaboration with the European Union and the United Nations Development Program, the Mission of Decentralization and Institutional Reforms (MDIR) of Mali (1998) proposes an ambitious program of decentralization to address the "legitimacy issue" facing the state. President Konaré has publicly said several times that decentralization is a central

goal of his tenure, and in 1993 his government passed a law (#93-008) establishing the overall framework of the national decentralization policy (Ibid., 13). Yet despite this stated presidential will, the creation of the MDIR, and the holding of communal elections, Bani Toure and I (Gosselin and Touré, 2000) discovered during a study commissioned in 1999 by the North-South Institute that implementation of decentralization is resisted by some state administrators themselves.

In the official document presenting decentralization, it is argued that such a mode of governance is traditional in Mali. The “history of the reform” is traced back to the Ghana, Mali and Songhay empires as well as to the Segou kingdom, polities that are presented as being characterized by federalism and the rule of law (MDIR 1998, 7-8). Interestingly, the theocratic Fulbe state of Maasina is omitted, and the Umarian empire only gets one line, at the end of the paragraph on the Segou kingdom: “Then followed in 1861 the reign of the Toucouleurs who will [sic] not fundamentally change the established administrative organization.” Even more significant, since the goal of the publication is to sell a uniquely Malian version of decentralization that is supposed to strengthen *democracy* – and here the recent emphasis by donors and especially by the most courted of them, the United States, on ‘democracy and good governance’ is likely the impetus for such a re-reading of history – the fact that all of these empires depended on slavery is not mentioned at all. Nor is their social organization according to caste, except for a brief allusion to the role of “Griots” and “Mory” (Islamic scholars, marabouts) as “counter-powers and control mechanisms” (Ibid., 8, Box 3). The MDIR historical review is also completely silent on the topics of age and gender hierarchies. This re-writing of history bears a family resemblance to the re-construction of Lesotho as a ‘less developed country,’ a process illuminated by James Ferguson (1994, especially 23-73). As Ferguson forcefully demonstrates, such omissions and falsifications are not the result of errors or of bad scholarship; rather, they are produced by the logic of the ‘development’ discourse, which itself has political, ideological and economic underpinnings.

Responsibility for “... the centralizing, hierarchical and bureaucratic administration of ‘command’ that Mali keeps having up to now” is assigned entirely to colonialism, which took away the “freedom of expression” of the citizens (Ibid., 9). In this analysis, it is because the post-colonial state was modeled on its colonial predecessor that it alienated citizens. In a speech at the Sorbonne university in Paris in 1996, President Konaré, who is a history teacher by training, said: “We will never blame enough the administration model of the African State for being the source of cultural alienation” (quoted in MDIR 1998, 9). And then, in a rare example of self-criticism amongst Malian *intellectuels* in my experience, he continued, alluding to the ideology of *évolution*: “And consequently, extreme centralization of the State is an obvious sign of bureaucratic self-absorption which considers that being the scene of officials, therefore of science, and consequently the example, it is his [*sic*] responsibility to develop the hinterland from which it would not have anything to learn” (Ibid.).

The self-described men of science, *intellectuels* and *évolués* in the central administration may consider it their responsibility to “develop the hinterland,” but the Malian majority living in this ‘hinterland’ mocks them, reports Schulz (1997) from fieldwork in Kita, by calling them such names as “*bikitigiw*,” or owners of *Bics*, the popular ball-point pen. This nickname, writes Schulz (Ibid., 450-1), “... mocks literacy as the credential for power, ... conjures up the image of schoolchildren,” and “... sets the ‘ball-point pen carriers’ apart from the ‘traditional’ Muslim clerical scribes and stresses their origin as one of obligatory formal schooling.” While in this depiction the *bikitigiw* appear more pathetic than dangerous, of more concern are the “*karapili[w]*”²²² among them, the greedy politicians and bureaucrats who refuse to redistribute state wealth to their clients (Schulz 1997, 464, n.39). Here Schulz concurs with other anthropologists such as Amselle (1992) and Fay (1995) in her analysis that the general dissatisfaction with the regime of Moussa Traoré was mostly due to a crisis of redistribution (the

²²² From the French *crapuleux*, meaning debauched, dissolute, filthy (*Harrap's New Shorter French and English Dictionary*, 1967, s.v. *crapuleux*).

failure of patrons to deliver to clients) and not, contrary to what the MDIR (1998, 10) claims, because of the rejection of the *principle* of using the state – or aid agencies for that matter – as instruments of personal enrichment *per se*. This was clearly illustrated to me towards the end of my fieldwork, when a group of internal dissenters within the CMPF leadership publicly demanded an audit of the association. Thinking from a Canadian perspective, I assumed they were concerned, rightly or wrongly, with “corruption.” Yet as I discussed the crisis with friends within the association, it became clear that what was at stake was the perception that access to capital (seminar per diems, for instance), and to international travel was not distributed according to members’ expectations.

Such a logic of redistribution, an aspect of Malian common-sense with roots in pre-colonial times (see Bagayogo 1987), is part of what makes President Konaré’s crusade against “corruption” (see Kpatindé 2000) so difficult. One of Fay’s (1995, 48, my translation) informants in Maasina, puzzled by and skeptical about the new democratic institutions, asked rhetorically: ‘How can Alpha expect to attract other voters if he does not start by rewarding those who elected him?’ Fay (Ibid., 40, my translation) reports the following emic typology of state administrators in Maasina, all of whom are equated to “princes” who derive their authority from a more powerful centre:

(i) those who ‘suck’ power: they are the descendants of the aristocratic families, they are proud of their origin and they parade their power; they also extract resources (*bouffer*, in Malian French), but in a reasonable and predictable manner, for instance not from their age peers;

(ii) those who ‘pull on’ or ‘seek out’ power: they are the sons of the poor, people say ‘the white man taught them how to read, they seek power, but they remember the efforts of their elders;’ some of them *bouffent* (eat up, extract resources/surplus) in moderation, while others exaggerate; and

(iii) the ‘things of power:’ those who only owe their position to ‘paper;’ they ‘... know French but don’t know how to command; they are afraid of everything...’.

Even through two translations (from Fulfulde to French to English), the contempt of Fay’s informants for the third category, to which the current regime is assigned, is apparent. The ‘things of power’ are the antithesis of the strong leader in the Maasina Fulbe conception of

power, a leader whose brute force (capacity for domination) must be sufficient to maintain security by the threat of punishment of those who engage in lineage warfare (Ibid.). Brutally strong leaders are both feared and respected in this conception, and democrats appear as dangerous weaklings who will be unable to prevent often deadly disputes over resources.

In the Maasina Fulbe conception as reported by Fay (Ibid., 48), power is not granted by consensus: it is taken by military or supernatural might (Ibid., 48). But if the “good” or competent power builds strength through the instruments of domination and uses this strength to maintain order and collect tribute, it does not interfere in day-to-day life:

...power becomes and remains legitimate only inasmuch as its necessary and violent interventions do not endanger local order, but in fact allow its existence in taking over the negative aspect of violence. (...) It intervenes in the local structure without changing it (it only affects certain positions within this order), and it does not intervene at every moment for, as a popular proverb says, ‘If the lion came to the village every morning, the women would have long ago killed it with their pestles’ (Fay 1995, 38, my translation).

Here we find, then, the “traditional” decentralization that the MDIR brochure is reclaiming, but it is clearly not a democratic form of governance; indeed, it buttresses the patriarchal, landed gerontocracy. It is no wonder then that youth and other social juniors are seen as the prime supporters of democracy, and that the new form of governance imposed by the ‘people of Bamako’ threatens most of all older men, who worry that democracy will bring about “... the definite destruction of hierarchies, *even the most elementary*,” and ask incredulously: “Land owners, landless, old, young, women, are they now supposed to sit on the same mat and discuss?” (Fay 1995, 32, 50, 47, my translation and emphasis).

Dorothea Schulz (1997, 446), who carried out fieldwork between 1992 and 1996 in villages in the Mande Kita region, found similar skepticism towards the new political system, “*demokrasi*,” and similar nostalgia on the part of older “farmers” (gender unspecified, probably male) for the pre-colonial, colonial and military political orders characterized by *fānga*, a notion connotating “... an absolute and unchallengeable physical force, and the qualities of a ruler such

as ruthlessness or an uncompromising will to rule.” Here too, as in Maasina, the legitimacy of rulership derived from “... its capacity to suppress any form of politicking or maneuvering between competing political factions, *fadenkèlè*.” in this way maintaining a certain peace of truce for the overall good of the community (Ibid.). In the eyes of Kita’s farmers, the plethora of political parties that has appeared since the overthrow of Moussa Traoré has increased factionalism, disrupted the equilibrium between patrons and clients and between old and young, and indicates the absence of a strong central power. Schulz’s informants rejected the notion that the electoral process invests a person with political legitimacy (Ibid., 457). A forty-year old farmer exclaimed: ‘... the real power is exercised with arms. But Alpha? Eee! He just talks and talks and talks’ (Ibid., 458). In older Kita farmers’ memories, the advantage of the political orders characterized by *fāngu* was that they represented distant forces of domination that rarely intervened in the internal affairs of the village (Ibid.). Of course, such a discourse reflects the position of those who were happy with village structure.

It is important not to lose sight of the history of Mali in these analyses of popular discourses on state power. As Fay (1995, 49, my translation) points out, the valorization of *fānga* is to be understood not as “a psycho-cultural fascination with force,” but rather as a historically-informed local theory on the form of power least disturbing to local communities, in a given situation of domination – several scholars have said, “predation” – of the countryside by the city and by the state. And herein lies one of the numerous challenges of the Malian decentralization program: whereas villagers do want more autonomy, its granting might be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility from a state that they already consider weak. The further danger, from the point of view of feminism, is that through decentralization political power will be entrenched even more firmly in the hands of the patriarchal gerontocracy. Indeed, after the communal elections in 1999, not one of the 701 new mayors was a woman (whereas several women were elected to the National Assembly, an institution whose role is generally misunderstood, discredited, or even unknown outside of *intellectuel* circles).

Whether or not state ideologues *believe* that electoral democracy is indeed the best possible form of government for Mali, they have little choice but to, at the very least, *appear* to be making an effort at implementing it, since most donors – one of the hands that feed them – have made “democratization and human rights” a condition for aid. In this, they choose their battles – they strategically delineate their hegemonic project, and decentralization can be seen as a carefully calculated compromise with rural power holders (rural aristocrats, Islamic leaders). One of their most crucial, and most difficult, battles is in the area of taxation policy and collection, as fiscal evasion is endemic in Mali, with as many as 80% of citizens not paying income tax, and fiscal revenues contributing only 11% of the Gross Domestic Product. Further, the opening of borders through the upcoming creation of a West African common market will soon erode an important source of revenue, the collection of duties on imported and exported goods. Therefore, with the support of Canadian technocrats, whose expensive expertise is provided through a fifteen million dollars bilateral CIDA project, the Malian government is preparing for what will almost certainly be a widely unpopular “fiscal reform.”²²³

It is in this context, then, that the hesitation on the part of state agents to take concrete action against excision must be understood, as exemplified in the interviews cited in the following section. While many law-makers and law-enforcers have rejected excision for their own daughters, the awareness of their limited credibility in the eyes of the general population and the need to maintain good relationships with local leaders make it politically risky to speak publicly against the practice – much like their colonial predecessors resisted Paris’s requests that they abolish slavery over one hundred years ago (Klein 1998). Officials at the department of Justice in Bamako do not wish to enact what they are convinced would be an extremely unpopular law against excision. And the attitude of local administrators in the cities of Segou, Mopti and Kayes, the understaffed and under-resourced people who would be in charge of

²²³ Information on fiscal policy and on the *Projet d'appui à la mobilisation des recettes intérieures* (PAMORI), was provided by CIDA’s Corporate Memory unit on July 20, 1999.

implementation and enforcement, is even more hesitant. The last group of state agents we will turn to, health personnel, are even more compromised, as some disagree with the official position that views excision as a mutilation, and in fact promote, or even practice, a ‘sanitized,’ ‘modernized’ clinical version of the operation.

State Experts

Law-makers and Law-enforcers

When I interviewed a high-ranking official at the *Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes* (CPF) in May 1997, I asked her to explain why the CPF had put a “wanted” advertisement in Bamako newspapers to recruit a consultant who would conduct a study on the possibility of elaborating a law against excision in Mali. She prefaced her answer by acknowledging that the impetus for such legislation had come from feminist organizations, such as the Association of (Female) Malian Jurists (*Association des Juristes Maliennes*, AJM). She continued:

At a certain point we worked with the services of the Ministry of Justice that were in the process of reviewing the Penal Code. We wanted them to take this [excision] into consideration. However, eerr, this initiative did not bear fruit. Eerr, because [pause] I think the services of the Ministry of Justice would have liked us to have, first, consulted the different Malian populations, to know whether really, the adoption of a law responds, eerr, to a demand from the majority of the Malian population.²²⁴

This was to be the task that the recruited consultant would undertake. It is not clear to me whether such a consultation, obviously a foot-dragging measure on the part of the Ministry of Justice, ever took place, especially as soon afterwards the CPF was terminated and replaced by the Ministry of Women, Children and the Family. An interview eleven months later at the said Ministry revealed that the officials from Justice had been successful in bringing feminist bureaucrats to their point of view on this topic. My interlocutor – not the same woman whom I

had interviewed at the CPF – did not hesitate this time: “The position of the Ministry is very simple: it is not yet time to take legislative action against excision. Why? Because people are not sufficiently well-informed about the damages caused by excision; they only know its advantages.” She quoted a recent, unpublished study undertaken by a Malian feminist NGO, which showed that only 30% of medical personnel attributed damages to excision other than hemorrhaging and tetanus. My informant added that the general population “knew nothing.”²²⁵

An intervention by a delegate from the Ministry of Justice during the National Seminar on FGM (Bamako, June 1997) suggests that the Ministry might have been open to a compromise that would permit some types of genital modifications and condemn others. After an overview of excision in Mali presented by Assitan Diallo, Mr. Cissé, one of the few male participants at the seminar, was the first to ask a question from the floor:

Thank you Mrs. Chair. Since I am the first to intervene, I must first congratulate Mrs. Diallo for her presentation [inaudible] and this is why I want to apologize for perhaps, since I am the first to intervene, perhaps slightly bringing down the level of the debate, since my question is a point of information and I will not get into it deeply. What I would like to ask as a supplementary piece of information is, in reaction to her presentation, I would like to be educated on the consequences of these genital mutilations. I know that when she spoke about the consequences she spoke in general and since prior to that she explained that there were different types of excision, I would like to verify whether, for these different types of excision, the consequences are identical or whether there are differences depending on whether you use this or that method. Hence, this is not to make a choice, but you will tell me, approximately, from the consequences attached to each of those cases, what represents the least harm in these, in these, types of things even if [inaudible] bad.²²⁶

This intervention was greeted with sounds of disapproval from most participants. In her reply, Assitan Diallo insisted that there is no such a thing as “the least harm,” and that all forms of “female genital mutilation” are to be categorically rejected.

During the same question and answer session, a participant asked whether legislative measures against excision had been taken. Assitan Diallo answered that no, none had been

²²⁴ Interview at the CPF, 13/05/97, my translation from the French.

²²⁵ Interview at the Ministry, 06/04/98, my translation from the French.

enacted, even though some women, for instance Fatoumata Siré Diakité, had engaged in intense corridor lobbying. At this point Mr. Cissé interjected, to specify that the legal principle retained was that the dispositions of the Malian Penal Code already made excision punishable. Later that day however, a presenter from AJM pointed out that there had never been any case related to excision brought to the authorities, even though there were several reported cases of death due to excision. After reviewing the three articles (166, 168 and 171) from the Penal Code on which the Ministry of Justice based its argument, this jurist went on to argue that these dispositions were not sufficient, since they could only be used in legal proceedings if it could be proven either that (i) the exciser had had the intent of harming the girl, or (ii) the excision had not been properly, or safely, practiced. Prosecuting on the second ground might lead, not to the eradication of the practice as desired by AJM, but to the definition of what constitutes a “safe” excision. In either case, it would be the exciser who would be charged.²²⁷

By the third and final day of the National Seminar, Mr. Cissé was a very unpopular man, yet as the representative of the Ministry of Justice he was part of the select group of participants and organizers that drafted the Final Report to be adopted at the ultimate plenary session. The Final Report made reference to the Action Plan of the CPF that aimed at the adoption of a national policy for the complete “eradication” of excision. Among the specific “objectives” adopted was to lobby the government to draft “appropriate” legislation. “Legislation” also appeared as one of a series of recommended “strategies,” along with information, education, communication, research, training, and medical and legal assistance. Implementation of the

²²⁶ From the author’s audio-recording of the National Seminar on FGM, Day 1 (17/06/97), tape #2, after 407, my translation from the French.

²²⁷ From the mimeographed, written version of the presentation read by the AJM representative, distributed at the National Seminar on FGM on 17 June 1997, and entitled “Lutte contre les mutilations génitales féminines et la stratégie des droits de l’homme: L’Expérience de l’Association des Juristes Maliennes” (author’s files).

National Seminar's recommendations was left to the National Committee for the Eradication of Practices Harmful to the Health of Women and Children.²²⁸

While debates around the appropriateness of legislating against excision no doubt went on behind closed doors in Bamako, I was carrying out interviews with local and regional administrators in Kayes, Segou and Mopti, generally isolated *intellectuals* who seem to experience their postings to "the regions" as a form of exile from the relative comforts and cosmopolitanism of Bamako. To analyze my interviews with these civil servants within a chapter on a category of "experts" on excision reveals the limitations of using a typology, even one as insightful as Schutz's (1964), in social science where the object of study – society, culture, human kind – is of multi-dimensional, fluid complexity. While several people interviewed in the 'general population' survey and the CMPF women who directed us to specific administrators looked upon these individuals as experts on the state's position on excision, the twelve male and two female informants who fell into that sub-category in Kayes, Segou and Mopti generally did *not* consider themselves experts on excision. They tended to refer us to those they considered to be the genuine sources of expertise on this issue, imams (Muslim religious leaders) and/or physicians, and often acknowledged that in their own households, decisions were made not in reference to these two bodies of knowledge, but rather in deference to the expertise and authority of older women and of *numuw*. Often, the confusion that state administrators expressed, after having compared the contradictory opinions of various experts on excision, revealed them to be, rather than experts, "well-informed citizens" with regards to excision. For this reason some of their answers will be examined again in Chapter 10. But for now, we look at them as the state's representatives in the three regions under study, the would-be law enforcers should the Malian government legislate against excision. In reading their words it is important to remember that these informants were not selected at random, but were recommended by local CMPF leaders.

²²⁸ Author's transcripts of the audio recording of the final plenary, 19 June 1997.

meaning that they were believed to be generally favourable to the anti-excision campaign – at least favourable enough to be willing to discuss it with a Westerner.

I start here with an interview conducted in French in November 1997 with a high-ranking administrator²²⁹ that renders the general flavour of interviews with middle-aged male *intellectuels* in Mali (at least when the interviewer is a young, female, white, francophone Westerner without development money to disburse). The interview took place in this man's office, in the buildings of the regional government in Mopti, and our conversation was constantly interrupted by phone calls and visitors. My informant requested that I come back to him after having completed all my interviews in Mopti, to report on "what the others said;" he also insisted on anonymity. This man knew about CMPF, and especially about its president, who, he exclaimed, is "the Mohammed Ali of women." When asked what he thought of the CMPF campaign against excision, his answer expressed an awareness of the centres of resistance to the campaign. He said:

I believe that it is a very courageous campaign, because what is at stake is to reverse centuries of practice. Therefore those who base the necessity of excision on religion, they will think that you are anti-religious. Those who think that non-excised women are very sensitive and surrender easily to men – you understand? – they can think that in promoting such a policy, it will passively encourage debauchery in quotation marks, whereas we are not even there! Do you understand? Debauchery is a lack of morality [*moeurs légères*].

Again, when asked about what should be done to stop excision in Mali, this official referred to the expertise and leadership of Muslim scholars. He believed that what would be effective would be "a large education campaign. Make as much noise as during the campaign against AIDS and even more. A large campaign: the media, religious leaders. They are the ones who have put it in our heads that religion requires it [excision]."

This man considered that by giving air time to anti-excision groups on state television and by allowing the CPF to hold seminars on excision's harmfulness, the government had already explicitly condemned the practice. Yet he was uncomfortable in his official role with regards to his employer's stance. In reply to my question, "if you were convinced of excision's

harmfulness, considering the influence that you have in the community, would you be willing to publicly speak against the practice?" he hesitantly said that yes, in certain conditions, such as a women's forum. Then he added that recently Alpha himself had publicly spoken about AIDS and 'rubbers' (*capotes*), and that some people had been scandalized. In his personal life he had not been able to prevent the excision of his daughter, who had suffered consequently: "My own daughter was excised – listen, here nobody asks the father's opinion, it is like ear-piercing. It is an old aunt who comes and asks 'What are you waiting for?' Hence my daughter was excised at around two years of age, and then she had difficulty urinating: each time she cried." Despite this experience, my interlocutor was hesitant to condemn the practice, and explained to me at length how circumcision and marriage for both men and women were the two keys to achieving adulthood (personhood, in fact) in Malian society.

In Segu, another high-ranking civil administrator who insisted on anonymity was even more explicit about the contrast between his official participation in a possible government campaign against excision and his personal views.²³⁰ Probably to mark his disapproval of my research topic, on the morning of our pre-arranged appointment he made me wait in his lobby 45 minutes before calling me into his air-conditioned office. He was not shy about expressing his forceful, albeit nuanced, position on excision:

If we start from the basis, from the principles of tradition, I do not hide the fact that I am in favour [of excision]. Now, to conform to a certain evolution of society, even if it is a cultural value that I do not condemn a priori, but to follow the evolution of society, I am of the opinion that we move, effectively, towards its progressive abandonment. But if I am speaking as an official I will say that it is not good, that we have to abandon it.

Such references to "*évolution*," presented as an inevitable process seemingly possessed of its own volition and independent of human agency, pervaded the discourse of most *intellectuels* I encountered in Mali, feminists included. It is the ideology that accompanies the hegemonic

²²⁹ Interview MD1, 04/11/97.

²³⁰ Interview GD4, 03/12/97.

project of their class. Such informants generally conceived of “the elders,” of the “people of the deep Mali” or “people of the bush” (rural populations), and of *nùmuw* as those who are resisting the tidal wave of “*évolution*,” but they were generally convinced that while such resistance might slow down the rate of what they presented as ‘progress,’ it could not in the long run halt it.

My interlocutor in Segou added the following concluding comment at the end of our interview, a message, I imagine, that he wanted me to take back to my feminist friends in Bamako:

We have to be very careful. A tradition is first and foremost a cultural value that can evolve with time, either being abandoned or re-valORIZED. But by counting on the evolution of society it is inevitable that it will be abandoned. But this will not happen by decree: we have to take into account the realities of each milieu. (...) And two or three weeks ago there was a debate on television I watched the programme and they fell into a certain lack of decency. Some things were said [pause] there was no need to name all the parts of the woman. It was a debate that was too much ‘let’s go to war’ against excision. It is not this kind of debate that will help. To the contrary, it only shocks certain people. (...) An old woman told me that the only harm done was that the programme was not live, otherwise she would have [telephoned and] asked those women who were speaking, aren’t you excised? Did you suffer from those problems? As we say, ‘the one who wants to drown his dog claims that it has rabies.’

I did not see the television program he mentioned, but typically activists in Mali group all possible short and long-term consequences of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation together in their presentations – witness Mr. Cissé’s question to Assitan Diallo above. In my experience, this often has the result of discrediting activists’ expertise in the eyes of excised women in Mali (cf. Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000). As Ylva Hernlund (2000, 241) pointed out with regard to a similar approach in the Gambia, “... if a campaign primarily focuses on the argument that FGC [female genital cutting] can cause obstructed labor, this is likely to be more salient to women who have undergone extensive excisions or infibulations, as opposed to partial clitoridectomies.” The quote by the Segou administrator above serves not only to illustrate this common reaction on the part of knowledgeable, often older women, but also to exemplify the typical discourse on ‘*évolution*’ and the unacceptability of publicly naming women’s genitals in Mali.

Another administrator in Segou, the human resources coordinator for a national agricultural agency, originally from the Sikasso region, had a different approach.²³¹ From the very beginning of our discussion, he defined excision as a “mutilation,” and stated that it should be prohibited. His stated position might have been a reflection of his professional friendship with my *patronne* in Bamako, a relationship he also acknowledged from the start, but I think it also came from his own personal experience of excision gone wrong. He related the following story:

In 1970, in my village, I had the chance to see recently excised girls. In the Senufo milieu excision was done at an advanced age, no earlier than ten years, and preceded by one year maximum the marriage of the young woman. At that time, I was able to ascertain that two girls died out of seven – not on the same day, but due to complications. But we were told that there were witches who through their witchcraft were trying to trouble the excisers who were allowed to respond to the challenge. You can imagine the confrontation. This is what would have led to the loss of human life.

Despite his strong opposition to the practice, reiterated several time during the interview, he was not a supporter of the legislative approach. “There is no point in pouring ink on paper if people do not see the merit of our decision,” he said, adding that it would only lead to a defensive reaction on people’s part. He also considered that it had been a serious mistake on the part of anti-excision campaigners, so far, not to have targeted men.

As one last illustration for this section, I present an interview that surprised me. Since the staff of the CPF I had met in Bamako had all been very vocal and very strong in their commitment to the “eradication” of excision, I expected a similar response from their official representative in Kayes at the time, Mme Bagayoko Fanta Camara.²³² Judging from her and her husband’s patronyms, she may have been *nyamakala*, but she did not volunteer that information.

²³¹ Interview GD2, 02/12/97.

²³² Interview KD9, 16/09/97. This is the typical way that married *intellectuelles* in Mali write their names: first, the title “*Madame* (Mme)”, followed by the husband’s patronym (in this case, Bagayoko, which could be a *nùmu* name), followed by the “*togo*” or personal name, here Fanta, and finally by the woman’s own patronym, here Camara, often a *fune* name (on which patronyms are most commonly *nyamakalaw*, see Frank 1998, 4, 129). A woman’s social position (for instance, her caste and her different *sènènkùnya* relationships) continues to depend on her patronym (*jamu*) after marriage, and I understand that in villages this is the only lineage name that women ever use. Mme Bagayoko did not want her answers to be anonymous.

and my questionnaire for decision-makers did not include demographic data such as ethnic and caste identification. In any case, she did declare herself against excision because, she said, it threatens reproductive health. When asked whether she would be willing to speak publicly against the practice however, she said no and explained: "... at the moment we have to spare people's susceptibility, and carry out a muted fight [*un combat en sourdine*]. This is what we are doing, educating all the strata so that they accept. Taking into account my responsibilities, it would be very badly looked upon for me to speak out in public. It would have a negative impact on future actions." It should be remembered that Kayes has one of the highest prevalence rates for excision of the whole country.

Health Personnel

Access to and especially expertise in the field of knowledge of the dominant Western style of medicine, biomedicine²³³ ("modern," as opposed to "traditional" medicine, Malians would say), brings with it a different conception of what constitutes a 'normal' female body. To a certain degree, expertise in Western biomedicine erases the shame associated, for a Malian, with naming those normalized parts, at least in the language of this field, that is, in Mali, French. During the 'general population' survey in Kayes, Mariam and I encountered by chance a 32 year old health agent, who identified himself as a Khassonke *jèli* and was married with one son. He said that he was previously posted "in the bush," where he had encountered several cases of complications due to excision, particularly hemorrhaging, sometimes fatal, and accidental closing of the vagina necessitating an intervention at the time of marriage. He considered the practice mutilating: "It is a mutilation that is not normal, eh? It is not normal. And considering the

²³³ I say "dominant" to acknowledge that there are all kinds of alternative medical practices in the contemporary Western world. Here I am talking about Western biomedicine, the medicine taught in European or North American universities where many Malian doctors have trained and that are the point of reference for the School of Medicine in Bamako.

consequences... better to leave the person the way she is naturally."²³⁴ With this conception of the clitoris as a "natural" and "normal" part of the female body comes a certain functionalism, as expressed by Dr. Seydou Coulibaly in Mopti, who said he was against excision because the clitoris "... is part of the organism and every organ on the human body serves a purpose."²³⁵

As seen in Chapter 5, the population reports that health agents increasingly offer their services as excisers. It is generally assumed that their motives are economic. During my fieldwork I was not able to interview a single health professional who admitted to such a practice: in Sikasso a nurse who, we had been told, performed excisions from her home, had agreed to talk to us but before we could start the interview her husband arrived and chased us out of his house. There is no doubt that health practitioners are aware that Westerners generally find excision repulsive; they are probably increasingly worried about the authorities as well. Dr. Abdoul-Karim Sidibé, second in command at the Mopti Health Centre told me that he and the other managers had gathered their staff to forbid them from performing excisions at the Centre, and that should a case of complications ever arrive for treatment following an excision practiced by a health agent, "he would be done for."²³⁶

The closest I came to interviewing a health professional practicing excision was the case of the woman in Sikasso who had been trained to perform the operation, along with her co-wife, by their husband, a surgeon. She presented his motives as humanitarian, as appears in the following exchange between my assistant and this 62 year old Bamanan *hɔɔn* mother of twelve children, whom we will call Awa.²³⁷

Mariam: How old were you when you started excising and who showed you how to do it?
Awa: Since my husband is a health agent, he circumcised boys and traditional excisers did it for the girls and every time there was hemorrhaging, they were brought to

²³⁴ Interview Kh47, 20/09/97.

²³⁵ Interview DM4, 06/11/97.

²³⁶ Interview DM6, 06/11/97. Dr. Sidibé did not want his answers to be anonymous.

²³⁷ Interview SE1, 24/10/97.

the hospital and since my husband was a surgeon, he had to repair that, so he decided that he would show my co-wife how to do it, and I hold the girl.

She and her co-wife charged 1000 F. CFA (about \$2.50) for an excision, and from what she showed us with her finger, it looked like they practiced partial clitoridectomies – “we cut towards the bottom,” she said, except for some Marka women, who for their daughters “request that we take everything out.” She proudly showed us how they sterilize all their instruments before and after each operation.

It is common for health practitioners to express strong disapproval of the methods of “traditional excisers,” whom they see as ignorant of basic principles of protection against infection and as lacking the knowledge and means to stop heavy bleeding. A 65 year old retired Dogon male nurse in Mopti, who had, after his mother’s death, forbidden excision for the members of his household, told us: “Often here, there is hemorrhaging; here they don’t know how to stop that. Sometimes they attribute it to witches and some girls die.”²³⁸ Dr. Sidibé in Mopti stated: “... excision is not carried out in the required conditions, that is, aseptic conditions, which can lead to, for instance infection, tetanus, AIDS, infertility, and many other problems.”²³⁹ Dr. Manifa Coulibaly, in charge of the maternity ward at the Regional Hospital of Segou, expressed a rare willingness on the part of a physician to collaborate with *nūmuw*: “It is imperative that they [traditional excisers] come to see that what they do is not good, and then, that we find them another source of income, because they make a living from this. Hence, once these excisers are identified, we need a local policy, and to try to integrate them into the health sector. Perhaps they can deliver babies.”²⁴⁰ A Malian midwife from the Western tradition in Segou, who requested anonymity, had of her own initiative undertaken to educate and re-train traditional excisers in her

²³⁸ Interview Mh45, 07/03/98.

²³⁹ Interview DM6, 06/11/97.

²⁴⁰ Interview GD10, 09/12/97. Dr. Coulibaly did not want his answers to be anonymous.

neighbourhood, recently forcing the mother of an hemorrhaging girl brought to her to name the exciser who had performed the cutting.²⁴¹

This respected midwife derived her conviction that excision was harmful from twenty years of experience assisting parturients, from which she had concluded that “the one who is excised has a long and arduous labour, while those who are not excised give birth easily, without tearing.” Her only hesitation in speaking out more publicly against the practice came from her self-expressed confusion with regards to Islam’s position on excision: she wished for clear guidelines from the country’s experts on Islam. “We need authorization from the Muslim religion not to excise,” she said. All but one of the other health practitioners I interviewed told me that Islamic leaders had already given such an authorization; the one exception was a health administrator who said he did not know Islam well since he used to be “an animist.”²⁴²

While the health practitioners I interviewed disagreed with the practices of the ‘traditional’ experts on excision – whose knowledge, if they recognized it at all, they considered wrong or at best deficient – and agreed that Muslim leaders are the experts concerning the religious aspects of female and male circumcision, they did not recognize feminists’ expertise at all. Dr. Sidibé was the most outspoken on this. He believed that the government should take over the campaign against excision from the NGOs, and institute “repressive measures,” in collaboration with health professionals. He stated: “We are much better situated to convey the message. [CMPF] came to Mopti several times but they never tried to contact health personnel. (...) Whereas we are in contact with the population, we are the ones who receive the complications when they occur.”²⁴³ He himself, he said, had several times participated in radio programmes during which he had explained the dangers of excision. The feminist discourse did not at all enter the analysis of the male nurse we interviewed in Kayes, who believed the way to ensure that excision cease was to rely on “*évolution*” and patriarchal authority: “... with evolution,

²⁴¹ Interview GD9, 09/12/97.

²⁴² Interview GD7, 09/12/97.

if every head of household took his part of responsibility, then we could carry out an effective campaign....” A state administrator interviewed had also expressed that physicians were the most qualified – had the most socially-recognized knowledge – to speak publicly on the harmfulness of excision, saying “... when a doctor speaks about the dangers, people are more likely to believe it than if an administrator does.”²⁴⁴

Conclusion

The analysis of interviews conducted with the second group of experts on excision, state agents, was prefaced in the first section of this chapter by a discussion of the state and hegemony in Mali. Recent ethnographic work on notions of power in Mali, conducted in a predominantly Fulbe area, Maasina (Fay 1995), and in an area where Mande peoples are the majority, Kita (Schulz 1997), revealed similar nostalgia for pre-colonial modes of political domination characterized not only by force but also by non-intrusion in local affairs. This nostalgia is, not surprisingly, expressed mostly by those who are or were advantaged by ‘traditional’ gerontocratic and patriarchal power structures. These remembered forms of power differ significantly from the version of political history created in a recent document on decentralization published by the Republic of Mali (MDIR 1998). While Schulz’s and Fay’s informants – mostly senior men, it would appear – praise the brute force (*fānga*) of pre-colonial and military regimes, and mock the current bureaucrats who owe their power to ‘pens and paper,’ Bamako administrators, in collaboration with European development experts, depict a ‘decentralized’ form of pre-colonial ‘democracy.’ Nevertheless, even the current regime admits that the state in Mali is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy, and administrators posted outside of Bamako are acutely aware of the limits of their authority. As a result, they are generally unwilling to upset the status quo – and therefore very few are ready to take action against excision.

²⁴³ Interview DM6, 06/11/97.

Symptomatic of the weakness of the state is the refusal, so far, by the Ministry of Justice to enact legislation against female circumcision, despite lobbying by Malian feminists and probably, by the Western donors who back them. Yet some of my data suggests that the Ministry might have been more responsive to the idea of a law delineating 'safe' genital cutting practices while outlawing other forms – but this has been forcefully rejected by feminists and by international organizations such as the WHO. Interviews with state representatives in the regional capitals of Kayes, Segou and Mopti in 1997-1998 revealed a lot of ambiguity on the part of those who would be in charge of implementing an eventual law forbidding or regulating excision. State administrators are well aware of the centres of resistance to the campaign against excision, and cannot politically afford to alienate these groups. Most of the administrators who believe that excision is an unhealthy practice console themselves of their impotence to act by arguing that '*évolution*' will eventually bring about the demise of the practice. Not all administrators though, are against excision, and several are of two minds about it, as we will explore further in the last chapter of this dissertation. Finally, many referred me to the 'real' experts on the matter: Muslim scholars, *numuw*, and/or medical practitioners.

Health agents who practice excision obviously fear state discipline. for I was not able to find any who would agree to be interviewed in Kayes, Segou or Mopti. Of course, they are also acutely aware that Westerners disapprove of the practice. In Sikasso however. Mariam and I were able to conduct an interview with the wife of a surgeon, trained by her husband to perform clitoridectomies with her co-wife. Her account suggests that her husband's motivation may have been humanitarian as opposed to financial. The training of physicians and nurses provides them with a completely different view of the female body, and more particularly of the clitoris, which acquires a positive function. In my experience, while health agents agree that Muslim scholars are the experts on the religious aspects of female circumcision, several consider the feminists ill-informed – not fellow experts – and ineffective at running the campaign against excision.

²⁴⁴ Interview DM3. 05/11/97.

Further, they strongly disapprove of everything about *nùmùmusow*: their field of knowledge, their excision practices – which they consider almost criminally dangerous – and the way that they stress their caste identity. It is worth repeating here that health experts, like other members of the bureaucratic elite, come from any caste, including historically ‘dishonorable’ ones, and generally advocate eliminating the caste system altogether.

In the next chapter we will see that accusations of life-threatening incompetence are reciprocal between *nùmùw* and Western-trained health practitioners. Whereas doctors, nurses and midwives insist on aseptic conditions, *nùmùw* stress the supernatural aspects of the practice: the dangerous amount of *nyama* that is released, the sorcery attacks on the children, and the secret knowledge required to combat these dangers. Epistemological differences appear as well. Whereas people of any *siya* and any gender with the required amount of capital (economic, cultural, and intellectual) can learn Western medicine, only female *nùmùw* can properly and safely practice excision: no amount of training could ever turn a *hɔɔn* woman into an exciser, in *nùmùmusow*'s view. *Nùmùw* and *dɔkɔɔɔɔw* (sing. *dɔkɔɔɔɔ*, the Bamanakan word for pretty much anybody with a white overcoat working in a health centre) are not only experts from incompatible fields of knowledge and competing suppliers of circumcision services, they also belong to social groups with different hegemonic projects. Hence the central conflict between state agents and *nùmùw* that excision brings to the fore revolves around the future of the caste system itself.

CHAPTER 9

EXPERTS ON EXCISION III: *NÙMÙMUSOW*

The reader was already introduced to the *nùmuw* in Chapter 4 above, where I provided a general discussion of the role and location of this sub-group of the *nyamakalaw* in Mande society. Recall that *nùmuw* used to have a monopoly on circumcision: *nùmu* men circumcised boys and *nùmu* women (*nùmùmusow*), girls. This monopoly was preserved partly through restricted access to the special knowledge necessary to perform the operations, considered risky for both the circumcised and the operators because of the large quantity of *nyama* emitted at the time of the cutting. Sorcery attacks – again, on both the children and the circumcisers – are also to be feared, but *nùmuw* themselves possess esoteric knowledge, sometimes acquired from spirits (*jinɛw*), that allow them to fight back on the supernatural plane.

Today the situation has changed: the caste system as a whole is being questioned, and with regard to circumcision, as we saw in Chapter 5, *nùmuw* have lost their monopoly, especially on boys' circumcision. By and large, *nùmùmusow* still perform the majority of excisions – at least where I conducted interviews – but they are aware that they now face competition from those who practice Western-style medicine in state hospitals and clinics. The *nùmùmusow* I interviewed were also familiar with the campaign against excision, and some had even engaged with feminist campaigners. In this chapter I present their words, first focusing on issues of identity and secondly looking at how they respond to the increasing medicalization of excision and to the campaign against the practice.

Bolokoli Practice and Identity

In 1997, Mariam and I interviewed eight traditional excisers: five in Kayes, one in Mopti and two in Segou. Seven of the women were *nùmuw* from the Mande cultural sphere (Khassonke

in Kayes, Bozo in Mopti, and Bamanan in Segu). The other exciser in Segu said her *siya* was *sakke*, the Fulbe group generally identified by the profession of its male members, who specialize in leather-working (see Table 8 above). The women's ages ranged from thirty-six to sixty-five, and all were married, with one being widowed. Only one of the eight women had been to public school, completing Grade 6, and one other had studied with a Qur'anic teacher; the other six had no schooling. None of the women spoke much French, if at all, and the interviews were carried out in Bamanan.

All of these women considered that they were the only knowledgeable experts on excision, as opposed to *dakɔɔɔw*, *hɔɔɔ* feminists and Westerners. Seven of them stressed that the practice of excision was a tradition in their lineage, generally mentioning that their male kin used to operate on boys while their womenfolk circumcised girls. The grey-haired woman in Kayes who told us about the "things with four feet," Nansa Kanté,²⁴⁵ said that there were "... fourteen mothers in my family, all *nùmuw*, who practiced excision. There was not this mixture of *siyaw* before – for instance, a *jèli* who marries a *hɔɔɔ* – so we did excision and the men did the boys."²⁴⁶ A fifty-five year old *nùmu* woman in Segu exclaimed: "The whole village did it! It's our *siya!*"²⁴⁷ On the other hand, in the families of four of the women the practice was not generalized, but taken up by specific individuals, aside from the respondent herself: the mother's younger sister (KE4), the father's sister (KE3), or the father's mother (KE5 and GE1).

The women's answers to my question relating to the identity of a *nùmumuso* who would refuse to excise reflect this difference between lineages who expect all of their able members to take up the knife and those who do not. For some, the decision to become an exciser depends on the *nùmu* woman's personality: she must have the courage, the heart (*dùsu*)²⁴⁸ to do it (KE3, KE4,

²⁴⁵ Even though Ms. Kanté did not insist on anonymity, I have changed her first name in this text.

²⁴⁶ Interview KE2, 12/09/97.

²⁴⁷ Interview GE2, 29/11/97.

²⁴⁸ More specifically, in the Mande conception of the person, the *dùsu* is the part of the human being where the energy that generates both courage and anger is located (Bailleul 1996, s.v. *dùsu*).

KE5). For others, it is an inherited duty, but only among some *nùmu* lineages. The *sakke* woman in Segou explained: “It is not all *nùmùmusow* who are excisers. Among the *nùmuw*, there are some for whom it is their *siya* to practice circumcision.”²⁴⁹ The middle-aged woman in Kayes who shared the story of the woman with “light like fire” explained: “*Nùmùmusow* and excisers are two things: it is not all *nùmùmusow* who practice excision, only certain families. because ... in certain families in the past some women fell ill in their eyes and their fingers – up to seven of them – so people saw that it was not good for their family.”²⁵⁰

If a woman who is destined to become an exciser lacks the courage, there are ways that this can be remedied. Nansa Kanté reminisced about her experience:

It is my mother who gave me the knife [after Nansa had had three pregnancies]. She told me “I am old now.” I told her that I was scared. My mother said she would give me some medicine to remove the fear. She pronounced some incantations over water, she took some incandescent coals from under the pot and put them in the water. I drank this and then I had the courage, I was no longer afraid.

Nansa also said that there is a special term for a woman who would refuse to fulfill her destiny as exciser: she is a “... *nùmu hana*.”²⁵¹ because what you really are, what your *si* [‘race,’ lineage] does, you were not able to do it.” The Bozo *nùmu* from Mopti, Agna Samassékou, also said that a *nùmùmuso* who would refuse to excise would not be considered a “real” *nùmùmuso*, at least, not amongst her people.²⁵² Finally, a proud comment from the fifty-five year old Bamanan *nùmu* in Segou who said that her entire village practiced circumcision reflects her strong sense of identity as *nùmu*: “We are *balò* [?], real *nùmuw*, we make hatchets and hoes!”

There were good reasons for Nansa Kanté to be frightened when her mother handed over her excision knife. One of the statements quoted above has already alluded to the dangers for the

²⁴⁹ Interview GE1, 29/10/97.

²⁵⁰ Interview KE1, 11/09/97.

²⁵¹ Neither my assistant nor I had heard this word (or suffix), ‘*hana*,’ before; perhaps it is a word from the Khassonke dialect of Mande that has not entered the Bamako Bamanakan that Mariam spoke and that I learned. It does not appear in Bailleul’s (1996) dictionary, but the following word does, which might be related: *hàràki*, translated as “great cheater” or “great liar,” from the Arabic *harik*, meaning “one who refuses to do or give back what he must.”

²⁵² Interview ME1, 07/11/97. Agna insisted that I use her name.

eyes and fingers of the operator, and in Chapter 4 we saw that excisers are particularly wary of clitori they consider abnormal and likely to emit too much *nyama* unless special precautionary measures are taken. McNaughton (1988, 69) reported, from conversations in the 1970s with *nùmu* men, that the high level of *nyama* released at the time of circumcision could even kill an ignorant or clumsy operator. Witchcraft attacks are also to be feared (see also Kanté and Erny 1993). To protect themselves, male and female circumcisers use a variety of methods: secret speech, special bracelets and amulets, and ointments (Diallo 1990, 35-41; Dieterlen 1951, 188; Kanté and Erny 1993, 199; McNaughton 1988, 69). Nansa Kanté described the protective method she was taught: "... my mother told me that when we pick up the knife we have to say: 'I take the knife, *Bismillahi*, I take the knife, *rahmani*, I take the knife, *rahim*.'²⁵³ And then you do not put down the knife until you can excise, even if the girl is struggling." This statement serves as a useful reminder of the extent to which Islam has suffused what are generally considered 'pre-Islamic' practices in Mali.

Since it was a central assumption of the CMPF program I was evaluating that *nùmùmusow* nowadays excise for money, I asked them how much they charge for performing the operation. One older *nùmùmuso* in Kayes remembered a time when excision services were not compensated in cash, but rather in kind, as part of the caste system:

Before, each *hɔɔɔ* [gender not specified] had his/her *nùmu*, therefore when a *hɔɔɔ* had a baby girl, the one who shaved the baby's head [part of the Islamic name-giving ceremony], the one who did that [also] excised the girl. The night before the excision, you gave ten kola nuts, one chicken, one piece of soap and after harvest, one basket of millet (KE1).

Only two women interviewed (ME1 and KE5) told me that excision revenues were a sufficient source of annual income; for the six others, it was only one source of revenue amongst several. In their current practice, the *nùmùmusow* interviewed charged between 1.000 F. CFA

²⁵³ This is from the Arabic *Bismillah i Rahman i Rahim*, meaning "in the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful," the formula that opens every Sura of the Qur'an (except for the ninth), and that is repeated at the beginning of every act by pious Muslims.

(approximately \$2.50) and 2,500 F. CFA (about \$6) per girl, and most also asked for soap.²⁵⁴ One woman in Kayes (KE1) additionally asked for one kilogram of millet, and one woman in Segu (GE1), for some kola nuts. Interestingly, one *nùmùmuso* in Kayes claimed not to ask for anything, adding: “I just do excision; those who come to me are neighbours or kin. Whatever they give you, you accept it. Otherwise what I do [for a living] is to braid hair.”²⁵⁵ Nansa Kanté, who had retired from excision practice when we interviewed her, used to price the operation differently according to caste: from other *nùmùw* she only asked for soap, whereas for *jèli* or *hɔɔm* girls she asked for 1,000 F. CFA. She explained that this was below market price: “... in my community people do it for 2,500 F. CFA, therefore everybody came to me. People ask me why I do it at 1,000 F. CFA. I say that I have pity because it is said that we do excision because there is *bàràji* [divine reward] in it [for the one excised]. Some give me more: millet, money or small gifts for my children.” Far from thinking that they endanger the health and rights of girls, as anti-excision campaigners and health personnel argue, *nùmùmusow* generally seem proud to perform a community service it is their duty – and theirs alone – to provide, and for which there is a demand. The practice is not that lucrative. The women I interviewed did not look wealthy relative to other members of their community and certainly, compared to Bamako *intellectuals*, let alone Westerners, they were poor.

²⁵⁴ It would be interesting to find out for how long soap has been part of the payment for excision in different areas, what kind of soap is supplied, and whether it represents an acknowledgment of the integration of hygienic practices, since the improvement of ‘hygiene’ was a significant aspect of the colonial ‘civilizing’ project (cf. Boddy 1998a). In the early ethnographic literature that I reviewed, Chéron (1933) is the only one to provide information on the payment of excisers, and he reported that in the case of the Mandinka it consisted of meat and money. Writing nearly four decades later, Pollet and Winter (1971, 449) reported that among the Soninke of Dyahumu, payment consisted of millet and soap.

²⁵⁵ Interview KE4, 15/09/97.

***Nùmùmusow*, the Campaign Against Their Practice,
and the Medicalization of Excision**

The traditional excisers I interviewed were aware of the campaign against their practice; indeed, several had participated in CMPF pledge ceremonies like the one held by CMPF in Mopti in 1997 discussed above in Chapters 4 and 7 (see also Gosselin 2000b). Most did not deny that there were *now* reported cases of complications due to excision, and some seemed genuinely convinced that these 'new' negative consequences were enough reason to stop excising. Nansa Kanté told us that she had thrown down the latrine the special excision knife made by her father, a knife of pure iron that never rusted and prevented tetanus, because "... according to the meeting that [CMPF] held, it was said that excision causes *mùsòkèlè* [literally, the "fight of woman," i.e., the mother's death during parturition]...." Yet when her daughter, now living in Senegal, asked for her mother's knife in order to take up excision practice, Nansa had one of her uncles fabricate another knife, which she prepared by pronouncing incantations over it while holding it over her daughter's head.²⁵⁶ The woman in Kayes who told the "light like fire" myth said that she had participated in several information sessions on the harmfulness of excision, but she was categorical: "It is now that people talk about the consequences of excision, that it causes problems while menstruating, giving birth, etc. Otherwise previously I had never seen any problems. My own mother had seventeen children, she never had any problems." Asked whether she had ever had a case where a girl had died following excision, she said that she had never even heard of such a thing. Further, she illustrated the *positive* consequences of excision through the following story:

There was a nomad who had a wife who was not excised. At each birth her baby died before the name-giving ceremony [performed on the seventh day]. Four pregnancies like that. Then, the *moriw* [Muslim diviners, healers and teachers] told him that the woman has filth, that this filthiness touches the child, that the child will not survive, therefore that if the woman is not excised in order to remove this filth, she will lose all her children. It is hard to excise an adult; I could hurt myself. But

²⁵⁶ Interview KE2, 12/09/97.

the husband had promised me a cow if I could excise the woman and if she had a baby who survived. Therefore – this was six years ago – I excised her. The woman had a boy who survived and she has had four other births. All the babies have survived.²⁵⁷

Needless to say, despite having been ‘educated’ on the ‘harmfulness’ of excision, this *nùmùmuso* had not abandoned her practice. She questioned the information she had been given by feminists, asking me at the end of the interview how *exactly* could clitoridectomy cause menstruation or parturition problems. She was not impressed with my explanation, answering back: “I only cut the clitoris that stands up. That has nothing to do with the vaginal orifice.”

Later on in the same interview, this expert on excision attributed today’s complications to the lack of respect of the proscriptions and prescriptions of the caste system. If a *nùmùmuso* has sexual relationships with a *hɔɔn* man, she explained, she will lose her (supernatural) ability to stop hemorrhages, and it is her moral duty to stop excising. But normally, a *nùmu*’s capacity to stop heavy bleeding is vastly superior to that of the *dɔkɔɔɔw* – and on this claim, all *nùmùmusow* interviewed were unanimous. Ami Sissoko, a thirty-six year old *nùmùmuso* from Kayes, stated: “[between] me and the health agents, the difference is the blood. They have made it into a trade, they can excise but when the bleeding does not stop, they do not have something to stop it, like the *nùmuw* do.”²⁵⁸ She explained that her grand-mother had showed her “something,” and that when she followed that secret procedure, the bleeding stopped.

The fact that non-*nùmuw* practice the physical part of the operation while ignoring its ritual aspects is the most dangerous form of violation of the rules of the caste system, as far as *nùmu* excisers are concerned. Nansa Kanté was the most explicit on this:

For instance there was a woman nearby who came to tell me that she had a girl to excise. Afterwards – perhaps somebody told her to go to the hospital – she brought her daughter to the hospital where it was done. The place became swollen to the point of having pus leaking. The woman came to see me to apologize and to ask me to do something for her daughter. First I told her to take her back to the hospital [scoffingly]. Then I did *kilisi* [secret ritual speech] into an ointment, I put that on

²⁵⁷ Interview KE1, 11/09/97.

²⁵⁸ Interview KE5, 17/09/97. Ms. Sissoko did not want to remain anonymous.

the spot, and all the pus came out. I put a bit of the ointment on the inside. Two or three days later the girl was healed. In the hospital, all kinds of people – *jèli. hɔɔŋ* – do it whereas it is not like that, you have to have secret knowledge.²⁵⁹

Agna Samassékou in Mopti concurred, saying “when we excise, we do *kilisi*; for the nurses, it is medication – it is not the same thing.”²⁶⁰ Nansa Kanté further supported her claim that *nùmu* circumcision was superior to that of health agents by talking about male circumcision, claiming that the operation practiced with the “treatments of the *tùbàbuw* [whites, non-Africans]” is not good, because the needle causes men to become impotent with age. In her family, she said proudly, none of the men had been operated on at the hospital. My *intellectuel*-turned traditionalist host in Kalaban Koro, the Lieutenant, shared this conviction and insisted that all his dependents, male and female, be circumcised the ‘traditional’ way.

One of the *nùmùmusow* interviewed in Kayes claimed that male health agents had asked for her secrets for stopping blood, but said she would never reveal them (KE1). But even access to the secret knowledge of *nùmu* excisers would not be sufficient: one has to be born a *nùmu* in order for these procedures to be efficacious, since circumcision knowledge is part of their *siya* and no one else’s. Similarly, *nùmùmusow* claim that mastery of the required technical knowledge is not sufficient to make pottery, another craft that belongs to their *siya*-gender: potters told Barbara Frank (1998, 130) that were a *hɔɔŋ* woman to apprentice herself to a pottery-maker, her pots would inevitably collapse or else explode during firing. *Nùmuw* are said to be born with special powers and aptitudes, as testified by Nambala Kanté (1993, 43, my translation), himself from a Mandinka *nùmu* lineage: “It is said that the pregnancy of a blacksmith-woman [*forgeronne*] lasts ten to eleven months, and it is not rare to hear that these casted children are born with two of their incisor teeth, a clear sign of their aptitude for sorcery.” It is because of their purported strength and bravery that *nùmu* men used to act not only as circumcisers but also as torturers for Mandinka kings (Ibid.). *Nùmuw* are often required to perform such bravery, for

²⁵⁹ Interview KE2, 12/09/97.

instance at circumcision, when the daughters and sons of *nùmuw* in Kanté's village were required to 'sit under the knife' first and to sing while undergoing the operation (Ibid., 177.189-90). In Kanté's family, this strength of character and of body was nourished throughout childhood by drinking and bathing in the water used to cool the instruments of smithing, as this water is considered to have supernatural powers (Kanté and Emy 1993, 178; see also Herbert 1993; McNaughton 1988).

What the *nùmu* excisers Mariam and I interviewed shared with their competitors, the health agents, is the non-recognition of the feminists' claim to expertise on excision. Asked what she had learned from a CMPF's three-day seminar on excision, one *nùmùmuso* answered: "They did not teach us anything."²⁶¹ The *sakke* woman in Segu was even more explicit: "[CMPF] did not teach us anything on excision. When [Adame] came, we only held a meeting. We, the twelve excisers we stopped [practicing excision]. They do not know anything about excision. What can they teach us? This is the work of the *nùmuw*!"²⁶²

Interesting in this regard is the testimony of a woman who is both a proud *nùmùmuso* from a lineage that produces circumcisers and an *intellectuelle*, a teacher who is a committed member of CMPF in Kayes.²⁶³ She said that she joined CMPF because "in our society there are many women who are ignorant of their rights; the few amongst us who are literate we have to put our education at their service." It was she who arranged for a meeting between Adame and the rest of the CMPF delegation in 1993 and several of Kayes' *nùmùmusow*. She said that it was at that time that she learned about the harmfulness of excision, but that it was the presentations during the National Seminar on FGM in Bamako in June 1997 by Dr. Dolo and Dr. Maïga – two Malian physicians who presented the anatomy of female genitalia with visual aids and discussed concrete cases of complications that they had treated in Bamako – that really convinced her.

²⁶⁰ Interview ME1, 07/11/97.

²⁶¹ Interview ME1, 07/11/97.

²⁶² Interview GE1, 29/10/97.

²⁶³ Interview KM13, 13/09/97.

Back home from the seminar, she wanted to hold an information session to relay what she had learned, but people said, she reported, “it is white people who want to impose these ideas on us.” However when, as *ɛnɛmuso* (father’s sister), she forbade the excision of two of her younger brothers’ newborn daughters, people started to take her seriously. When she told her aunts and her mothers to stop excising, she was called to a meeting of the family’s council. She considered having been able to initiate discussion on this topic a great success, and had brought up the topic with her co-workers at school also. “I provide an example in my own family,” she concluded.

In the fact that the presentation by *nùmùmusow*’s competitors who were nevertheless recognized experts on reproductive health convinced this *nùmu* activist, we recognize Schutz’s (1964, 123) observation that the expert “... knows very well that only a fellow expert will understand all the technicalities and implications of a problem in his field, and he will never accept a layman or dilettante as a competent judge of his performance.” However, in my experience there are very few people like this CMPF member in Kayes who can bridge *nùmùmusow*’s and *ɗɗɗɗɗɗ*’s fields of knowledge, who consider their expertise comparable.

If then, the majority of excising *nùmùmusow* disagree with health personnel’s approach to excision and consider feminists to be ignorant in this regard, why do some of them agree to hand over their knives to organizations like CMPF? Here, I believe, the motivation of most is poverty. What attracts these women is the possibility of accessing some of the *tùbàbuw*’s known vast amounts of money – as evidenced by the lifestyles of non-African television characters and of expatriates in Mali, most of whom drive vehicles that are luxurious by local standards, and live in spacious villas with such opulent appointments as watered flower gardens, electricity, air conditioners, refrigerators, telephones, swimming pools and television satellite dishes. Numerous people in urban Mali know very well that one of the few possible ways to access such riches is through participation in a ‘development’ project managed by a Malian NGO or more specifically, in our case, a women’s association, whose leadership is the link to the Western world (see also

De Jorio 1997). Such behaviour needs to be situated in a context not only of relative and absolute poverty, but also of a dearth of economic opportunities for *nùmuw*, whose products, including pottery, are increasingly replaced by cheap imported manufactured goods from Asia and other parts of the world (see also Frank 1998, 156).

Several of the *nùmùmusow* I interviewed kept asking, throughout our exchange, what I personally or CMPF in Bamako was going to do to 'help' them, now that they had pledged to stop excising. Agna in Mopti insisted that I bring back this message to the national president of CMPF: "I have nine children. The father is dead. It was with excision that I tried to ensure my children's livelihood, therefore if we are told to stop excising, people have to help us." The two *nùmùmusow* who agreed to be interviewed in Segou were very irritated at the way that their collaboration with CMPF had gone. "I had stopped," one of them said, "because we were told to stop, that we would be given some machines, and we did stop, we ceased at these conditions." But the training they had received had been inappropriate, she said, and they had not made any profit from the business venture, so now what was CMPF going to do?²⁶⁴ The *nùmuw*'s code of behaviour, as *nyamakalaw*, allows them to make such insistent, direct demands that would be considered shameless begging on the part of most *hɔrɔnw*.

Such was the frustration in Segou that already in June 1997 (four months before my interviews), one of the *nùmùmusow* who participated in the events staged for the visit of the Canadian NGO and film-making team discussed in Chapter 4, issued a threat to the president of CMPF, whom I call Adame. At the end of the day, an outdoor street celebration was held during which the *nùmùmusow* who had previously pledged to stop excising, and were participating in the income-generating project, testified about their experiences. Whereas the event was celebratory in tone, involving singing and dancing while the video camera was rolling, a close look at the transcripts of the testimonies reveals the women's impatience with the project – this alongside the

²⁶⁴ Interview GE1, 29/10/97.

mandatory expression of gratitude to one's patrons (here, the local and national presidents of CMPF, both in attendance). For instance, one woman addressed the crowd in these words:

Dear Muslims [a common greeting], good evening. Every person who has been able to come here tonight, everybody, welcome on behalf of [CMPF]. (...) Myself here Assa, [Adame] had us come to Bamako [for training], what she did was Allah's will. She gave us machines, there is value in that. Now, us we are children, there are elderly people [to take care of], we have our children, we want to get them started doing excision. At the present help us again so that we do not teach them excision. This is what would please us, what we are praying for.²⁶⁵

Here Assa, a middle-aged woman who has given her word that she will no longer perform excision, is directly threatening to train her daughter(s) to take over her practice if more money is not forthcoming from CMPF.

To abandon excision might also be part of a class climbing strategy, and a way to pursue *évolution*. *Nyamakalaw* who become part of the *intellectuel*, French-speaking, bureaucratic, Western-oriented elite, or follow the other elite path towards the adoption of 'orthodox' Islamic practice, trade and an orientation towards the Arabic world, tend to disassociate themselves from practices that both these groups consider 'animist' and 'backwards,' such as circumcision practiced by *nùmuw*, and from the behaviour traditionally associated with their *siya*, such as begging and performing ritualized services for *hɔɔmw*. Rosa De Jorio (1997, 307-8) reports that the female members of one of the richest households in Segu, a *nùmu* family, have stopped performing services such as excision and the shaving of babies' heads during name-giving ceremonies. Even acknowledging *siya* as an organizing principle of society is badly looked upon by modern urban elites, who in my experience are often impatient with what they perceive as Westerners' fascination with ethnicity, caste structure, and *sènènkùnya* relationships. Barbara Frank (1998, 169, n.22) shares an interesting anecdote to this effect:

One of my interpreters was from a blacksmith family. She was a part of the well-educated urban middle class and did not wish to be singled out among her peers as a *nùmùmuso*. She once told me of becoming somewhat embarrassed and annoyed

²⁶⁵ Transcript of the recording of the *nùmùmusow*'s testimonies, Segu, 05/06/97, side A at 322, originally in Bamanakan.

while attending a social event where she and a woman from a griot family were presented with modest gifts of cash because they were both *nyamakalaw*.

Independently of individual strategies, a system of assigned status such as that of the Mande and Fulbe caste system is obviously at odds with the ideology of meritocracy associated with the kind of capitalist market economy that organic intellectuals of the Malian ruling class are now promoting.

Conclusion

Based on my interviews with eight traditional excisers, presented above, as well as on data obtained through participant-observation, I conclude that the premise on which CMPF anti-excision programs aimed at *nùmùmusow* is based – namely, that they practice excision because that is how they earn a living – is not entirely correct. For most *nùmùmusow* interviewed, money and goods received in payment for excision constitute only one amongst several other sources of revenues. There is more to the practice of excision than earnings: it is also a source of pride and of identity, and some of the women also expressed the conviction that excising is their duty.

My *nùmùmusow* informants took the competition from doctors and nurses seriously. Indeed, several put a lot of effort, during interviews, into convincing Mariam and me of the superiority of their knowledge and methods over those of *dɔkɔɔɔw*. Their emphasis is on their superior capacity to stop bleeding. Having established, in Chapter 5 above, that the blood of the circumcised is the vessel for the *nyama* released by the cutting, this affirmation is not surprising, since according to Mande concepts, only properly-trained *nyamakalaw* have the capacity to safely handle that substance. In *nùmùmusow*'s expressed point of view, when health workers who are not *nùmùw* perform circumcision, they seriously endanger the children – and ultimately, society.

Generally, the *nùmùmusow* interviewed considered feminist anti-excision campaigners to be ignorant about the topic. When questioned about the arguments put forward by activists, some

responded by arguing that the reported harmful consequences are a new phenomenon attributable to the lack of respect of prescriptions and proscription of the caste system. Properly done by trained *nùmùmusow* who have not broken the rules of their caste, excision is beneficial for girls, women and society, most argued, while one woman seemed to have been genuinely convinced of the harmfulness of the practice by campaigners' evidence. In any case, leaders of women's associations are useful as conduits to aid money for *nùmùw* willing to retire from the practice. There are a number of possible motivations for excisers to hand over their knives: poverty, 'conversion' to the feminists' point of view, and class-climbing, since joining the elite in urban Mali generally means adopting *hɔɔn* behaviour (and dropping such obvious markers of *nyamakala* caste belonging as excision practice).

If there is one aspect of excision in Mali that everybody agrees on, opponents and proponents, experts and non-experts alike, it is the fact that the age at which the operation is practiced is decreasing and that the initiatory aspects of *bolokoli* have, in urban settings at least, disappeared. Nambala Kanté (1993: 183) attributes this loss to the appropriation of the practice by Islam. He deplors the fact that "... in the hands of the Islamists this custom anterior to Islam has become a practice of cleanliness: it is said that the ritual ablutions are not valid and that one's prayer is refused by Allah if one has not been through this trial [circumcision]" (Ibid., 199, my translation). In the following chapter we look at the discourse of the last group of experts on excision, Malian Muslim leaders, those who encourage a reinterpretation of boys' and girls' circumcision from a puberty rite of passage to a purification ritual.

CHAPTER 10

EXPERTS ON EXCISION IV: MUSLIM LEADERS

The Point of View of Islam on Girls' Excision

Generally speaking excision is an old custom and its origins are unknown. The Prophet, PBH [Peace Be on Him] said: When two circumcised people have [sexual] relationships, washing is mandatory.

Another hadith of the Prophet PBH says: there are five things that are natural for man. Among the five is excision. For certain schools [of religious legal opinion] circumcision is a custom for men and women. For others it is mandatory, a duty for men and women. It is also said that it is an obligation for men and a custom for women.

The Prophet PBH said to ATTIYAT's mother: "cut a little bit" and do not cut a lot. Because it is a beauty for the woman and a pleasure for the husband.

Through this hadith the Prophet asks that a little be cut that is, the place where impurities are located.

This is the point of view of Islam: Excision is not an obligation and non-excision is not a sin.

For our part, we recommend to our sisters and to our wives to understand the phenomenon and to follow the recommendations of the Prophet PBH. It is preferable to consult doctors and health agents before proceeding with excision.

Currently several sexual illnesses can be avoided through abandoning excision: AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

*For the National Office of AMUPI [Association
Maliennne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam]
Imam El Hadj Abdoulaye Camara
Secretary for Internal Relations
(signed)*

(Mimeographed one-page document distributed at the *National Seminar for the Definition of Strategies to Eradicate FGM in Mali* [in this text 'National Seminar on FGM'], Bamako, 17-19 June 1997, my translation)

AMUPI, the influential national Malian Association for the Unity and the Progress of Islam, was expected to participate in the June 1997 National Seminar on FGM in Bamako, but at the last minute declined to send a representative, instead dispatching a messenger with the above statement. One of the seminar's feminist organizers read the printed "Point of View" – a jewel of ambiguity – to the audience, highlighting the part that suited her purposes, that is, "excision is not an obligation and non-excision is not a sin." Muslim leaders I interviewed, however, emphasized other aspects of AMUPI's public point of view, such as the fact that the Prophet would have

advised to “cut a little” – in other words, partial clitoridectomy or more specifically, removal of the ‘hood’ or prepuce of the clitoris. I interpret the fact that AMUPI did not attend the National Seminar as a refusal to lend anti-excision activists legitimacy by associating with them. I would encounter such antagonism throughout the year, as a Westerner associated with a prominent Malian feminist organization. My association with CMPF made it difficult to obtain interviews with Muslim leaders in Mali, but thanks to the personal contacts of CMPF members in Kayes, Mopti and Sikasso I was able to interview one imam in each of these locales. This chapter is based primarily on those three interviews and on articles and opinion pieces published in the Malian press by those claiming religious expertise on the question of excision.

Purifying Bodies, Purifying Islam

One of the Bamanakan words used to euphemistically talk about male and female circumcision, *seliji*, indicates that in Mali the practice of excision has long been inscribed with Muslim meanings. *Seliji* is a compound word formed by the words for praying, *seli*, and for water, *ji*, and in daily speech it refers to the ritual ablutions that Muslims must perform before each of the five mandatory daily prayers. Here the message is that excision, just like men’s circumcision, is a practice that allows the ritual purity without which, it is said, one’s prayer is not received by Allah. A fair number of “people on the street” and several of the *nùmùmusow* interviewed stressed that the prayer of a *bilakôro* would be worthless.

Imams interviewed in Kayes, Mopti and Sikasso, however, insisted that this belief was due to ignorance of the sacred texts of Islam. Imam Oumar Barro in Kayes, the director of a *medersa* (Qur’anic school), a member of AMUPI and a preacher on rural radio stated: “... in ignorant circles, ignorant women exaggerate. They say that non-excised women do not receive

Allah's blessing. That is exaggerated."²⁶⁶ What distinguishes imams such as the ones interviewed from these "ignorant women" is the field of knowledge on which they base their claim of expertise on excision: authoritative knowledge of the Qur'an, of the Books of Hadiths and of other Islamic texts and treatises, knowledge acquired through years of advanced studies, usually abroad, often in Egypt. While a large number of Malians, particularly men, spend a few years of their childhood learning verses from the Qur'an by rote memorization, very few people are actually literate in Arabic in Mali. Few understand the meaning of the Suras and prayers that they recite from memory. The ability to read and write the Arabic script and knowledge of the sacred texts of Islam are much valued in Malian society, and imams can regularly be seen on national television and heard on various radio stations discoursing on just about every aspect of life. Two of the three imams Mariam and I interviewed had participated in such media programs on excision.

In explaining to us Islam's position on excision, all three imams encouraged the practice. It is "*sunna*" (i.e., the way of the Prophet), it is "recommended but not mandatory," said Imam Barro. Imam Yacouba Doucouré in Sikasso, also the director of a medersa and a radio preacher, explained that excision dates from the time of Ibrahim ('Abraham' in the Judaeo-Christian tradition), and that Prophet Mohammed had condoned it. He specified that it is not an obligation, only a recommendation: "To circumcise a woman is a *mustahabu* [ennoblement] only, meaning that it is good in the Muslim religion to do it. But if you do not do it, you do not enter into the fire, there is no damnation" Later he added that the Prophet Mohammed also said "... that the dignity of woman is in it."²⁶⁷ More vehement was the AMUPI representative in Mopti, who requested anonymity, and who answered "yes" when asked whether excision was a religious requirement. He then explained: "There are two things: if you do it, there is *bàràji* [divine reward], and it is a splendour for the woman. If you do not do it it is not serious. However

²⁶⁶ Interview KD3, 13/09/97. Imam Barro said he did not mind me using his name as long as I did not distort what he said. It is my hope that I have been faithful to his words.

Muslims choose what is advantageous [in terms of *bàràjì*], therefore it is mandatory for Muslims.”²⁶⁸

Imam Barro, who had participated in the 1993 CMPF workshop on excision in Kayes, knew of the standard activists’ way of grouping various forms of female genital operations into three (sometimes four or more) “types,” where generally Type I is partial or total clitoridectomy, also called “*sunna* circumcision,” Type II is “excision,” in this case defined as ablation of the clitoris and the labia minora, and Type III is infibulation. Assuming that Mariam and I knew this typology, Imam Barro specified that Islam only recommends “Type I”. Imam Doucouré made the same argument in different words, citing the same hadith as the one in the opening AMUPI statement above, which reports that Prophet Mohammed, encountering an exciser, told her to cut, but only a little at the tip.

Because of the long history of Malians going to Cairo to undertake advanced Islamic studies, I believe that the position of imams Barro and Doucouré, interviewed in September and October 1997, respectively, as well as the June 1997 AMUPI statement, may have been informed by the 1996 declaration by the imam of El Azhar University in Cairo, the most prestigious centre of learning of Sunni Islam (practiced in Mali). The imam, Sheikh Tantaoui, publicly promoted in an Egyptian newspaper “moderate circumcision” for women, saying it is not mandatory, but citing the following words attributed to the Prophet, a variant translation of the same hadith: “circumcision, when it is not too deep, embellishes the woman and gives more pleasure to the husband” (quoted in CI-AF 1996, my translation from the French).

My interviews with imams Barro and Doucouré also took place after the Administrative Tribunal of Cairo re-authorized the practice of female circumcision in public health centres in Egypt in July 1997, and before that decision was reversed by Egypt’s highest court in December 1997 (Anonymous 1998; CI-AF 1997). The July 1997 decision was reported in a militant Islamic

²⁶⁷ Interview SD10, 25/10/97. Imam Doucouré did not want his answers to be anonymous.

²⁶⁸ Interview DM7, 07/11/97.

bimonthly newspaper in Bamako, *La Shourah* (AFP/AMAP 1997). It may have been the Egyptian model that Imam Barro was advocating when he said to us that instead of the current situation where excision in Kayes is mostly, to his knowledge, performed by *nùmùmusow* or other “old women,” he would “...prefer a practical training of midwives, that it be done in hospitals and health centres as it is for boys.” The events in Egypt reflect the high level of disagreement over the medicalization of female circumcision.²⁶⁹ In October 1995 the Egyptian Health Minister issued a decree ordering state hospitals to perform female circumcision one day a week, despite promises made by the Egyptian government at the UN Cairo Conference on Population and Development to outlaw the practice (Ghalwash 1995). The decree’s stated purpose was to make the operation safer, halting its practice by “clumsy amateurs” (Ibid.). The Egyptian Minister of Health argued that his decree would “... eventually lead to the eradication of the practice by educating parents in mandatory counseling sessions” (Ibid.). However feminists and human-rights groups charged that the decree legitimized female circumcision, and following an international outcry the government of Egypt reversed its decision. In July 1996 a new decree forbade medical personnel from practicing circumcision on girls (CI-AF 1997; IAC 1995). This second decree was then taken to court by “Islamists,” according to the IAC (CI-AF 1997) – hence, the declaration by the Imam of El Azhar University, in support of this court challenge²⁷⁰ – and overturned in 1997, leading to the re-legalization of the practice, shortly before my interviews with Imams Barro and Doucouré. In November 1997, Mohamed Kimbiri, a board member of a Malian Muslim organization and an independent electoral candidate for a seat at the National Assembly, published an opinion piece in a Bamako daily citing the Egyptian case as a model for medicalization of excision.²⁷¹ He argued that female circumcision, “... applied according to the Sunna method in its modern form is a healthy practice” (Kimbiri 1997).

²⁶⁹ For a discussion of this topic in Kenya, see Bettina Shell-Duncan et al. (2000).

²⁷⁰ The Imam of El Azhar University died shortly afterwards, and his replacement was apparently chosen because of his anti-circumcision stance (Janice Boddy, personal communication, September 2000).

²⁷¹ Information on Mr. Kimbiri’s political career from a newspaper article by Doucouré (1997).

On the other hand the AMUPI representative in Mopti did not see anything wrong with the way that *nùmumusow* practiced excision, basing his judgment on empirical evidence from his own life experience: “In our family, my brothers and I we have about twenty daughters. Myself I have seven. All these girls have been excised and not one had a problem.”²⁷² This differs from the official position of his Association. As we saw in the statement that opens this chapter, AMUPI suggests to Malian women that they consult with doctors and health agents before having their daughters excised. In Sikasso, while Imam Doucouré was not as explicit as Imam Barro in recommending medicalization of the practice, he did blame possible negative health consequences on the failure of *nùmuw* to perform the operation in the way recommended by the greatest doctor of all, Prophet Mohammed. He explained:

As I said, since the time of Ibrahim to the time of Mohammed, Peace Be on Him, from his time until today, *bolokoli* is performed everywhere in the world. We have never heard that it has caused a danger anywhere in the world. If not in our country, we have not heard, we have not opened a book and seen [we have not read anywhere] that excision has dangers. There is only one thing that is [dangerous], it is to do something without knowing how. And this is not only true for excision, but for everything in this world. Even the operation, if you give it to someone who does not know how to do it, truly it causes damages, do you understand? Hence we are not aware that excision, if done normally, as the Prophet said, the boss of the doctors, to cut a little, that it causes damages in the world, we have never heard this in a book, nor heard it in our ears. *Unless someone does it in another way than that recommended by the Prophet, things like that, or cutting with a nege [“iron,” a reference to the nùmuw’s traditional excision knife] where there is tetanus, not knowing the work of the doctors.* Things like that we do not say that it is a failure of excision, we say that it is a mistake on the part of the one who did it.²⁷³

As the italicized sentence reveals, when Muslim leaders are advocating the medicalization of the practice, they are, intentionally or not, attacking *nùmuw*’s claim to expertise. This is a reflection of the ‘modernity’ that highly educated Muslim leaders espouse, embracing medical science as opposed to the science of herbalists and other ‘traditional’ health specialists. It is also a reflection of the long-standing rivalry in Mali between *moriw*, Muslim diviners, healers and teachers, and *nùmuw*, custodians of competing ritual, medical and cosmological knowledge – a rivalry that

²⁷² Interview DM7, 07/11/97.

²⁷³ Interview SD10, 25/10/97, emphasis added.

reveals itself in the accusation leveled by Kanté (1993), cited above, at the ‘Islamists’ for having removed the initiatory aspects of *bolokoli*, initiatory aspects of which *nùmuw* were largely in charge.

Patrick McNaughton (1988, 6, 51, 52) notes that *nyamakalaw* in general and *nùmuw* in particular share several practices with *moriw* (or “marabouts”), such as divination, amulet-making, healing, and rainmaking. The smith to whom McNaughton apprenticed himself often compared *nùmuw*’s work and role to that of marabouts (*moriw*), presenting the latter in a negative light, even calling them charlatans (Ibid., 110, 205 n.24). Another *nùmu* man of his acquaintance, a *kɔmɔ* society leader, once accused two Muslim marabouts of sorcery causing illness (Ibid., 132). “Most smiths would say such things,” concluded McNaughton (1988, 205 n.24), “because marabouts are the chief competitors in many of their activities.” Now that *male* circumcision in urban Mali seems to have been completely reappropriated, in its physical aspects by health agents, and in its spiritual aspects by Muslim leaders, female circumcision is one of the few remaining areas where *nùmuw* can still claim a monopoly, intensifying the animosity between the various competing experts.

The push to take excision away from *nùmùmusow* by Muslim leaders is also to be interpreted within a general effort by some Muslim scholars in Mali to reform Islam and strip it of at least some of the religious practices associated with animism, such as the cults addressed to wilderness spirits ministered by *nùmuw*. The fact that nearly the entire population of Mali claims Islam as its religion gives an indication of the negative reputation that traditional religions have acquired in Mali, even if the Islam practiced by Malians incorporates many of these religions’ concepts and practices. Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1989, 171) reported that in the area where she carried out fieldwork, some of the characteristics that were formerly attributed to slaves, such as shamelessness, were attributed by Muslim Bamanan to nonconverts to Islam. Such an attitude towards non-Muslims creates or reflects a certain receptivity to the messages of reformists, as

numerous people are eager to become – or be seen as – better Muslims, as this enhances their honour. Islamic reformism has a long history in Mali, starting with the Almoravids, continuing with, amongst other movements, the Diina of Seeku Aamadu, and finding perhaps its most dramatic expression in the *jihad* of al-Hajj Umar Tall. Yet as Sundiata A. Djata (1997, 156) argues in the case of the Bamanan of Segou, the burning of “fetishes” and the conversions exacted by Umarian rulers “... failed to eradicate all aspects of Bamana religion and religious culture.” leading instead to syncretism. It is precisely this syncretism that irritates Muslim reformists in Mali, who want to strip religious practices of what they consider to be unorthodox local adaptations of Islam, to arrive at ‘pure’ Muslim practices, such as ‘*sunna*’ circumcision. Reformists are just as likely as *nùmuw* to accuse of charlatanism the often lesser-educated marabouts who practice healing or divination. In an August 1997 interview with *La Shourah*, Malian preacher El Hadj Thierno Hady Thiam blamed them for the fact that “Maliens in their majority ignore Islam” and expressed the opinion that “Malian society is not truly Islamic” (Doucouré 1997).

Efforts to ‘purify’ Islam in Mali are concerned with, amongst other things, the appropriate role and behaviour of women. The most important Islamic reform group in Mali is the Wahhabiyya movement, named after its Arabian founder, Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhād (1703-1793) (Amselle 1985b). The name “Wahhabiyya” is rejected by members, who call their movement the Community of the *Ahl al-sunna* [the family of the (true) path], or Sunnis (Brenner 1993, 60). It has been present in the country since the mid-1940s, first spreading amongst wealthy merchants in Bamako and then amongst urban and rural youth (Amselle 1985b). The movement originated in Saudi Arabia, and according to Louis Brenner (1993, 60) for members “... this orientation symbolizes the legitimacy of their movement, associated as it is with the spiritual centre of the Muslim world and with an alleged ritual purity which rejects the many innovations of local Islamic expressions, especially Sufism.” The arrival of the movement in Mali corresponded with the last fifteen years of French colonial rule, and it included enough of an

anti-French element to worry colonial authorities. Particularly, the Wahhabi/Sunni sought to establish Islamic schools (medersas) that competed both with the French colonial schools and with the small, less formal Qur'anic schools of the Sufi *moriw* (or marabouts).²⁷⁴

The Wahhabi/Sunni movement does carry with it a different gender ideology, alluded to briefly by Amselle (1985b, 355, n.8) who mentions the confinement of women, veiling, and the interdiction of handshakes with members of the opposite sex. Jane Turriffin (1987, 101) reported that in the village where she conducted fieldwork in 1982-83, Wahhabi/Sunni beliefs were "...leading to a restructuring of the sexual division of labour in a small number of Wahhabiyya households." Turriffin (1987, 100-1) recorded the following Wahhabi/Sunni preachings concerning women:

- women's place is in the household, and their role is child-bearing and domestic work;
- husbands should fully support their wives and children financially;
- only men should go to the market;
- women should not do any work that involves leaving the household compound, such as agricultural work; only income-generating activities that can take place within the compound are allowed;
- women should wear a head and face-covering veil and concealing black clothing.

These precepts are significantly different from the practices of the majority of Malian women who are very active in agricultural work and in local and long-distance trade. Further, the great majority of women in Mali wear vividly colourful clothing and do not cover their faces, although most of them wear head scarves to cover their hair. Turriffin (1987, 101) notes that few villagers can afford to live according to Wahhabiyya principles. In the cities where I worked, the

²⁷⁴ The Islam of the Wahhabi/Sunni also differs from that of the majority of Malians in that they follow the Hanbali school of *shariat* (the strictest in terms of rules of interpretation), as opposed to the Maliki school, more prevalent in West Africa generally, which admits local custom as a tertiary source of authority or precedent, after the Qur'an and the Hadiths (Janice Boddy, personal communication, September 2000; see also Brenner, 1993).

movement was also associated with wealth, and carried with it a certain prestige. It is difficult to know exactly how many Malians are Wahhabi/Sunnis: I am not aware of any statistics to that effect. They are definitely still a small minority, and those religious leaders who speak on excision do not identify themselves as belonging to this group, although Imams Barro and Doucouré, as directors of medersas, were almost certainly associated with the movement.

Imam Barro espoused the local common-sense and Islamic view that women's sexuality needs to be controlled, although he expressed this opinion in moderate terms, saying that if a woman is not excised, *and* she is not "properly supervised and educated [*encadrée*]" non-excision "... can be a significant factor for delinquency." Imam Doucouré was much more adamant, insisting throughout our interview on the dangers to society brought by the insatiable sexual desire of uncircumcised women. When asked what the consequences for society of abandoning excision would be, he answered: "... the feeling of women that Islam wants to diminish. it will increase this pleasure. Then the pleasure of women is great, this is what brings about 'I cannot be without a man.' 'I cannot be without a man.' this is what brings about the serious illnesses of sexuality like syphilis or AIDS...." Such behaviour is not only dangerous for society he explained, but spiritually harmful for the highly sexed woman herself, whose self-respect and dignity is lost. For his part, the AMUPI representative in Mopti was of the opinion that merely by naming women's private parts in public, by "divulg[ing] the intimacy of woman," anti-excision activists were behaving disrespectfully.

Islam, Politics, Excision and Hegemonic Projects

The December 1997 UNAFEM Conference and Its Aftermath²⁷⁵

Between 24 and 26 December 1997 there took place in Bamako the second national conference of the *Union des associations de femmes musulmanes du Mali* (Union of Muslim women's associations of Mali, UNAFEM). Women from all the administrative regions of Mali were present, and debated such locally controversial topics as family planning, excision, and women's role and rights in Islam. Among other resolutions during the final plenary session, the UNAFEM conference officially accepted contraception when used to space out births within marriage; urged the suppression of certain television programs that "degrade" Malian values, and the closing of bars and discotheques during Ramadan; requested that the Muslim religious wedding ceremony have the same legal status as the civil marriage performed by municipal officials; and declared that excision was required for Muslim women and asked for the medicalization of the practice. UNAFEM also specifically asked the Malian government *not* to legislate against excision.

One journalist (Nianglay 1997) reports how the debate on excision proceeded. Apparently the speakers who addressed the conference linked the media campaign against excision to the will of the followers of Satan to encourage the 'sexual delinquency' that in their view contributes to the destruction of society. They argued that the practice of *sunna* circumcision was mandatory because prescribed in the Hadiths. Still according to Nianglay, speakers maintained that an uncircumcised girl would be "twice as sensitive" as her excised sister. Linking the fact that excision is not practiced by Westerners to the purported depravity of Western society, one orator from Kayes reportedly told the audience that "... in the West, it is not

²⁷⁵ My account of the UNAFEM conference is based on the following newspaper articles: Aw (1998), Doumbia (1997), Fainke (1997), and Nianglay (1997).

rare to see in the streets, in the movie theatres and in public plazas individuals right in the middle of sexual activity” (Nianglay 1997, my translation).

Three and a half months later, I interviewed an official at the Ministry for Women, Children and the Family and I asked her if she knew where I could find the president of UNAFEM, Hadja Tahara Dravé. She exploded: “Tara Dravé! She used to fight for women’s rights! She was a role model for us!”²⁷⁶ Indeed, Adame Ba Konaré (1993, 382-3) devotes an entry in her Dictionary of famous Malian women to Taher Kamara, also known as Tara Dravé, a midwife born in Bamako in 1933 who was active in the RDA from 1956 onwards, was instrumental in the creation of UNFM, and held the position of Treasurer in the Pan-African Women’s Organization in Algiers between 1962 and her retirement and return to Mali in 1986. My informant told me that after the UNAFEM December 1997 conference, the conclusions of which were televised, UNAFEM women were called to the Ministry where “... doctors and obstetricians gave it to them!” The Ministry official believed that the UNAFEM women had been used. “By whom?” I inquired. “Look at the name,” she told me. “U. N. AFEM.” pointing to the aural similarity of the acronym with that of the old women’s organization linked to Moussa Traoré’s party, the UNFM. And indeed, some of the Malian opposition political parties at the time claimed the inheritance of Moussa Traoré’s party.

A professional Malian woman working for UNICEF, also interviewed in April, was even more direct on the political aspects of the UNAFEM conference. When I asked her about the UNAFEM declaration in favour of excision, she replied:

It was purely political. These women were against excision in the time of UNFM. They are midwives and teachers. They are using this against the current regime. They completely manipulated the Commissariat for the Promotion of Women. Mme Bah [a high-ranking official in the CPF] was there; they were showing her as if she was in agreement with these conclusions. (...) Why is this? When someone wants to dislodge an adversary, all the weapons are good if the other fails in one of her missions. They think they can get the maximum number of women from the grassroots with them. (...) Everybody knows that when the country has problems they turn to excision. When these women use religion, they have some men behind

²⁷⁶ Interview at the Ministry, 06/04/98.

them. Also, this movement is to a large extent financed by the Iranians and others.²⁷⁷

In an interview with a journalist from *Le Républicain*, the first vice-president of UNAFEM affirmed that the association "... does not have any other references but the Prophet and the word of God" (Daou 1998), yet the UNICEF staff's assertions are supported by the fact that the Ambassadors of Iran and of Palestine were present during the Conference (Nianglay 1997). But caution is warranted here because accusing reformists, particularly Wahhabi/Sunnis, of representing outside interests is a common argument on the part of secularist *intellectuels* such as our UNICEF interlocutor (Brenner 1993), a point I now turn to.

Muslim Reformists and Secularist *Intellectuels*: Each Other's 'Other'

Accusations of manipulation by outsiders who do not have Mali's true interests at heart are mutual between Muslim leaders and secularist *intellectuels*. Those Muslim leaders who attempt to discredit anti-excision activists in Mali – it is not all Muslim scholars who do; a few in fact have publicly sided on the abolitionists' side – often do so by linking them to "Westerners," sometimes more specifically to the colonial oppressors, the French. The AMUPI representative Mariam and I interviewed in Mopti in November 1997 added the following comment at the end of our exchange: "I don't know how this whole thing started. Since ancient times we have practiced excision And now, there is all this talk. Are they trying to destroy the Muslim religion or what? Instead of researching, of interfering in this, there are other things in Mali that need solutions, like malaria." He concluded with a threat: "My final word: if you want to forbid a religious practice, it will bring about a *jihad* [holy war]." In Kayes, at the conclusion of the interview, Imam Barro switched from French to Bamanakan to tell my assistant: "I'll give you some advice: everywhere there are foreigners. We must not try to abolish this: it is our culture,

²⁷⁷ Interview at UNICEF in Bamako, 07/04/98.

our customs.” During the June 1997 governmental National Seminar on FGM in Bamako, someone distributed a militant Bamako Islamist newspaper that included an anonymous article that claimed: “Westerners are trying to trick and poison the mentalities of African women so that they will abandon African customs; this is why a satanic woman, Mme Virginie ploughs through Malian villages, educating against excision...” (Anonymous 1997a). The latter part of the sentence was a direct attack on a Christian staff member of Centre Djoliba, present at the National Seminar on FGM.

Daouda F. Diarra (1997a; 1997b; 1997c), the author of three pro-excision articles in *La Shoura*,²⁷⁸ develops the following thesis: the ontological meaning and the historical origin of male and female circumcision are to be found in African beliefs regarding the androgyny of human beings. These concepts traveled from “black” Africa to the Middle East – Abraham, according to Herodotus, would have been circumcised as an octogenarian by “black blacksmiths” (Diarra 1997a). While Judaism and Islam kept circumcision practices, Christianity erred by following the teachings of Paul who abolished the Semitic circumcision ritual. Now the “Christian West” wants to do the same to excision and hence erase this Black African contribution to Islam. And what motivates this Western, Christian campaign against excision? Not concern with the health of African women, answers Diarra (1997b, my translation), but racism: “This fight that the West is imposing on us is far from being a health issue, it is first and foremost the logical continuation of domination by a race that claims to be civilized over another, pariah of civilization.”

If anti-excision Westerners find allies amongst feminists in Mali, according to Diarra and several other commentators, it is because these women are not only ignorant of their religion but enculturated, spending their time at the Champs Élysées and in Beijing (a reference to the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women), and especially, attracted to Western capital. Malian feminists who fight against excision, charges Diarra (1997c), are “... exchanging our African

identity and dignity for medals, cars and plane tickets.” Reporting on the 1997 UNAFEM conference, Fakara Fainke (1997) quotes a Dr. Maïga who is said to have revealed to participants that “a large sum of money” was made available to “end our ancient practices.”

In retaliation to such a discourse and in response to the UNAFEM 1997 conference, a Malian jurist, Koniba Coulibaly (1998), wrote a spirited repartee, in which he argued that until Malians decide to “... change their satanic secular Republic into an Islamic Republic.” current Malian law needs to be respected and the debate on excision must remain “secular and democratic.” He proposed that excision only be practiced on adult women after they have given their informed consent. Further, he pointed out that the UNAFEM female leadership is materially rewarded for its stance in favour of excision: “... looking at those dignified ladies descending from their automobiles covered from head to toe in the best silks from Riad (the capital of Saudi Arabia), we can understand how, in exchange for their own excision (praise the Lord), they forgot all earthly miseries the day they entered the vast front lobby of their rich husbands” (Ibid.). The rich husbands of those women “adepts of the scalpel” are, according to Coulibaly (Ibid.), “... either great dignitaries of the religion, with dozens of followers and other ‘*talibes*’ and servants, or large merchants....”

In his characterization of the men behind UNAFEM as wealthy merchants linked to Saudi Arabia, Coulibaly, a secularist *intellectual* judging by his opinion piece, is giving the typical profile of the Wahhabi/Sunnis. But while Coulibaly (1998) accuses the imams who espouse this orientation of belonging to the “Middle Ages,” in fact the Wahhabi/Sunnis have for decades been bringing at least some of the physical manifestations of modernity to Mali. Brenner (1993, 67) notes of the Wahhabi/Sunni that “... they find themselves constructing their identity in opposition to a ‘tradition’ invented during the colonial period.” Their modernism is expressed partly through the range of institutions that they have built throughout the country: mosques, clinics, pharmacies, cultural centres and medersas (Ibid.). To give an idea of the significance of

²⁷⁸ Unfortunately I do not know anything about Mr. Diarra’s background.

this infrastructure, Brenner (Ibid.) reports that in the early 1990s approximately one quarter of the children in primary schools in Mali attended a medersa. This ability to provide services to deprived populations is particularly significant in the light of the crisis of legitimacy of the state, which until very recently failed to deliver comparable services.

Yet as Brenner (Ibid., 70) notes, while many Wahhabi/Sunni initiatives "... are examples of what the international development community would call grassroots development," neither that international community nor the state agents it finances publicly recognize the success of such initiatives. In fact, they ignore them completely. I concur with Brenner when he argues that one reason for such silence "...is the fear that is generated among Western development officials and the [Malian] secularists (almost exclusively Western-educated 'intellectuals') about the political potential of Islam, particularly of 'fundamentalist' Islam." Such fears are undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that several of Brenner's "grassroots development projects" are indeed financed by Arab Muslim powers, some of them theocracies or monarchies, that are adversaries to the Western world in global politics. The above debates on excision are to be situated within a larger argument between those who advocate a "purified" Islam as an alternative model of society and an alignment with the Arab-Muslim world, and those who propose to follow Western-style "development" and secularist democracy. In this conflict over different hegemonic projects, girls' bodies have become a battleground, since excision often acts as a symbol of different allegiances. I am certain that President Chirac's advisors were well aware of these political and ideological ramifications when they recommended that he make Fatoumata Siré Diakité Knight of the Legion of Honour.

Conclusion

Because this chapter builds on limited primary data, and on secondary data with limited objectivity (extracts from the largely amateur and partisan Malian press), my conclusions here are

tentative. Nevertheless, the analysis of the discourse on excision by the last group of experts on the subject clearly reveals how debates around excision are linked to larger hegemonic struggles not only locally, but also at the international level. My access to Muslim religious leaders was impeded not only by the fact that I am not a follower of Islam, but also – and most importantly – because of my association with CMPF, a secular feminist organization. I should note also that of the four groups of experts discussed in this work, Muslim scholars are the most respected by the population at large, and the least easily approachable for an unmarried young woman, foreign or Malian.

I opened the chapter with the AMUPI statement on excision prepared for the June 1997 National Seminar on FGM. This remarkably ambiguous text refers to a number of Hadiths, including the one which reports that Prophet Mohammed would have advised an exciser to “cut a little.” The AMUPI scholar’s exegesis follows thus: “Through this hadith the Prophet asks that a little be cut that is, the place where impurities are located.”²⁷⁹ This sort of teaching, along with the occasional use of the expression “*seliji*” (“prayer-water,” i.e., ablutions) as a euphemism for circumcision, has led to the common-sense association of excision with ritual purification. Incorrect, stated the three Imams interviewed: it is simply untrue that the prayer of an uncircumcised woman will not be received by Allah. Their endorsement of the practice has more to do with the belief that excision helps to control female sexuality. As we have seen in Chapter 5, such an objective is highly compatible – in fact, identical – with those of Mande and Fulbe patriarchal cultures.

Where two of the three Imams interviewed diverged from majority, common-sense notions is in their rejection of *nùmùmusow*’s expertise on the matter. In the competing claims to technical expertise on excision of *nùmùmusow* and health practitioners, most urban Muslim leaders emphatically take the side of bio-medicine – as did AMUPI in the above-cited statement.

Further, in the televised conclusions of the UNAFEM December 1997 national conference, the national union of Muslim women's associations, after affirming that excision is necessary for Muslim women, demanded the medicalization of the operation. Many factors are at play here, including a long-standing rivalry between *nūmuw* and *moriw* (marabouts), as competing spiritual specialists; the integration of 'modern' science (including bio-medicine) in the Muslim reformists' vision for the future; and probably a certain modeling after Egypt, where I believe most erudite Malian Muslim scholars pursued their advanced studies.

If advocating the medicalization of the practice is an attack on *nūmūmusow*, advocating excision is a rebuttal to anti-excision feminists and to a State that reluctantly supports their campaigns. While some Muslim experts paint rather phantasmagoric images of the Western involvement in these campaigns, it cannot be denied, even by activists, that Western donors are indeed financing most anti-excision groups and their activities, probably at least partly for geopolitical reasons. In response to this accusation of being the agents of neo-colonialist interests, feminists and other members of the secular bureaucratic class retort that the Muslim reformists themselves receive funding from foreign powers, that is, from rich Arab nations. And so both elite groups accuse each other of not having Malian women's true interests at heart.

In the next chapter I move away from the competing discourses of experts to give voice to this population whose interests all claim to promote. Using the Schutzian analytical concept of the 'person on the street' I explore common-sense approaches to excision. What are people's reasons to excise (or not) their daughters? Which experts have influence on the majority? What is the typical 'working knowledge' of excision? What are the 'typical results' sought after? I seek answers to these questions in extracts from my survey of 300 women and men chosen at random in Kayes, Segou and Mopti. Next, I address the motivations of those who seek to become

²⁷⁹ AMUPI, mimeographed one-page document distributed at the *National Seminar for the Definition of Strategies to Eradicate FGM in Mali* (in this text 'National Seminar on FGM'), Bamako, 17-19 June 1997, my translation. (My files.)

well-informed on excision, and the barriers that they face in their quest for knowledge. Finally, I discuss the alienation that often results from such an exercise.

CHAPTER 11

“PEOPLE ON THE STREET” AND “WELL-INFORMED CITIZENS”

To recall our discussion on the social distribution of knowledge in Chapter 5, let us re-examine one of Schutz’s basic premises: the partial nature of the knowledge of all social actors. People recognize the incompleteness of their knowledge and know that it is not humanly feasible for them to be experts in every field of knowledge in society. In certain areas – here, excision – they are either happy or resigned to follow the prescriptions of experts in order to obtain certain desired results. These results – the desirability of which is evaluated within a certain cultural field of reference – and the means to achieve them, form part of social actors’ natural concept of the world, or in Gramscian terms, of their common-sense.

In Chapter 5 we also examined, via Gramsci’s concept of the “man of the people,” the strength of social consensus, an observation akin to Schutz’s “socially approved knowledge,” but more cognizant of the impact of hegemonic projects on the daily life of “people on the street.” For the reasons explored in chapters 4 and 6 through 9, excision in Malian society has become a politically salient practice. Even though it has an impact on one of the most intimate aspects of personhood, sexuality, excision was at the time of my research, very much in the public domain, and hegemonic processes channeled through social pressure were intensified at the same time as rewards for conforming (in terms of *bàràji*, for instance) were highlighted.

In this chapter I turn first to survey responses by people who exhibited a “person-on-the-street” approach to excision, and then to those who sought to become “well-informed citizens.” Admittedly, a questionnaire is not the ideal tool to ascertain a person’s Schutzian location, but recurring patterns in responses aided the analysis, as detailed below. Also, “people on the street” are here somewhat of a default category, for it is easier to identify through survey answers those individuals who aim at being well-informed on excision. Their answers will be discussed below. For now, I look at common themes in the survey responses of “people on the street.”

“We Were Born and Found This”

When we approached people about the ‘general population’ survey, the most common initial reaction was surprise. The majority of Malians I interviewed on excision – even the women who after all, have had the operation done themselves – did not consider themselves qualified to discuss this topic. Often, there was a scramble in the courtyard as family members were trying to determine who in the household was more knowledgeable on the topic, and then to locate this person. Mariam and I had a difficult time convincing people that anybody over fifteen could answer, that we were interested in everybody’s opinion. No doubt my being white and the fact that both Mariam and I were educated urban women influenced people’s understanding of the type of knowledge we were seeking. Nevertheless, I also believe that several people were signaling that they were not socially recognized as, nor did they consider themselves as, experts or even well-informed people on the topic of excision – in other words, they were expressing their position in the local knowledge economy. This modesty with regards to one’s knowledge, which often came from youth and wives of the family, also reflected the fact that in large corporate households, these two categories of people are usually given orders, not asked for their opinions. And when a few times I suggested that one of the maids could answer, this only generated laughter – how could *she* have anything to say?

In answer to three survey questions, the one concerning the reasons why excision is performed, the one asking the reasons why the respondent’s daughters were or would be excised, and finally the query as to whether or not excision is a good practice, a formula that translates approximately into “we were born and found this” (*an wolola ni an y’a sòro*) was often given. The ambiguity of the translation rests in the fact that the second Bamanakan verb used, *sòro*, which I have rendered as “to find” could also mean “to receive.” In fact, both connotations are relevant here, as some of the respondents who gave these answers later emphasized that the

practice had come from the elders (hence, received from them), while others simply used the formula, apparently to suggest that excision was part of their 'natural,' common-sensical world. Paul Riesman (1974, 21) found a similar phrase in use amongst the Fulbe of Northern Burkina Faso, *tawaangal*. This is generally translated as "tradition," but Riesman writes that it literally means "what we have found." For Riesman (1974, 21, my translation),

in this expression culture is not viewed as a collection of practices, nor as something that one generation gives to or teaches the next one, but as an objective reality that one "finds" around oneself. As [a Pulo child] grows, he discovers this world and learns the *tawaangal* of the group in which he finds himself. This *tawaangal* is in other words the "properties" of the human world, just as the sun, rain, night and day are properties of the natural world.

In the field of knowledge and social practice – excision – with which we are concerned, however, a significant number of people interviewed were critical of the practice and highly aware that the social world they find themselves in *could* be changed, if only they had the power to act upon it. Instead of being convinced of the immutability or 'naturalness' of their social and cultural system, it is of their subordinate condition in it that those informants were aware.

In discussing what motivates social actors to seek out knowledge in order to become experts or well-informed in a particular field of knowledge, Schutz (1964, 124) uses the concept of "regions of decreasing relevance." The zone requiring optimal knowledge acquisition he defines as "... that part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us and also *at least partially dominated by us – that is, changed and rearranged by our actions*" (ibid., emphasis added). A sizable number of people interviewed did not believe that they had the power to change excision practices, not even with regard to their daughters, let alone for society at large. A Bamanan woman in her fifties in Segou put it pithily. Asked who had decided to send her five daughters to the exciser, she answered: "Their kin. When you are married you have no decision to make."²⁸⁰ In Kayes, a Mandinka *nùmu* woman who said she was approximately twenty-eight years old, who had borne six children, including three girls, and who did not have an

²⁸⁰ Interview G£21, 01/12/97.

independent source of income, told us “I don’t like excision. If the decision was mine I would not want for my daughters to be excised.”²⁸¹ This respondent was one of the very few Malian women who admitted to me that her circumcision had hurt. She was excised when she was ten years old by her father’s sister, she said, adding “it hurt me a lot. I do not even want my daughter to be excised, I suffered so much.” Her husband’s mother had made the decision to have her daughters excised, and I imagine that the answer she gave to my first question was an echo of her mother-in-law’s words. When asked “according to you, why is excision practiced?” she answered “Here in Africa, when there is a girl you have to excise her, people say it purifies her, and if you do not excise her you will be indebted to her.” This woman was supportive of the campaign against excision, but extremely pessimistic about its chance of success. Her opposition to the practice seemed to come from her personal experience, and other than pain she was unclear about the consequences of excision.

The conviction that even if one were to acquire sufficient knowledge about excision, one would not have any power to change anything about the way it is practiced is not the only factor that deters those who have heard rumours that excision is dangerous from seeking out more knowledge. Several informants pointed out that simply to ask questions or express a divergent opinion would be considered a rebellion against the authority of the social seniors empowered to make these decisions for the corporate household. For instance in Kayes we interviewed a fifty-year old Khassonke woman of *jɔn* lineage who belonged to a Muslim women’s association, had had seven children and earned some money farming. I present some extracts from our interview with her:

According to you, why is excision practiced?

We were born and found/received that.

What are the consequences of excision?

Some women when they give birth, after one week, two weeks, they [the babies] are excised; others are excised by doctors.

What will happen to a girl if she is not excised?

²⁸¹ Interview Kf20, 17/09/97.

As I said, we were born and came to know something, we grew up in this, we cannot do otherwise.

Have you followed campaigns against excision?

Yes, I have heard about that. I heard that they are going to stop excision. I heard a woman doctor in a group discussion saying that she will no longer excise, that she will stop, and I laughed. Is it possible to stop excision? That's a big job!

Do you think that excision is a good or a bad thing?

When you inherit something [here she paused, then, pointing to my assistant said]: for instance when Mariam was born, what she found that her parents were already doing, can she not do it? *She cannot even ask.*²⁸²

Another respondent, a twenty-one year old Bamanan *nùmu* student in Kayes, answered, when asked about the type of circumcision that she had undergone: "I don't know. We cannot ask 'old people' [i.e., people of generations older than hers] about this."²⁸³ A twenty-five year old man in Kayes, who had recently returned from Egypt where he trained to be an electrician and who had not been able to find work since returning home gave the following answer when we asked him why he thought excision was practiced: "We found it. Our parents did it, it's a tradition. We don't have the right to say whether it is good or bad."²⁸⁴ He added later on: "Many youth are against it, but it is difficult to say that because the elders will tell you that you are damned because you have rejected their word."

Instead of age and generation, some informants presented their lack of schooling as the main barrier to attempting to acquire knowledge about excision. In Segu, the wife of a civil servant, a thirty-two year old mother of three who worked at home and had no schooling, would not give us her opinion about the anti-excision messages she had heard on the radio. She commented: "People who are learned can speak their thoughts but those of us who are not educated we cannot say anything."²⁸⁵ Another informant in Segu, an older Fulbe widow, stressed her illiteracy throughout our interview, contrasting it with her three daughters' education that had enabled them to take a stance on excision:

²⁸² Interview Kf15, 17/09/97. Emphasis added.

²⁸³ Interview Kff8, 16/09/97.

²⁸⁴ Interview Kh6, 12/09/97.

²⁸⁵ Interview Gf55, 07/12/97.

According to you, why is excision practiced?

It is a very old tradition, but today people say it is not good. When people say it is not good, it is not good. This does not please us, because we are illiterate.

What are the consequences of excision?

Before people said that if a girl is not excised, it is not good, but now people say that if she is excised it can cause her problems while giving birth. Here we are illiterate. If people tell us that something is good, this is what we do.

What will happen to a girl if she is not excised?

Nothing. Since it is a tradition here, people say that it has to be done in the Muslim religion. I have daughters who did not excise their children. The children's [agnatic] grand-mothers told them to do it but since my daughters went to school they said not to excise their daughters.²⁸⁶

Later on in the interview, when asked about any health or sexual problems she might have had due to excision, the same woman answered: "In our days we did not have these kinds of problems. I went through all my deliveries [five] with no problems. *But when you do not know anything you do not notice certain things* [emphasis added]."

Other members of the general population chosen at random did not express a desire to become well-informed about excision simply because they felt it fell outside of their sphere of relevance. Several unmarried men with no children were in that category, and indeed a small number of men refused to answer the questionnaire, saying excision is women's business. Some post-menopausal women were also in that category, saying they no longer had any interest in excision since all their daughters were excised already and they would not have any others.²⁸⁷ In Mopti a Marka woman, when asked how many children she had, exclaimed "You can skip that question! I am through with having children!" Then she said she had had "about nine," and thinking about it a little longer, confirmed "yes, six daughters and three sons." She did not know how old she was, but what was important for her was the fact that she was post-menopausal. Asked what she thought about the television programs on excision she had watched, she retorted: "Since I am past menopause now – if I was still in my reproductive years, I could say something

²⁸⁶ Interview Gf49, 06/12/97.

²⁸⁷ This is odd, as they should have had an interest in their grand-daughters' excision: perhaps they had no grand-daughters, or perhaps they simply did not want to answer my questions.

about that. The boys are circumcised, the girls are excised, in those days there was not all of this."²⁸⁸

A central factor preventing active information-seeking on excision is simple lack of time, energy and resources. Although interviewees rarely made that argument, poverty is obviously a barrier to knowledge-seeking, or rather, it dictates priority areas where social actors direct their energies. Organic and professional intellectuals make this argument in Mali. Recall the Mopti AMUPI representative quoted in the previous chapter, who argued that foreigners like myself should focus their energies seeking solutions for malaria, not excision.²⁸⁹ Interviewed by the newspaper *Le Républicain* in Bamako for a special issue on international women's day in 1998, Rose Bastide, a member of the executive of the Malian umbrella organization for women's associations, CAFO, was of the opinion that excision is not a central preoccupation for Malian women. She told the journalist:

... I do not consider this theme [excision] to be a priority at the moment. Would you believe that a large majority of women today live in total insecurity, having nothing and facing problems of survival, not knowing how they will eat the next day, how they will take care of their sick children, how they will find a decent place to live, how they can educate their children through schooling. Those are the preoccupations that are a priority (Daou 1998, my translation).

Rose Bastide's opinion is confirmed by my year of participant observation in the Bamako office of CMPF. Numerous women of all ages came seeking financial and legal assistance every day, but despite the association's public stance against the practice, to my knowledge during the entire year *not a single person* came to seek help to prevent the excision of a child. Sometimes people I interviewed subtly redirected me towards their concerns at hand, for instance this forty-five year old woman in Mopti who earned money by making vermicelli for sale at the market, and who, at the end of our interview, when asked if she had any other comments, stated "My old man

²⁸⁸ Interview Mf73, 09/03/98.

²⁸⁹ As a matter of fact, my friends and acquaintances in Bamako often fell ill due to malaria, and spent a lot of time, money and energy caring for children and other relatives incapacitated by this life-threatening, endemic, under-researched disease. I attended the funeral of the fourteen year old daughter of a member of

[husband] is ill.”²⁹⁰ Sadly aware of the long-term futility of such a gesture. I purchased a few bags of the noodles from her.

Corresponding more closely to Shutz’s (1964: 122) ideal type, some “people on the street” interviewed demonstrated a knowledge of excision as a procedure trusted to “... bring forth in typical situations typical results,” without necessarily understanding clearly how the procedure works. The results they were aiming to achieve were most commonly the sexual (self-)control of women, their ritual purity in Islam, and their reproductive health. Excision would allow a woman to remain faithful to her husband, something considered difficult especially within a polygynous union. “Non-excision can only work where you are from,” a young, entrepreneurial female cowry-shell diviner told me, “because over there, each man only takes one wife, but here, a man takes four wives, even there are some who take ten.”²⁹¹ Lowered sexual desire – or rather, normalized desire, as far as most informants were concerned – helps keep the peace amongst co-wives, making it easier for them to share the same old man, several argued. Excision was also credited with several positive results on reproductive health, from facilitating conception and birthing to preventing urinary tract infections. One seventy-three year old Soninke *garanke* widow in Kayes was one of the few respondents to my ‘general population survey’ who gave an emic explanation of excision as a rite of passage. For her, the result achieved by this procedure was womanhood. We practice excision, she said, “... because people from before said that if you are not excised, you do not become a woman. If you are excised you become a woman, you are adorned with women’s clothing, and one year later if you have found/received a man, you are married.”²⁹² As for the reason for the *origin* of excision, she directed us to the *nūmuw*.

Perhaps it was because she herself was *nyamakala*, or perhaps because of her age, or both, that this respondent identified *nūmuw* as the true experts on excision; people in general were

the CMPF leadership during my fieldwork: even her wealthy parents had not been able to prevent malaria from killing her.

²⁹⁰ Interview Mf69, 08/03/98.

²⁹¹ Interview Gf9, 30/11/97.

more likely to make reference to “the elders,” “the old women,” or “the doctors.” Even though my questionnaire did not specifically ask respondents to identify experts on excision (they were asked who *performs* the operation, not who is knowledgeable about it), it is possible to discern through their answers to other questions who were the experts whose knowledge they respected and whose prescriptions they followed. A Somono woman in Mopti, who did not know her age but looked about fifty, told us that in her household there was a moratorium on excision until the elders (*mògòkoròbaw*, the “very old people,” men and women both) made a decision.²⁹³ The expertise of “doctors” (often probably nurses or other health workers) was invoked both in support of excision and against the practice. A twenty-six year old respondent said she had been convinced of the dangers of excision “... because the doctors said so. When you become ill and you go to the doctor, even if you do not believe in it, what the doctors say is what you believe.”²⁹⁴ A fifty-six years old Wolof construction worker with a Grade 10 education opposed to excision referred to the expertise of “*la Santé Mondiale*,”²⁹⁵ presumably the World Health Organization, which five months before our interview had announced its Action Program against FGM in Africa (OMS 1997), an announcement carried by the media in Mali. Another person argued that excision cannot be a bad thing, since “...even doctors do it.”²⁹⁶

Echoes of the words of the Muslim experts that we reviewed in the previous chapter also reappear in the answers of some respondents, particularly men. A twenty-one year old Mandinka man, who believed that women had to be excised because otherwise they would have a lot of pleasure and want many men, even to the point of becoming prostitutes, argued that “... previously, the instruments were not sterilized for all the girls, therefore there were consequences. But now, with *évolution*, ... hygienic conditions are there.”²⁹⁷ He supported lobbying in favour of

²⁹² Interview Kf13, 17/09/97.

²⁹³ Interview Mf42, 06/03/98.

²⁹⁴ Interview Mf37, 06/03/98.

²⁹⁵ Interview Kh10, 16/09/97.

²⁹⁶ Interview Mf38, 06/03/98.

²⁹⁷ Interview Kh1, 11/09/97.

medicalization, but any other campaign would only bring “debauchery” to the country. In another instance, in Mopti, a Bozo woman with a Qur’anic education, age thirty-seven, stated: “Prophet Mohammed said to do excision but not to exaggerate when cutting.”²⁹⁸ More talkative was a Mandinka father of ten, a retired chauffeur with a Grade 8 education, born in 1936, who said he was from a family of *chefs de canton*. He explained that excision was a religious obligation: “...everybody has to be clean. It is not asked to cut everything, but three-quarters of it. If children are not excised, they will have too much feeling. [Circumcision] is to diminish the feeling of woman as well as of man. We have to avoid certain things that our religion forbids, otherwise you cannot hold the children back.” He said that his wife was a member of a women’s association, and that she was against excision, but that since the decision was his, even if he had a daughter the next day, she would be excised, because “... Kayes is a place of exodus. Our wives can stay one or two years without seeing their husbands. Do you think that a non-excised woman can wait a year or two?” The only expertise he referred to were the teachings of his religion, commenting on his decision that excision be practiced in his household: “I want that ... on the religious side ... things be clear: either you are a Muslim or you are not.”²⁹⁹

Instead of experts, female respondents sometimes based their decision to continue to excise on their personal, embodied experience. A Bamanan hairdresser and mother of two in Segu said the television programs on excision she had watched had not convinced her of the harmfulness of the practice. “I am excised myself,” she said, “and if people say it causes damages, I have not seen this in my case.” At the end of the interview, she wanted to know whether for Mariam and I, excision was a good or a bad thing. I reported to her what the three Malian doctors who had presented at the National Seminar on FGM had said about excision’s consequences. She listened attentively, and then responded: “Well for me it was not serious. To

²⁹⁸ Interview Mf49, 07/03/98.

²⁹⁹ Interview Kh14, 17/09/97.

each their way of being. Some can withstand certain things and others cannot.”³⁰⁰

Numerous women rejected the claims of activists by citing the large number of successful pregnancies they had had, here also indirectly indicating that the one possible negative consequence they were concerned with was difficulty at parturition (in contrast, not one woman offered her sexual enjoyment as a rejoinder to activists’ claims).

Another common theme to appear in the responses of “people on the street” is that of the punishments for non-conformity. For the most part, people stressed the humiliation that a non-excised woman would have to endure, being called “*bilakòro*.” A young nightguard in Kayès also said “there are girls who marry, and if she is not excised and the husband realizes it, he abandons her.”³⁰¹ Finally, several people referred to social consensus as their reference point on excision. “It is the opinion of the majority that matters,” said a Bozo bracelet-maker in her mid-forties in Mopti, when asked her opinion about the campaigns against excision. She illustrated: “If two people out of three agree, the third one will not win the argument.”³⁰² Others left it up to the country’s “authorities” to decide.

Becoming Well-Informed

“It is the duty and the privilege ... of the well-informed citizen in a democratic society to make his private opinion prevail over the public opinion of the man on the street.”
Alfred Schutz (1964, 134)

One difficulty in using Schutz’s analytical tools in Mali is that they are based on the model of a “democratic” society with a high level of occupational specialization, and where “there is a stock of knowledge theoretically available to everyone” (Schutz 1964, 120). This is neither the case theoretically nor practically in Mali, where access to information about such topics as circumcision is severely limited for the large majority. First, there is the problem of

³⁰⁰ Interview Mf22, 05/03/98.

³⁰¹ Interview Kh50, 20/09/97.

literacy, but even for the few who are literate and could afford books or library cards, bookstores and libraries outside of Bamako are either non-existent or extremely poorly stocked, and access to the Internet is at the moment limited to the urban elite.³⁰³ Knowledge is primarily accessible directly from experts, but rules of propriety and social hierarchies strictly limit access to these people, especially in the case of an object of inquiry that is linked to sexuality and hence shameful to discuss in most social situations. Further, some knowledge is the exclusive property of certain *siyaw*, as is the case with *nūmuw*'s knowledge on male and female circumcision. Age is also an extremely important factor regulating access to information. While the graded initiations into higher and higher levels of knowledge through secret societies have almost disappeared from urban areas, the principle that knowledge acquisition is a life-long process and that some knowledge is restricted to elders is very much alive. Asking questions about certain topics considered esoteric and/or taboo and restricted to elders, such as excision and circumcision, might even be dangerous. A Bamanan man in his late forties in Kayes who earned a living farming and teaching the Qur'an explained: "Speech has *nyama*. There are certain things I cannot say. You have to approach the elders, because if you have not reached a certain age, it is dangerous to speak. Even if you put one hundred *moriw* together, there would be very few who would know the origin of excision."³⁰⁴ Certain types of knowledge are considered to be the property of specific groups or even individuals, and cannot be acquired by others except in some cases through purchase or initiation.

As we have already discussed, children's socialization in Mali does not encourage the questioning of elders' wisdom; in fact it punishes it. Michele Fellous (1981), who studied children's socialization in a Bamanan village near Bamako, went further and concluded that it did

³⁰² Interview Mf31, 05/03/98.

³⁰³ Although I was told recently by a Malian friend visiting Ottawa that President Konaré had promised a school, a computer and an Internet connection for every village in Mali before the end of his term (2002)! This is to say the least ambitious, since villages in Mali in 1997-1998 had neither electricity nor telephone lines.

³⁰⁴ Interview Kh11, 16/09/97.

not encourage critical thinking. The socialization processes she observed aimed at producing submissiveness: "... the goal is not to awaken a critical spirit in a child nor the idea of transforming the surrounding world" (Ibid., 213, my translation). For her, Bamanan village society is based on social consensus, and on the active acknowledgment that society – the others – can mold one's private life. The number of decisions left to the individual is small. There are advantages to such a social system in terms of personality formation: one's personhood is adapted, unified and strong in its feeling of belonging (Ibid., 214). In my experience, it is unimaginable that anybody should be lonely or not know his/her role in Malian society. I never heard about an expectation that youth would experience the sort of existential crisis that adolescents typically go through in Canada, searching for who they really are and for their 'niche' in the world. To a large extent, this is determined by others in Malian society, as parents and agnatic kin often decide whether one will go to school, where one will train or work, who one will marry, etc. As a matter of fact, even in the city the individual is unimaginable outside of the group – to the point that to minimally function socially in Mali as a foreigner it is imperative to be given a local patronym. Indicating a difficulty in imagining the self independently of the group, several informants, particularly older ones, answered all the survey questions with the collective pronoun "we" – "we do this," "we say this," "we excise all *our* daughters here," etc. – rather than "I". Such a conception of the individual differs markedly from that of the society on which Schutz based his theory of the social distribution of knowledge.

Yet despite this unfavorable soil, the seeds of critical thinking about excision are growing more and more numerous in Mali. Thirst for knowledge is indicated by the fact that nearly 16% of respondents in the general population in Segou, Mopti and Kayes asked Mariam and me for information about excision at the end of our interview. So far, the information most people have received that challenges common-sense notions about excision has come mostly from the media (radio and television), and less frequently from debates or plays organized by activists or sometimes, by teachers or community leaders. Those who aimed at being truly well-informed

however, often felt that this information was not sufficient. In the next section I look at some of the intrinsic and extrinsic relevances that motivate individuals to actively compare experts' opinions because they are no longer satisfied simply with following procedures. Such a search does not necessarily result in clear decision-making, as experts' frames of reference are often experienced as incompatible by "well-informed citizens."

Motivations

Not surprisingly, from my interviews it appears that a common motivation for a person to attempt to become well-informed about excision and to question its 'naturalness' is one's personal experience with excision gone wrong. Those who seemed troubled about excision, who were seeking more knowledge, often said that they had witnessed or heard about a specific case of heavy hemorrhaging, sometimes leading to death. For instance, a forty-four year old divorced Minyanka teacher in Mopti seemed to have given quite some thought to the reasons why excision is practiced, arguing that while it is said that excision will allow unmarried young women to resist male advances, this was not what she observed happening around her. Further, she pointed out that there were ethnic groups in Mali – the Songhay, the Wolofs, she said – who did not practice female circumcision, therefore she concluded that it was strictly a social, ethnic phenomenon. She also noted that unexcised women of her acquaintance were giving birth normally. It seems that her questioning was triggered by the following experience:

Often there are excised girls who suffer a lot. I was at the husband's [she was married to a Somono]; they excised sixty girls at the same time. Some suffered. There was a lot of blood! I paid for prescriptions, vitamin K, everything, everything. For ten days, day and night, they bled. I regretted having had them [she herself has only one daughter; perhaps she is talking about nieces or the daughters of co-wives] excised in this group. I am against group excision, because it is done by just any exciser; some know what they are doing, others not.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ Interview Mf48, 07/03/98.

In conclusion, she was advocating the medicalization of the practice, mainly to avoid “the problem of tetanus.” She had not followed any of the campaigns against excision, and asked us for specific information about the health consequences of the practice at the end of the interview.

Another interesting case was that of a twenty-nine year old Mandinka woman in Kayes, from a family of *nūmu* excisers. Engaged but not yet married, she had made the decision herself not to excise her eighteen month old daughter after the following experience: “I saw a girl who was excised. She was bleeding a lot, bleeding a lot, I was surprised. This is the reason why I did not want for my daughter to be excised, even though her [agnatic] grand-mother did everything.”³⁰⁶ Part of her approach to knowledge acquisition was empirical. Asked what happens to a girl who is not excised, she answered: “Well my daughter does not have any problem so far. She is my first example.” She had heard anti-excision programs on the radio and watched some of the televised debates. She had gone out to purchase a CMPF membership card, because she admired the women in the association. Everyday she had to personally reject *nūmu* expertise, as everyday she said, her mother tried to convince her to have her daughter excised. Through her profession she had access to an alternative field of knowledge: she was a health agent and a pharmacist. As a health agent she had occasionally assisted pregnant women, and said that for many of the first-time mothers it was impossible to carry out an internal gynecological examination, a problem she attributed to excision.

As the above two examples demonstrate, access to cultural capital, especially in terms of schooling and literacy, is obviously an enabling factor in the project of becoming well-informed about excision. Not only does education provide access to information and to the logic of the Western scientific field of knowledge, it also increases one’s prestige not only in society but, perhaps more importantly on a daily basis, within one’s household, especially when one’s education has led to professional employment. Being educated is a factor that enters into the social calculus that assigns the right to speak, to have and express opinions, within the family. In

Mali, men have a far greater access to schooling (be it in the state-run French schools or through advanced Islamic studies) than women, so it is not surprising to find a proportionally greater number of men in the “well-informed” as opposed to the “people on the street” category. Also, whether they like it or not, men in positions of authority – heads of households, of lineages, of neighbourhoods, etc. – are expected by those who owe them respect and obedience to have opinions and to provide guidance on controversial matters.

While it is impossible to predict the conclusions that those who have been exposed to communities where excision is not practiced will reach, we can say that such exposure minimally leads to questioning. For instance we interviewed a Fulbe sheep trader born in the Mopti region but in Kayes at the time of our encounter.³⁰⁷ He had a Qur’anic education, and believed he was twenty-seven years old. He was married and the proud father of twin boys. At the very first question on excision he mentioned that “... there are regions where it is not done.” He was aware that people said that for praying purposes, a non-excised girl is not clean, but he contrasted that with the fact that in Gao and in the regions of Côte d’Ivoire where he had spent time, women were not excised, and that “...nothing happens to them.” Having “tasted” unexcised women in Côte d’Ivoire, he said he preferred them as sexual partners, and had heard that they have fewer problems at delivery. In fact, in his opinion unexcised women were healthier, fatter than those who have been excised. For all these reasons he had decided that if he had a daughter, he would not have her excised, unless of course, she was born while he was away, in which case the decision would not be his. No doubt his resolve was boosted by the fact that one of his brothers, who worked “in an office” in Ansongo (also in Songhay country) had refused that his daughter be excised, and had spoken about the dangers of the practice.

One central characteristic of the theoretical “well-informed citizen” is that “[he] considers himself perfectly qualified to decide who is a competent expert and even to make up his

³⁰⁶ Interview Kf45, 20/09/97.

³⁰⁷ Interview Kh7, 12/09/97.

mind after having listened to opposing expert opinions” (Schutz 1964, 123, emphasis in original). Here it is instructive to compare the interviews I held with two men with similar responsibilities in Kayes in September 1997. Both were chiefs of villages at the outskirts of the city, and both had been exposed to opposing expert opinions on excision and considered themselves in a position to judge their respective values and make a decision for the community they were in charge of. Interestingly, they had reached opposite conclusions.

The first case is that of Issaka Diallo, a teacher of French and a football (soccer) player, who had traveled extensively outside of Mali as an international football referee.³⁰⁸ He was a descendant of the Khassonke kings of the region. He told us that he was “acting” village chief for three years while his older brother was in France. He was familiar with all the different experts’ discourses on excision. Concerning the field of knowledge represented by *nūmuw*, he said that excision was “... a traditional trial that women had to go through. Women and men both had to pass this test. It allowed you to enter a group: first there are the *bilakòrow*, then after circumcision you make your entry amongst the men. You are respected, you are given secrets.” With regard to Islam, he said “... even at the level of the Muslim religion, they said that it does not exist, that is, when a woman is not excised, it does not mean that she is not a Muslim. (...) The Songhay are very Islamized and they do not excise.” And further: “The imams spoke on the radio to say that it was not mandatory.” He was acquainted with the point of view of the feminists, saying that CMPF had held meetings in his village. Finally, his knowledge of the possible negative health consequences of excision he credited to “medicine” and to his literacy. For him those possible consequences were infertility, difficulties while giving birth, frigidity, and death after the operation. After having weighed all of this information, he had concluded that excision must be abolished, and he himself had started to talk to people about it, mentioning the case of a friend who had in the previous year lost a daughter due to excision. Citing the case of France, he believed that the Malian government should “take its responsibilities” and legislate

against excision. He foresaw that if a law was passed, people might continue to excise in secret. but "... the one whom we find doing that we take him and put him in jail and the others will be scared." His current experience as chief he said, had taught him "... how to manage people. There are times when the village chief has to 'take the whip'."

Arouna Diallo, whom we interviewed in the village where he is chief, a short motorcycle ride away from Kayes, had reached the opposite conclusion.³⁰⁹ For him, it was important to continue to practice excision to preserve the customs of the ancestors. It was not a matter of religion, as he had concluded that in Islam, circumcision was only mandatory for men. He was well aware of the arguments against the practice, but rejected them: "Physicians say that there are problems but having spent thirty years in France I know that in what doctors say there is truth and there is falsehood. I know Whites like the back of my hand." Further, he said that some of the diseases attributed to excision are suffered by unexcised white women. From a sexual response point of view, he said after having had numerous discussions with "old men in the *Quartier Latin* in France," he was really not convinced that excision had the impact international activists say it has: "when people say that excised women do not like men, they don't know anything." Even though one of his wives was the president of the village's CMPF cell, he did not credit feminists with any expertise on excision, and did not believe that legislation could stop the practice: "Even in France Africans do it in secret. They take them and put them in jail. Therefore even if it is forbidden it will continue."

Alienations

"... we [Africans] are wedged uncomfortably between the values of our traditional culture and those of the West. The process of change we are going through has created a dualism of life which we experience at the moment less as a mode of challenging complexity than as one of confused disparateness."

Abiola Irele, "In Praise of Alienation" (1992, 212-3)

³⁰⁸ Interview KD7, 15/09/97. Mr. Issaka Diallo did not want his answers to be anonymous.

³⁰⁹ Interview KD2, 13/09/97. Mr. Arouna Diallo did not want his answers to be anonymous.

Not all “well-informed citizens” are able to reach a decision after comparing different experts’ opinions. For some, the incompatibility of the discourses leads to an unresolved malaise, a paralyzing contradiction, an alienation, since making a decision on excision is not purely a cognitive exercise, but has several emotional, psychological and spiritual ramifications, as it tests one’s loyalty to one’s religion, one’s tradition, one’s education, one’s peers, one’s elders, and for the excised, one’s self. Further, those in positions of authority realize that they are responsible for the spiritual and physical health, possibly even the life, of the girls in their charge.

The encounter with Western biomedical and scientific knowledge can be especially alienating. French scholar Michele Fellous (1981, 201, my translation) writes that she went to study children’s socialization in a Bamanan village in order to understand better the causes of the “... psychological and academic difficulties of youth from rural areas, young teachers for the most part.” These student-teachers, whom she presumably taught in Bamako, were experiencing “... a rejection of their traditional values that they were not able to resolve in their minds, participating as they were in contradictory cultures, in the disequilibrium brought about by urbanization and schooling, in the re-evaluation of the criteria for knowledge and power.”

In his famous 1982 inaugural lecture at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) entitled “In Praise of Alienation,” Abiola Irele (1992, 202) argued that the profound ambivalence that Africans feel towards the culture and knowledge of their ex-colonizers has influenced the work of all African intellectuals since independence: “All our modern expression in literature and ideology has developed from a primary concern with the pathology of alienation as inscribed in our experience as a colonized people.” In reaction to the intellectual humiliation of colonialism, Africans have stressed their difference and reified their ‘traditions.’ Abiola argues that this reification has gone too far, and that it is in contradiction with the modernity to which Africans aspire. It would be an illusion, he said, to think that only the intellectuals and the Westernized elite experience such alienation. As a matter of fact he argues,

.. it is ... a global phenomenon, affecting every single individual The truth of our situation [as Africans] is that the modern institutions we now operate, the material furniture of our modern universe, the ideas that are making their inexorable way among us, are creating a new context of life and meanings to which every single individual has perforce to relate in one form or the other (Irele 1992, 207).

What numerous Africans are facing therefore, is a dual ambivalence towards both the Western world and the 'traditional' world which for some, excision practices epitomize.

The words of a public servant in Mopti speak of this alienation, of this uncomfortable dual location with each of one's feet in a competing sphere of knowledge. Asked what he thought were the consequences for society of non-excision, this man replied:

As an intellectual? Because as I said there is a cultural standpoint and a standpoint with regards to my level of education. Because at this level the two positions are not congruent. It is a bit problematic. There is a certain contradiction within ourselves. From a scientific point of view we know that there is no excuse for certain things, but on the other hand we agree with the parents, we are not able to prove them wrong. Hence from the point of view of my culture, of the Muslim religion, as long as one is not excised she is not accepted. People will not chase her away, of course, but it is still mandatory to do it. Yet myself personally I think that the human being should be left in her natural state.³¹⁰

A young woman in Kayes put it this way: "For me, excision is bad and good. When you think that the parents do it, you tell yourself that you cannot abandon it. When you think about what the doctors say, you tell yourself that you have to abandon it."³¹¹

Such alienation is not likely to decrease in Mali with regards to excision, as the debates around the practice are becoming more and more polarized, both in global and local sites of cultural production (see also Gosselin 2000a; Walley 1997). The civil servant quoted just above advised extreme caution in education campaigns on excision in Mali, to avoid the sort of polarization that was experienced at Beijing, he said, where women divided up into two antagonistic groups, the Arabs and Muslims in solidarity against Western feminists. Indeed, one informant in Segou told us while seeing us out of his courtyard after completing the survey, that

³¹⁰ Interview DM2, 05/11/97.

³¹¹ Interview K19, 16/09/97.

“groups of women” had started to go from door to door to advocate excision and delegitimize the campaign against it.³¹² No doubt such women were encouraged in their efforts by the stance taken by UNAFEM a few weeks later. Also in Segu Mariam and I happened upon a Qur’anic teacher who said he was part of a *pro*-excision campaign. He said that “the field that [the president of CMPF] has studied, we have no need for that,” and that “I myself I am amongst those who are against the campaigns against excision, along with my friend here,” pointing to a man standing nearby, who came to join the conversation. The Qur’anic teacher’s parting comments to Mariam and me were: “Your association, blow it up, suppress it, because that is a fight against religion, a religious war. Those who want to fight excision, their fight, their associations, I don’t like that. ‘A bad thing brings another’.”³¹³

Conclusion

In Chapter 5 above we had already reviewed rewards and coercion mechanisms that encourage excision and punish non-excision in Mali, as well as the ideologies that give meaning to the practice. In this chapter my focus was different: here I have been primarily concerned with informants’ location in the social distribution of knowledge with regards to excision. More specifically, I returned to my survey data to find indications of location in the Schutzian typology that distinguishes between ‘people on the street’ and ‘well-informed citizens.’ Schutz’s exercise was a theoretical one: reality, as always, is messier, and the line between people ‘on the street’ and ‘well-informed’ was, admittedly, difficult to draw in many cases. Further, my questionnaire, designed before I became acquainted with these particular analytical tools, was not the best instrument for such identification. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a number of observations and conclusions from the exercise.

³¹² Interview Gh13, 30/11/97.

³¹³ Interview Gh30, 02/12/97.

In fields of knowledge where they are ‘on the street,’ people seek from experts procedures that will bring about specific, desired outcomes. Assuming that here excision is the procedure in question, what are the desired results expressed? Amongst those mentioned by informants were sexual control, which is said to allow for faithfulness and peace amongst co-wives; ritual purity for prayer; and reproductive health. Rarely, informants expressed that the desired outcome of excision was to produce women out of children. The experts to whom informants made references in their answers included the four categories discussed above, plus another one, perhaps the most common: elders. In fact, there is an acknowledgment and an expectation that elders make decisions for individuals – indeed for the whole community. Like *nùmumusow*’s, the field of knowledge of the elders, male and female, is secret: here access to knowledge is not primarily limited by caste, but by age. Elders therefore are not expected to explain the reasons behind the decisions they make. Their decisions are considered inspired by the collective wisdom accumulated through the generations; this, I believe, is the meaning of the common formulaic answer, ‘we practice excision because we were born and found/received it.’

Social juniors I interviewed, particularly young wives living virilocally, were generally aware of their subordinate position in the social distribution of power, authority and knowledge. Most juniors realized that they would not have the power to implement their decision concerning their daughters’ excision, and this realization acted as an disincentive for seeking knowledge on excision. To do so might bring about negative consequences, since questioning excision – or any practice valorized as ‘tradition’ – would be considered in most cases a direct rebellion against the elders in one’s household or community. In any case, unlike in the individualistic, democratic society where Schutz locates his actors, in Mali knowledge is not even “theoretically” available to everyone: on the contrary, access to knowledge is severely restricted by age, gender, and caste. Further, inquiring about excision is particularly tricky, since discussing sexuality is dishonorable in all but a few social contexts, and naming female genitals almost unthinkable. Other factors

that impede knowledge-seeking are poverty, illiteracy, and simple lack of personal interest (as in the case of unmarried young men).

Despite all these barriers, some do seek to become well-informed on excision, sometimes as a result of exposure to the campaign against excision. What are the factors that motivate these knowledge-seekers? While there is no doubt personality plays a role, it is possible to identify some social characteristics of well-informed citizens. First of all, those who seek to become better informed tend to be in positions of authority, either as heads of households or respected elders within households, or else as village or neighbourhood chiefs – all positions, except for household elders, that are filled by men. Second, people in this group tend to be literate. Schooling provides them with both access to a different field of knowledge and with cultural capital. This again explains why more men than women aim at becoming well-informed on excision, since men in Mali are more educated than women. Further, two types of personal experiences recurred in the interviews with ‘well-informed citizens.’ First, they often had been exposed, often through temporary migration, to communities where excision is not practiced – and here again, more men than women had had this exposure. Secondly, personal knowledge of a victim of excision (usually a girl who had bled excessively, sometimes to death), seemed to be the most powerful motivation for questioning the practice.

Those who become well-informed on excision, however, do not necessarily reach the conclusion that the practice should be abandoned. Some choose medicalization; others decide that they must value their traditions by insisting on excisions conducted by *nùniùmusow*. And yet others are locked in an ambivalent, alienating indecision, unable to choose between competing experts’ claims, between competing fields of knowledge. For if one can often deal with such incommensurable bodies of knowledge by utilizing them all – for instance consulting doctors, herbalists and *moriw* for an illness – in the case of excision one must ultimately make a choice: and once one decides in favour of having the operation done, this decision is irreversible.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSIONS

For this final chapter I have divided my concluding remarks into three sections. In the first place I summarize the main findings presented in this dissertation, and outline my contributions to knowledge and to anthropological discussions. Secondly, from those findings I draw some implications for the Malian campaign against excision, directed both at Malian feminists and at their supporters. Finally I reflect on my learning experience, and on the challenges faced in conducting cross-cultural feminist fieldwork using the methodology of action-research. This critical self-reflection leads to some unsettling – and unsettled – inferences on the limits of feminist solidarity and of the common in ‘common’-sense.

Main Findings and Contributions to Knowledge

A lot beyond girls’ and women’s bodies is at stake in the debates around excision in Mali. What is really at issue are fundamental societal choices for the future of Mali: the continued relevance of the caste system and of its ideology; the role, constitution, power and attributes of the state; the role of Islam in governance; the type of ‘modernity’ to be adopted, and the extent to which it should include individualism; the function and control of female sexuality and its de-linking from reproduction; and the relevance of cosmologies that are perceived to be non-modern and non-Islamic. The stance of particular groups in Malian society on these macro issues and on the particular issue of excision is linked to their specific hegemonic projects.

Nimùmusow who practice excision obviously stand to lose from the possible abandonment of the practice, and some actively work to counter the claims of anti-excision activists. This is why some Malian feminist organizations such as CMPF and AMSOPT have sought their ‘conversion’ to the point of view that excision is harmful, and promised economic

compensation to those who pledge to stop excising (see also Gosselin 2000b). The basic premises on which such programs are based, however, are incorrect. First, as others have also pointed out (Shell-Duncan and Hemlund 2000, 36), such programs only address the supply of excision services, and as such do not reduce the demand for the practice. As I have shown, an increasing number of health agents in Mali now offer excision services for a fee, and it is logical to expect that they would fill in the gap should demand for excision no longer be met by *nùmùmusow*. Second, the stated assumption of anti-excision groups such as CMPF, that *nùmùmusow* excise only for the income it provides, is contradicted by my data. It is clear that, while the financial rewards are appreciated and sometimes contribute significantly to the women's income, *nùmùmusow* excise primarily because they feel that it is their duty, as *nùmùw*, to provide this specialized service for their community.

My interviews with *nùmùmusow* who participate in pledge ceremonies revealed that rare are those who agree to retire from the practice because they have 'converted' to the point of view of the feminists, whose expertise they do not recognize. While it is difficult for excisers to deny that the cutting can have immediate negative consequences, the *causes* to which they attribute excision casualties are completely different from that identified by feminists using the medical literature. Added to the oft-reported fact that *nùmùw* attribute excessive bleeding, delayed healing, death and other consequences to sorcery, I revealed another recently identified cause, from the *nùmùmusow*'s perspective: excision accidents are due to the lack of respect of the prescriptions and proscriptions of the caste system. In other words, from their point of view it is not the operation itself that is to blame, but the fact that it is no longer practiced properly. For instance, *hɔɔn* health agents who excise are acting irresponsibly, since they are meddling with powers (*nyama* and sorcery) they neither understand nor have the knowledge to defend themselves and the girls against. In making this assessment, older *nùmùmusow* are not only portraying their competitors, non-*nùmù* nurses and doctors, as incompetent, they are also policing

the actions of the younger generation of *nùmùmusow*, who are less and less disciplined with regard to the taboos and other requirements of their *siya* (see also Frank 1998). Here, the younger generation of *nùmùw* are joining in the general challenge of their generation to the whole caste system and its ideology (see also Klein 1998; Rondeau 1992).

In failing to publicly acknowledge that excising is a matter of caste identity, the elite urban women who head feminist organizations in Mali are, wittingly or not, acting in a manner that is coherent with the hegemonic project of the class they belong to. I pointed out that the Malian bureaucratic elite shows disdain for *siya* as a structuring mechanism for society – indeed, as a system of ascribed statuses it goes counter to the meritocratic principles that are part of the ideology of ‘*évolution*.’ Yet, the behaviour of members of this class is not without contradictions, for those who achieve success tend to adopt, independently of their actual caste belonging, the *hɔɔn* code of behaviour, therefore reinforcing part of the caste system ideology. As I illustrated in my discussion of the daily functioning of the CMPF office and of the relations between its leadership, staff, trainees and membership (Chapter 3), performing *hɔɔn* behaviour includes establishing chains of redistribution – patron-client networks – that reproduce the very ideological system that the educated bureaucracy says it wants to dismantle in its nationalist discourse. In documenting and analyzing patron-client relationships in a woman’s association, my CMPF case study provides an in-depth illustration of the general pattern identified by Rosa De Jorio (1997).

The future of the caste system is one of the large societal debates that excision brings to the fore: another concerns the nationalist project. So far, this project, as financed by the West, is linked to a secular, bureaucratic state organization, with French as its official language – a language taught, significantly, in non-denominational schools. While rarely attacking the model as a whole, reformist Muslim leaders, particularly those linked to wealthy merchants – historically the other pole of political power in Mali – are more and more vocal in demanding that the state reflects less the wishes of its Christian and secular donors, and more the religion of

nearly 91 percent (Coulibaly et al. 1996, 26) of its population, for instance by establishing schools where Islam and Arabic are taught. With the conclusion of the UNAFEM general meeting discussed in Chapter 10, excision clearly became a key area for testing the state's allegiance: do not ban excision. UNAFEM asked the government, for it is a recommended practice for Muslim women. But UNAFEM and the male Muslim leaders associated with it do not only refer to (a particular interpretation of) Islam: in asking that excision be available in public health centres, they also appeal to modernity – in this particular case, biomedicine – strongly rejecting the traditional forms of healing that not only *nūmuw* but also village *moriw* practice. Here, the debate over the medicalization of excision has entered the more general doctrinal dispute in Mali between the Maliki (locally known as 'traditional' or 'orthodox') Islam of most *moriw* and the Hanbali practices of the Wahhabi/Sunnis (whom I have been calling 'Islamic reformists') (see Brenner 1993).

Increased demand for medicalized excision is a problem for Malian anti-excision campaigners, who adopt the prevalent argument in the global campaign against FGM that any type of medicalization will legitimize and entrench the very practice activists want to eliminate (see also Shell-Duncan, Obiero, and Muruli 2000). This was the main point discussed in the June 1997 National Seminar on FGM, where activists reflected on the fact that their own educational efforts on the health risks of female genital cutting have fueled this demand. In response, feminist participants at the Seminar advocated two approaches: first, intensifying their lobbying efforts for a legislation criminalizing excision, and second, the use of 'human rights' arguments in anti-excision activities. My data clearly revealed that, first of all, law-makers in Bamako consider a ban on excision to be politically unfeasible, and secondly, that most administrators outside of the capital, aware that their limited authority is dependent on the acquiescence of local patriarchal power-holders, are of the opinion that such a law would be impossible to implement and enforce. With regards to human rights arguments, I showed that while Malian feminists are comfortable in using this language in international and national elite settings, they face serious

difficulties in translating human rights arguments linguistically into Bamanakan and culturally into Mande-Fulbe concepts. Several of the unexamined assumptions of the global campaign against FGM rest upon concepts that are not universal: in our case, unresolved differences center on the very notion of the 'individual' as a bearer of rights and responsibilities outside of the corporate family, and on the perceived value of sexuality (particularly, female sexuality), outside of its reproductive functions (see also Boddy 1998b).

Reflecting upon another time and place, Antonio Gramsci (1971, 370) wrote:

... every culture has its speculative and religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group of which it is the expression and perhaps coincides exactly with the moment in which the real hegemony disintegrates at the base, molecularly: but precisely because of this disintegration, and to react against it, the system of thought perfects itself as dogma and becomes a transcendental 'faith.'

I believe that because of on-going economic and political changes, the historical hegemony of the patriarchal gerontocracy is 'disintegrating' at the base in urban Mali. That base is the same as that studied by Janice Boddy (1998b, 94) in another Muslim African society (northern Sudan), that is, the control of sexuality, for "... insofar as it is individually housed in fallible bodies, it represents a potential threat to the maintenance of collective interests." As Boddy (Ibid.) reviews, the control of the sexuality of women of reproductive age is crucial in societies where the (patri)lineage is the main form of social organization and matrimonial alliances the main politics. But in today's urban Mali, members of the younger generation are resisting the control of elders over their lives. More specifically in the sphere with which we are concerned, that is, the control of the sexuality and fertility of junior men and women, rare but powerful acts of concrete and ideological resistance include choosing one's own spouse, living in a nuclear household, and arguing that sex can be had for the sake of pleasure. Yet as Gramsci observed, when counter-challenges threaten the hegemony of a group, "... precisely because of this disintegration, and to react against it, the system of thought perfects itself as dogma...." This process can take the form of enshrining as unchallengeable 'tradition' certain practices, and excision has become one of

those, for, even if Malian feminists generally shy from arguing for women's rights to pleasure and to dispose of their own sexuality and fertility, male and female lineage elders I believe are aware that the larger ideological implications of the campaign against excision threaten their hold on power.

So the stakes are high and debates on excision rage on the national television, in the Bamako press, and on various radio stations throughout the country, and yet in my interviews with the general population I was struck by how uninterested the majority of women and men were in the issue. Here, as I examined in Chapter 5, the internalization by both men and women of hegemonic concepts of gender, sexuality, and embodied selfhood play a role, as well as the concrete societal rewards offered to those who conform to the requirement to excise their daughters, and the punishments for those who rebel. In this part of the analysis I made significant use of the clinical case studies provided by psychoanalyst Dominique Lutz-Fuchs (1994), as well as of recent ethnographic work on excision amongst the Bamanan (Amal-Soumaré 1996; Brett-Smith 1982; Diarra 1992; Koné 1997). Here my contribution consisted partly in having gone beyond what Jean-Loup Amselle (1998 [1990]) calls the "ethnological reason" to show the similarities in the practices and meanings of excision amongst most Mande groups in Mali, and to an extent amongst Fulbe as well (here, more research is needed). I painted a picture of a changing practice in urban milieus, which has moved from being an initiatory rite of passage to becoming an act that genders and purifies infants or young children. This is accompanied by conceptions of the clitoris wholly different from that prevalent in the contemporary Western world: in Mali, the clitoris is male, dirty and dangerous. Several women I interviewed felt "relieved" to have had that repulsive "thing" removed from their bodies, an organ that if not excised might have rendered their sexuality aggressive, male-like, difficult to control, and therefore dangerous both for the preservation of their honour and for their spiritual achievement.

Beyond this analysis of the structures and ideologies that allow for the reproduction of the practice of excision in urban, multi-ethnic Mali, my main contribution has been to analyze the

campaign against excision using the intellectual tools developed by Schutz within the sociology of knowledge. While using a theory developed for the analysis of modern Western society had limitations in Mali, nevertheless it was useful in normalizing the fact that most people refer and defer to the opinions of others on excision. In other words, the fact that the majority of the 300 women and men interviewed in Kayes, Mopti and Segou chose excision uncritically or referred to the opinions of 'well-informed citizens' (elders, heads of households, village and neighbourhood chiefs) or those of 'experts' (Muslim leaders, doctors, *nùmùmusow*) proved consistent with the way that the majority of people in the West make decisions in areas where they know they are not experts (assuming that Schutz was correct in his analysis). I also outlined the numerous – and specific – barriers that Malians face in seeking to become well-informed on excision, and identified the characteristics of those who do aim to acquire knowledge on the practice. I showed, with ethnographic examples, that the process of critically comparing the claims of various experts on excision does not always lead to a resolution, and that when it does, it is not necessarily in favour of abandoning the practice.

Implications for the Campaign

In this dissertation I provided quantitative and qualitative data that shows that for various reasons generally reflecting gender privilege, men are more likely than women to question excision in Mali. Yet, while public education campaigns using mass media (television, radio, newspapers) reach all – and in fact more men than women, because of literacy and ability to understand French and Bamanakan, the common languages of these media – CMPF is, to my knowledge, typical of anti-excision campaigns in targeting women for most of its face-to-face activities against excision. Obviously, this is partly explained by the fact that the *hɔɔn* code of behaviour prevents discussing sexuality in mixed gender groups, but this is not an insurmountable difficulty, since feminist groups could employ men as activists to reach male audiences. This

would appear to be necessary to the success of the campaign, since my findings confirm beyond doubt that women of reproductive age are not the main decision-makers with regards to excision.

A related remark concerning the targets of Malian anti-excision campaigns is the recommendation, expressed by Younoussa Touré and his colleagues (1997b; 1997a), as well as by several of my informants, that campaigners specifically target local decision-makers and power holders, more specifically elders (men and women), *dutigiw* (heads of households) with clout in local politics, and *dùgùtigiw* (male heads of villages or of urban neighbourhoods). They have the legitimacy that the Malian state is still struggling to establish. While such a strategy may lead to a remarkably rapid abandonment of excision, I agree with Claude-Stéphanka Amal-Soumaré (1996, 344) that if the decision to abandon the practice is taken and dictated by those at the head of the traditional social hierarchy, this would not necessarily contribute to the larger feminist goal of women's emancipation. Therefore while generally I believe that it would be profitable to cease to treat excision as a "women's issue," implicating men more actively in the campaign needs to be done carefully. The greater implication of men is also likely to be resisted by post-menopausal women (*mùsòkɔɔbaw*), for many of them want to preserve one of the few areas in which they have a significant amount of knowledge/power.

In order for the campaign against excision to be truly revolutionary in gender terms – to truly contribute to the reduction of gender inequality – it needs to address issues of female sexuality head on. Malian feminists need to decide whether or not it is part of their counter-hegemonic project to divorce sexuality from reproduction, and to critique the control that husbands and lineage elders exercise over women's fertility. This does not necessarily mean devaluing procreation (cf. Ahmadu 1995). But it must be recognized that while the emphasis on fertility no doubt is satisfying for a large number of Malian women, others clearly suffer: not only those who are infertile, but also those whose health is endangered by early and/or numerous and insufficiently spaced pregnancies (Coulibaly et al. 1996, chapters 3-6, 10). Another reason for

feminists to address issues of sexuality is to respond to the attacks of those who argue that the abandonment of excision will lead to “debauchery,” as I heard day after day while administering my survey. I believe that silence on this issue is no longer a sufficient response, and that the phantasmagoric images of nymphomaniac unexcised Western women need to be debunked, especially since such images are validated in the frequent screening of French pornographic films in the popular Malian cinemas.

The difficulties of following this line of argument, however, are tremendous. Not only does it threaten fundamental structures of power, there is also a danger that advocacy of the right to the enjoyment of sexuality would discredit the campaign in the eyes of the majority of the population. The fact that this argument appeals the most to those rebellious youth (mostly men) who aspire to individualism and ‘modernity’ does not help to convince more conservative segments of society. There is also the problem of the limits that the *haram* code of behaviour, with its attendant ideology of honour and shame, puts on the discussion of sexual pleasure and on the very naming of female genitals. Yet my research results suggest a point of entry for discussing these issues with Malian women: their preoccupation with vaginal lubrication. Instead of arguing that excision causes ‘pain’ during intercourse, or arguing for the right to pleasure, it would be more relevant and potentially more successful to explain that excision might cause or contribute to vaginal dryness.

Such an argument, however, would need to be supported by more and better medical research on the specific health consequences of clitoridectomy and ‘excision’ proper (that is, removal of the clitoris and of the labia minora). Based on participant-observation at CMPF public education activities and at the two national seminars on FGM held in Bamako in June 1997 (both the governmental and NGO ones), I conclude that Malian anti-excision campaigners use the typical approach critiqued by Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000, 14-17), that is, they fail to differentiate between the health risks and consequences of *infibulation* (most often studied by

medical researchers) and that of less intrusive forms of genital cutting. Several of my interviews corroborated Shell-Duncan and Herlund's (2000: 16) caution that

... when communities practicing clitoridectomy and excision become targeted by anti-FGM campaigns, medical 'facts' derived from reports on infibulation are often not supported by the experience of community members, and the incongruity between propaganda and lived experience has the potential to undermine the credibility of anticircumcision campaigns.

I do not claim to have the expertise to judge the validity of the research on the medical sequelae of excision that forms the basis of Malian campaigners' arguments, but it appears to me that the main local study, that conducted by Habibatou Diallo (1990) on a sample consisting of the women coming to several maternity clinics for delivery, may suffer from the type of selection bias that Shell-Duncan and Herlund (2000, 15) warn against.

If the main concern of anti-excision campaigners is not women's emancipation but health, then I think that they must reflect on their opposition to the idea of medicalizing the practice. Here I think it worth quoting at length Fuambai Ahmadu (1995), an anthropologist originally from Sierra Leone who has written about her own experience with clitoridectomy. She argues in favour of medicalizing the practice:

Indeed every woman has the right to good health. (...) Denying women and girls their right to safe, hygienic circumcisions because we in the West contest that the operations may have any value is the height of hypocrisy. Doctors in Britain perform abortions, sex-change operations, cosmetic surgery, all of which entail varying degrees of mutilation and incur some psychological effects on those who request them, but the procedures are carried out all the same (Ibid., 45) (see also Ahmadu 2000).

One might also contend that the fact that Malians have more access to medicalized circumcisions for boys than for girls is a form of gender inequality.

Based on research in Kenya, medical anthropologist Bettina Shell-Duncan and her colleagues (Shell-Duncan, Obiero, and Muruli 2000) also argue in favour of re-opening the debate on the procurement of bio-medical techniques for the lessening of pain and bleeding during female circumcision, and for improved and speedier healing. They find no empirical evidence to support the claim, common in the global discourse on FGM, that medicalization

counteracts efforts to eliminate excision (Ibid., 126). Further, their research leads them to conclude that “... excision is not associated with the types of long-term obstetrical complications reported among infibulated women, although it is associated with serious, potentially life-threatening short-term complications,” and “... even minor levels of medical intervention dramatically reduce the risk of developing immediate complications” (Ibid., 125-6). My evidence shows that those immediate risks are what Malian parents are most concerned about, but as long as the Western funders of the African campaigns to ‘eradicate FGM’ are expressly against medicalization, it is very unlikely that Malian feminists will revisit their stance, for they need the financial and ideological support of donor agencies.

Regulating excision and placing it in the control of biomedicine would also have an impact on the caste system, more specifically, on *nùmùmusow*. The data I presented clearly shows that Malian campaigners must seriously revisit their programs with ‘converted’ excisers, as well as the assumptions on which such programs are based. Campaigners must agree on a strategy to address the fact that non-*nùmu* health agents increasingly offer their services as excisers. Further, it is clear that such programs do not reduce the demand for excision, partly because as one exciser retires another replaces her, but also because the ‘converted’ *nùmùmusow* do not ‘educate’ the public in the way that the feminists train them to – they are simply not convinced by the arguments presented, which run counter to their own knowledge and common-sense. They do not respect feminists as fellow experts, but rather, use them cleverly to access aid money.

Another conclusion to be drawn from my analysis is that feminists have not succeeded in establishing themselves as experts in the eyes of the majority of the Malian population. The Western parentage of their claims to knowledge, as well as their motives, are viewed as suspicious, and as a result most in Mali turn to other knowledgeable people for advice on excision. As Schutz (1964) noted, *who* makes a statement is as important as *what* is being stated, especially when statements run counter to common-sense. Here feminists have two choices,

which are not mutually exclusive: they may continue to work towards the long-term goal of acquiring legitimacy, or they may rally other experts (Imams, doctors) to their cause. This they have done successfully in Mali to a degree, but in my experience feminists do not want to surrender the campaign completely to others, because this would affect their own international careers and access to funding.

Malian anti-excision campaigners may also want to revisit their strategy to lobby for a ban on excision. It is clear to me that the government will not enact such a law until it is obvious that a majority of the population supports it – unless they are forced to do so by Western donors. Such a scenario however, could lead to a backlash, as the failed UNFM approach demonstrated. At best, a law enacted without the support of the majority of the population would be unenforceable; at worst, it would drive excision underground, with more dangers to girls, since complications might not be reported if the practice was illegal.

I also reported on a gap in the campaigners' strategy, identified by front-line health workers during the NGO Seminar on FGM: there is a need for more follow-up after educational activities. For such activities do not entirely fall on deaf ears, and some women, after participating in seminars and other educational programs, start to feel that they have been victimized by the practice, that they have suffered an irremediable loss. It must be deeply distressing to come to the view that one has been wronged by society, by one's own relatives, especially if one is not in a position to effect change. Part of the campaign must include the provision of support to those who come to feel this way.

Finally, it might be time for Malian feminists to follow in the steps of Rose Bastide, quoted in the previous chapter, and tell their Western supporters that excision is simply not a priority for the majority of Malian women. Certainly, my participant-observation in the Bamako office of CMPF supports her judgment. But as long as donors make funds available specifically to 'combat FGM,' it is likely that capital-starved Malian women's associations will continue to provide donors with 'experts' and anti-excision programs. In this respect we, Westerners, need to

acknowledge the global inequalities that allow us to define the agenda of Malian feminists, even if it is indirectly through the earmarking of money or through our offering of volunteer work. A little hypothetical reversal may help to make the point. Malians of my acquaintance were as horrified to hear about the plight of lonesome and poor seniors in Western countries than Westerners are horrified to hear about excision. Should the global economic situation be reversed, I am sure Malian development organizations would be coming to Canada to help us 'eradicate' senior abuse and poverty. Would it not make more sense, from the point of view of feminist solidarity, to address the needs that the majority of Malian women themselves identify (i.e., poverty, unemployment, wife abuse, and insufficient access to education, health care and legal services), rather than spending limited resources working hard to convince women that excision is a problem? I turn to other related moral and ethical issues in the next few pages that bring this dissertation to a close.

Reflections on Action-Research on Excision: Testing the Limits of Feminist Solidarity and of "Common"-Sense

Reflecting on her work in Burkina Faso (a country geographically and culturally close to Mali), anthropologist Marie-Andrée Couillard (1995, 65) wrote: "Feminists have made it a point to question power structures and hierarchies. When working in international development, they somehow tend to think that women as partners will share this ideal." Just as I did not find this ideal amongst the leadership of CMPF, Couillard did not find it amongst her collaborators in Burkina Faso. On the contrary, she concluded that "... our partners often use our support to confirm their higher status and their authority vis-à-vis their 'sisters'" (Ibid.). This does not mean that actions by elite women cannot benefit their less privileged 'sisters,' but rather that their feminist program does not include the abolition of forms of oppression based on axes of power other than gender. Indeed, as De Jorio (1997) and I have shown, the clientelist system of

international aid money redistribution, while assisting some poor women in addressing their immediate needs, in the long term contributes to reinforcing the hierarchy between them and their benefactors, the elite women who act as intermediaries between the poor and aid donors.

I volunteered at CMPF because of a commitment to feminist action-research, that is, to joint participation in an activity that has the promotion of gender equality as its goal. Feminist action-research produces not only data that is of interest to the researcher, but also data that is immediately useful to a group that works towards social change for the benefit of women. Through the evaluation study that I conducted for CMPF, I felt that I did contribute something useful to the association. Further, the general implications of my findings for the campaign against excision outlined above have the potential to contribute to the increased success of this campaign. Despite these contributions, I am not sure that I collaborated in a truly *feminist* project, that is, one that would contribute to the "... fundamental transformation of gender relations ... in order to achieve an equitable and egalitarian society," to use a definition by anthropologist Huguette Dagenais (1994, 260-1, my translation). Further, I agree with Dagenais (*Ibid.*), when she adds that such transformation "... cannot be accomplished independently of the struggle to abolish other types of oppression, that is, racial, ethnic, imperialist, and class inequalities...." Part of my doubt comes from the realization which follows from the conclusion above: my very involvement with the CMPF leadership contributed to their social capital and served to heighten their superiority vis-à-vis other women. Secondly, I also doubt the usefulness of my contribution because of one of the main conclusions of my research: excision is not a priority for most Malian women, who do not feel oppressed by this practice. The momentum for the campaign is to be found not at the 'grassroots,' but in the 'global North.'

Why are donors so determined to fund programs against excision? As Boddy (1998b) and others have argued, we must interrogate our own motivations and our own assumptions with regards to female circumcision. When interviewing, I initially could not understand nor accept the fact that a large majority of Malian women were not passionate about having lost their

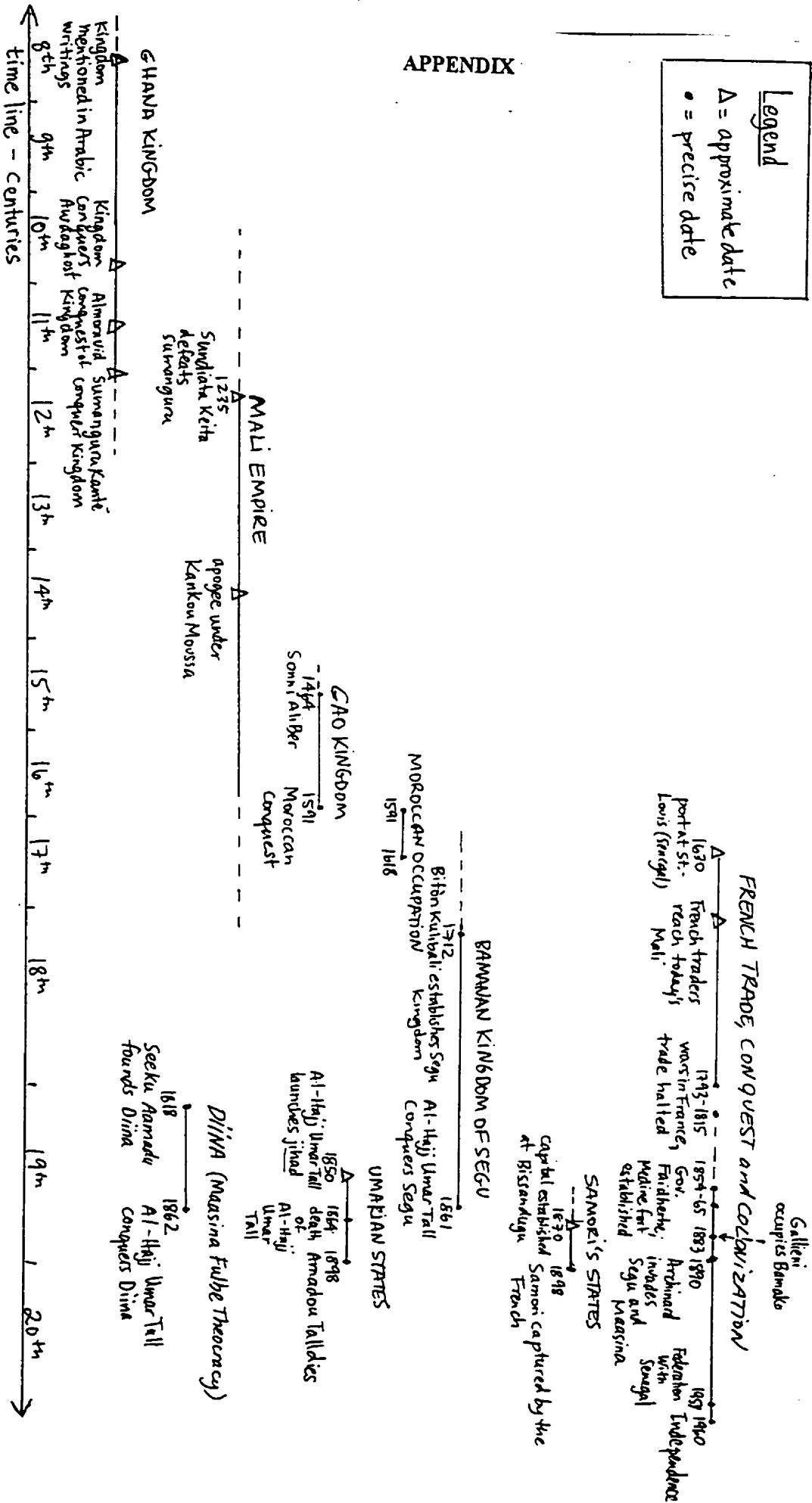
clitoris. I gradually came to the realization that a clitoris is not a clitoris – in other words, I had to face the fact that, as Boddy (1998b, 90) phrased it, “... we are speaking of a meaningful clitoris – not (were it possible) a precultural, unmediated one.” Having written the paper that was eventually published as “Feminism, Anthropology and the Politics of Excision in Mali” (Gosselin 2000a, 46) before going to the field, by the time I arrived in Mali I had come to the realization that in my society, “... the clitoris has become a powerful symbol of women’s emancipation.” I did not expect necessarily to find the same symbolism in Mali, and I was prepared for the possibility that Malian women would put economic needs ahead of sexual ones. However, I still considered excision to be a mutilation, and I was not genuinely prepared for the fact that several women expressed *relief* at having lost their clitoris. In order to comprehend such seemingly counter-intuitive statements, and the surprising fact (to a Westerner) that one of Lutz-Fuchs’s (1994) Malian patients experienced sexual problems *because* she had some clitoris left, we must be willing to consider that the very experience of embodiment and of sexuality varies cross-culturally. To quote Boddy (1998b, 88) one last time, “if we take seriously the idea that bodily experience is interactively shaped through processes of culture and is not simply culture’s natural base (...), we must also allow that desires and pleasures will be culturally and historically specific (...).” The implications of this are very troubling for feminism for, if shared biology no longer means shared bodily experience, the very foundation of cross-cultural feminist solidarity is shaken.

Coming to the end of my research project, I am put in the awkward situation, for an uncircumcised woman, of being considered an ‘expert’ on excision. Like the alienated Malian administrators I interviewed, I am reluctant to accept this role. Through my fieldwork experience I was confronted with other fields of knowledge, with other human experiences that challenged my own common-sense understanding of excision as a mutilation. Like some of the ‘well-informed citizens’ I quote, I have not reached resolution.

APPENDIX

MALI: CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF SELECTED HISTORICAL EVENTS UNTIL INDEPENDENCE (1960)
(Not to scale)

Legend
 Δ = approximate date
 ● = precise date



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