

Black & Red
The Impacts of Development on Culture:
A Case study of Dogon People of Sangha, Mali

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ABSTRACT

For my Independent Study Project (ISP) I focused my research on struggling to understand the relationship between development and culture in an isolated community. I chose to study the Dogon people located in Sangha, Mali and spent 17 days studying and living among them. By conducting a series of interviews daily, I explored the land and the hearts of the people in order to obtain a meaningful understanding of their culture as well as, to acquire first hand knowledge of the ongoing development.

My paper begins by analyzing general definitions and discourses of both culture and development. I then detail my research methods and give a comprehensive background on the study area and people. Finally, the report funnels into the development and culture of the distinctive Dogon people and the specific areas in which development has impacted culture in areas including education, religion, community associations and health care systems. I conclude that by examining the current development of and understanding the unique culture of the Dogon people in Sangha, Mali, I have altered my previous beliefs--that development ultimately destroys a culture--to understand that while development will inevitably cause a change in culture, the Dogon people have integrated these changes into their society allowing certain aspects to merge and others to endure.

Preface

Anthropological fieldwork is like searching for your lost child at a fair. You realize they have disappeared so you begin your search, at first frantically, grasping at any clues. You rely on the cotton candy stick on the ground, the peanut shells to lead the way. Of course, this never works. You hit dead end after dead end. You get even further from where you started, wishing you would have just stood still and let your child run back to you—a futile belief of course. Retracing your steps is worthless because not only are you moving to find your child, your child is, with out a doubt, moving to find you. Is it hopeless? I certainly thought so at first. But what kind of parent gives up looking for their lost child? Not one I wanted to be. So I followed the clues, took a Ferris wheel ride or two, searched high and low. I found her eventually; she was hiding behind the pie-throwing stand waiting for me. I never would have guessed that's where she would be, she does not even like pie. But that's how fieldwork goes; it's never quite what you expect.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge and dedicate this paper to my advisor, Baire Dolo, without whom none of my research would have been possible. For being at my beck and call, taking two hour hikes to repeat interviews and feigning (if not being entirely sincere) interest in my topic, I thank you.

In the beginning...

As our group of 18 American students rolled into the village of Sanankoroba, we swiveled in our chairs looking out at the village where we were about to spend a week "roughing it," living the rural lifestyle of a Malian. To our surprise, the main road that ran through the center of the village was lined with street lamps and power lines. It was market day when we arrived, and Malians packed in and around the small stands selling raw fish, onions and dried tamarind alongside t-shirts covered with *Yes We Can! Obama: 44th President* and belts covered in rhinestones. As we parked the bus, I glanced across the street and saw a newly constructed cyber cafe--closed at the moment because the owner was most likely eating a long lunch and taking a midday nap to avoid the 100 degree sun.

We were told before we left Bamako that our stay was going to be a difficult experience, living in such an isolated location, but the scene that lay before me was far from the mud huts and grazing goats that I had envisioned. Somewhat confused, I looked around at the other students hoping to get an idea whether or not they were on the same page as I. "This is our rural village stay?" I asked nervously. To my relief, most of the other students seemed to be just as stunned and frustrated. Coming from America, most of us had pictured the African continent as largely rural, connected by unpaved roads, and full of wildlife. We had all embarked on this journey to learn the customs, to experience the culture, to study and live the lifestyles of Malians. Many of us were surprised how large of a city Bamako was and thus anticipated this week-long journey to what we thought would be "real" Africa. It was bizarre how much the circumstance in

Sanankoroba seemed to discourage many of the students, myself included. What was I so upset about?

As I sat upon the roof of my compound that first night, I realized why I was so disappointed. The peaceful mysticism of the village life was vanishing and in its place was a few street lamps--I couldn't even see the stars. I had sent my parents an email before I left warning them I'd be out of service for the next week when in reality, the cell service in the village was even better than in Bamako. Ready for a cultural experience, I felt like I was standing in the midst of a cultural destruction. The light that poured down the road felt more like blackness to me, a blackness that was wiping out this simple and unpretentious culture.

*Chez Joël Dougnon
Ogol-Dah, Sangha, Mali
14/4/09*

I sat quietly on a stool in the middle of Joël's courtyard. His cow was trouncing around, almost like a dog sniffing the ground and kicking up hay. I was listening intently as he answered my countless questions about traditional medicine in the Dogon culture. A practicing "thérapeute" and "guérisseur," Joël was certainly the perfect interviewee to extract the information I needed; he offered views from the ancient traditional healing methods to the modern fusion of traditional and conventional medicinal practices and beliefs. He seemed both knowledgeable and spiritual—a rare combination in the Dogon world of traditional medicine. Distracted somewhat by the cow, I began to stray until he drew my attention back suddenly with a demonstration. "Watch," he explained in French, "I'll tell you an important belief we have here in Dogon culture." He pulled out one small bag of black powder and a small red pebble-like rock. With intense determination, he

crushed the red rock into musty red powder. “See the two colors here? Red and black. They are very important in our beliefs. The black, it represents burning and the red, it represents the Earth, life.” He took the two colored powders and began to mix them in front of him on the flat stone. “Do you see?” he asked, “Can you see how the colors act?” I was slightly confused, not quite sure whether or not I was supposed to see some sort of chemical reaction. Preparing myself for a minor explosion, I leaned back and explained I didn’t really see them acting yet. “Tell me,” he said unhurriedly, “Which color will cover the other?” Still vexed and now somewhat nervous I answered, “The black, I think. Black covers everything.” He smiled and explained, “No. Look just there. The red, we say, can never be hidden by the black. Do you see it?” As I looked down upon that smooth stone covered in powder, I expected to see just black powder. For some reason, I didn’t believe him; black is darker, black shades out everything. But as I looked closely, I could see the red power scattered among the black. Once I knew I was looking for it, it was certainly visible.

“Huh,” I said aloud in English, “Look at that. Black doesn’t totally hide red...”

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Culture

The word culture stems originally from the Latin word *cultura*, a stem of the word *colere*, which means “tend, guard, cultivate, till” but in 1867, the word took on the definition “customs and achievements of a people” (Harper, 2001). Since then, various

poets, authors, ethnographers, philosophers and anthropologists have analyzed the different meanings and ways to interpret the word.

In 1874, a British anthropologist named Edward Burnett Tylor was among many to try and define culture in the scope of scientific anthropology. In his book Primitive Culture, Tylor describes culture as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor). Widely believed and used today, I believe this definition is somewhat flawed in its assumption that all people as members of society must acquire the same beliefs and morals in order to retain their culture. In the primitive society that Tylor studied, this was often true. However, as the twentieth century approached, scientists and anthropologists began to alter the definition slightly. For example when speaking of anthropology, it is often pointed out that culture is passed from generation to generation through learning—a concept particularly applicable when performing anthropological research in third world countries--thus different lines of ancestry adopt moderately different morals and beliefs.

In Webster’s online dictionary, culture takes on six different definitions; the simplest defines culture “the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education” (MWOnline). Dictionary.com goes even further, giving eleven different definitions for culture including “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” as well as “a particular form or stage of civilization, as that of a certain nation or period” (*Dictionary.com*). Regardless of the specific wording used to define culture, most sources agree that a culture is ultimately a way to describe or group certain aspects of society.

While the word culture has an intricate history, in this exploration I will stick to the primarily anthropological definitions and parameters of culture used today.

When speaking of Third World countries (in particular Africa) often societies are thought of as less developed, less evolved (indeed they are often referred to as “the Global South”, “developing countries”, or “least developed countries”). However, when researching the aspects of a culture, first it is essential to recognize culture as not only a multifaceted but as an ever-changing (rather than a singly-defined) noun. Franz Boas, a German-American pioneer of anthropology, argued that cultural "types" or "forms" are always in a state of flux.

Thus while we consider third-world countries less developed, we must remember that they are still in the process of developing—a topic which will be alluded to later in this paper. Boas was also responsible for introducing and entertaining the idea of *cultural relativism*, another important facet of understanding and studying third-world countries. Loosely defined, cultural relativism refers to the explanation of a person’s actions and beliefs in context of that person’s society; ideals, beliefs, and moral standards of a people reflect their unique cultural context.

Cultural relativism stresses the importance of examining a culture in an isolated fashion and not in the context of differing cultures. As Boas stressed, culture is not predestined to a linear progression resulting in the equivalent of "civilized" European society (NNDB 2009). Thus before beginning an examination of a culture different from the one we are accustomed to, it is critical that we approach the exploration from a largely unbiased standpoint. For the purpose of this paper then, I attempted to examine

the language, the religions, and the traditions and beliefs of the Dogon people in an isolated manner to identify their unique culture.

Understanding Development

As with culture, in order to understand the concept of development it is important to examine the meaning of the word. Development has a number of definitions nearly all of which involve a change towards progress. Webster's Dictionary defines the word develop as "to bring out the capabilities or possibilities of; to bring to a more advanced or effective state," while the American Heritage Dictionary states "to develop" is "to bring from latency to or toward fulfillment" (2009). Additionally, the meaning of the word often depends on the type or category of development of which we are discussing. Biological developments, development in mathematics, economic development, even development pertaining to a game of chess all propose different definitions. In its classical definition, development was a natural process of renewal and expansion whereas the present day doctrine of development often explains the process as discontinuous, where "destruction and renewal are simultaneous" (Shenton, 1996).

Discourses on development have been unfurling among philosophers and ethnographers for ages. In anthropological realms, often a distinction is made between development anthropology and the anthropology of development. The 'anthropology of development' describes development as the object of study while development anthropology often acts as an applied practice. Although the distinction is slight (and increasingly obsolete according to many anthropologists), I will concentrate primarily on the anthropology of development.

In 1995, Arturo Escobar wrote "Encountering Development", an analysis of new ways of looking at discourses of development. As with my exploration, Escobar talks of Third World countries and the ways in which researchers have categorized and implemented development schemes. According to Escobar, one of the greatest difficulties coupled with studying development is the hegemonic idea of Western superiority. He believes that often the implementation of development strategies essentially creates an apparatus for producing knowledge of and thus exercising power over Third World countries. Correspondingly, Harvard professor Hilary Putnam wonders how one can justify development ethics without tyrannizing over an opponent (Glover). This argument, that developmental studies are only possible when one establishes a difference between the rich and the poor, the developed and the underdeveloped, brings the idea of cultural relativism into focus. By accepting that development operates as an area of cultural contestation we are admitting the presence of culture competition, in doing so, representing the Third World perhaps as the colonists did: as less-developed, less-educated, worse off.

Thus we can see development is a highly contentious concept. Regardless of what definition one applies, development is to some degree an aspect of everyday life (Grillo and Stirrat, 1997). In their book, Grillo and Stirrat point out that anthropology "illuminates those aspects of development which other disciplines ignore" (pg 5). Therefore, for this exploration I will attempt to isolate the definition of development to steer away from the idea of betterment and improvement and focus solely on the idea of change. Discerning the difference here is essential: change keeps in mind the cultural

relativity of each country and treats them as isolated populations rather than forcing a comparison with a society we are accustomed to.

Consequently, development spans an expansive group of topics, topics which countless people have written about in essays and entire books. However, in examining the society of the Dogon people in an attempt to examine the clash between their unique culture and the development occurring in their region, I attempted to restrict the focus to analyzing three aspects of their culture that are currently undergoing some form of development: the establishment and operation of modern education systems and its effect on their traditional language, the arrival of outside religions and the effect on traditional beliefs, the administration of community associations and the effect of tourism on their traditional practices and finally, the function of modern health care systems and its effect on traditional medicine.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY **Interviews, Obstacles and Struggles**

Changing Topics

I began my project with the intention of studying health education and public health policies in Sangha—a rural and isolated region. I was curious as to how healthy practices were passed on through the generations and whether or not there was a movement to focus on public health and preventative medicine. I knew it was a lofty goal but I was certain I would find something. It only took three interviews and two days with the Dogon people to realize that my hunt would be futile. Health education did not exist. Every person that I asked, both casually and in formal interviews, gave me a variation of the same answer; I asked them about hygienic practices, or health knowledge (in all

realms: childhood, menstruation, pregnancy, old age) and how or wherefrom they received such knowledge and they replied, “Oh well, I just know these things,” or “I was never taught by anyone.” Regardless of culture, I could not imagine that totally understanding your period, or knowing how to behave during pregnancy was simply innate knowledge. Perhaps they never read the “Pregnancy for Dummies” books but at the very least they learned from their mother, right? I began to load my questions slightly, asking *who* taught you these things. I thought about the two possibilities, either these people were not going to reveal to me their methods of education their children about health or, they genuinely did not make any effort to do so.

To get over this first hurdle, I decided to change my topic entirely. During the first few days, I noted that in my interviews I was learning a considerable amount about Dogon culture. So, I figured I’d continue to explore their culture and wanted to ascertain which traditions and beliefs were beginning to disappear. Furthermore, I wanted to discover the opinions of the Dogon themselves about the future of their culture. Thus I continued down this path for a few days until I discerned that my topic was not as multifaceted as I’d hoped. Letting my fieldwork guide me, I soon found myself asking not only, “What traditions are disappearing?” but also, “Why?” Suddenly the topic of development and outside influence arose and I integrated it into my topic.

Asking Questions

If someone had told me before I began my research that the phrase “Oui, bien sur” (French for “Yes, of course”) would be one of the most disheartening things to hear, I would not have believed it. I entered my research with an open mind and excitement for success. However, little by little, I began to recognize that I did not want my subjects to

simply agree with what I was saying; I wanted opinions and details. I decided from the start that I would gather my data through personal interviews coupled with follow-up research. Because I was examining an isolated and unique society, I determined that interviews would be my most beneficial tool—not only because the Dogon people know their history better than any book but also because I wanted to incorporate the opinions of these people in my report.

In an attempt to prepare for personal bias, I resolved to conduct a plethora of interviews in order to present a wide span of views. However, the trouble came when most of my interviewees answered my questions with one-word answers (often the answer was just yes). Perhaps, I thought, this was a cultural difference—something that I found hindered much of my understanding when my research went awry. I re-evaluated my research methodology and reassessed one of the big problems that anthropologists often find with interviews: the subject often gives you what you want to hear, not what they truly believe. The solution I found was to remember the intricacies that characterized anthropological questions. I needed to make my questions clear and thought-provoking and avoid overgeneralization. Rather than asking questions like, "Do you believe traditional medicine is the best way to cure the sick?" I shifted to questions like "Explain why you practice traditional medicine, why is it unique?" Once I realized this, follow questions began to branch off in every direction and I was able to gather copious amounts of interesting information rather than a meager yes. My project took off.

STUDY AREA

**“The Pays Dogon”
Commune of Sangha
Region of Bandiagara
Mali**

“There are many different kinds of Palestinian experience which cannot be assembled into one. One would therefore have to write parallel histories of the communities in Lebanon, the occupied territories, and so on...”

-as quoted by James Clifford

Mali, like Palestine, is made up of many unique communities which followed different directions in development. Therefore, after struggling to understand the meanings of culture and development, I decided to turn to the one people I studied during my fieldwork research: the Dogon people of the Sangha region of Mali. By first attempting to learn and understand their rich culture and then exploring the current systems of development, I analyzed the interaction of the two and ultimately, attempted to decide if (and how) development will have a positive and/or negative impact on the Dogon culture in the future.

The Dogon can be divided in to fifteen different people groups ranging from 400 to 153,000 members totaling to a population of close to 800,000 (Mali’s total population is estimated at around twelve million) (Joshua Project). Of the fifteen different people groups, nine practice Islam and six practice other religions—including animism and Christianity

In 1997, the “Pays Dogon”, French for Dogon country, was Mali's leading tourist attraction receiving 6,000 visitors per year with an annual growth of 10% (Shackley). Then in 2001, the number of tourists was estimated at some 82,000 but the growth rate

fell to 4% (Baxter). It remains Mali's number one tourist attraction and it seems the numbers of tourists are increasing.

To most Westerners, the Dogon are most widely known for their mask dances and architecture. The mask dances, one of many sacred rituals still practiced today in Dogon culture, are typically performed to show respect to a passing elder and play an integral role in the rich connection of the Dogon Earth to the celestial world. The masks themselves rank among the most respected within the world of tribal art collections, influencing artists such as Picasso, Braque, and even the Cubist movement (Rainier 2003).

The Dogon live in one of the harshest environments on Earth—just south of the Sahara Desert in a hot arid belt where mean yearly temperatures are the highest, and mean annual precipitation is the lowest, in the world. The villages range from the black rock plateaus, to the stone cliffs, to the valley just bordering the desert where food, water, animals and plants are often scarce, especially during the dry season. Theories have circulated among anthropologists that the Dogon fled to the Bandiagara escarpment as a result of pressure from Islamic jihadists and settled in the unforgiving environment in order to avoid conversion and to establish a formidable defense. The Dogon people, however, often share a different story.

While there is little written documentation of Dogon culture and history, and those that are, are often contradictory, countless stories about the history fills the mud brick huts as tales are passed on orally from generation to generation. Whether in the form of a fetish, a painting, a Dogon granary door, or just in the mind of the elders, the traditions remain strong in the hearts of the people of Sangha.

In the beginning, the Dogon believed in a god they call Amma who created the Earth and its people. The Dogon creation story, as told to me in an interview with Baïré Dolo, began with Amma and his creation of the Earth as his wife. As he laid her in the sky, her head to the North and her feet to the South, Amma wanted to mate with the Earth, who refused. In her refusal, the Earth is said to have “stood up her sex organ” (Dolo Apr. 21). Amma, however, insisted. As he is an all powerful being, he forced the Earth to procreate by cutting of this sex organ (the first record of an excision). Because the relation was forced, their offspring—a fox—was cursed. Thus, disappointed with the fox, Amma alone created the Nommo, twins acting ultimately as the authority for the human population to follow. This story, like most Dogon tradition, has been told in many different accounts; Some say the Earth had both male and female organs, represented by ant and termite hill, and that the anthill (the “male” sex organ referring to the clitoris) was blocking the termite hill and thus needed to be cut off before Amma could produce young with the Earth (Velton 177). Others argue that Amma instead split into two creating Ogo—a representation of disorder—and later created Nommo to restore order (Wotherspoon 2009).

As demonstrated with the creation myth, in an exclusively oral society like that of the Dogon people, history is never fact. With each passing of the story, words and interpretations are likely to change—even if ever so slightly—and after hundreds of years can meld into completely different accounts.

BACKGROUND

A Brief History of the Dogon People

As far as a Dogon history goes, I will stick to the account I was told orally, respecting the original transfer of Dogon tradition. Thus according to Baire Dolo's version of the story, following their creation, the Dogon people first resided in the south of Mali. As a result of a misunderstanding between the Malinke people and their little brothers, the Dogon (in Bambara the word "Dogoni" means "younger brother"), the Dogon people decided to leave to avoid being killed by their older Malinke brothers. Before leaving however, the Dogons decided to dig up the bones of one their first ancestors, *Lébé*, to bring with them on their journey. Yet when they dug into his grave, the Dogons found a snake in the place of the old man's bones. (In the Brandt Travel Guide, the story is a bit different, explaining that the *Lébé*'s corpse was actually swallowed by a creature with a serpent tail and human body) (Velton, 180).

The *Lébé* was the first "Hogon" (a Dogon chief) and thus following the death of the *Lébé*, once the Dogon settled, the oldest man in every village was hailed as the Hogon. As the snake was believed to be a reincarnation of the original *Lébé* ancestor, as the tradition goes, the Hogon of every village is forbidden from washing because during the night, a snake comes to him and licks his body clean—this is a tradition that is still strictly adhered to in most Dogon villages.

When the Dogon people arrived near the city of Bandiagara on the central plateau, they decided to establish their society. However, the plateau was not barren; rather it was occupied by a people called the Telem. In Dogon tradition, the Telem were a magical pygmy race who built their civilization among the falaise (French for "cliffs"). Many Telem houses remain in tact today, nestled among the rocks high above where any

average human could climb. This, according to the Dogon, is because the Telem could either fly, or because they could create a sticky cotton thread which they launched up the side of the cliff and climbed to reach their dwellings (both accounts are often believed.) When the Dogons settled, they established a number of important traditions and fetishes that are still recognized today and that represent essential values and beliefs of the Dogon people. For example, the Wagem fetishes, usually symbolized by different statues, represent ancestors who have died. Like the Wagem, the Binu fetish symbolizes ancestors but specifically, those who have died and been reincarnated as animals. In Dogon culture, elders and ancestors are of primary importance and are respected and revered. As Baire explained, the Dogon believe elders and ancestors are “nearer to god than to men” (Dolo Apr. 21). This connection between the earth and celestial world provides the framework for nearly all Dogon beliefs. The celestial world of heaven is where the afterworld is believed to exist (and thus Amma) and the Earth provides food, shelter and life (Rainier, 2003).

CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT: A CLASH OR A MIX?

The Establishment and Operation of Education Systems

In 1909, the French colonial government opened the first school in the Commune of Sangha and since then, 18 schools have been built for the 57 villages that make up the region. I decided to follow my advisor, Baire Dolo, to a primary and secondary school (in the French school system, primary school is the first six years of schooling and secondary school is three years following) in the village of Amani located about 2 hours down the cliff from Ogol-dah (where I was living). As we hiked down the cliff, Baire explained that the school was just opened that year and he works as an English teacher for the

secondary school. Schools are still desperately needed in Sangha and, while 18 already exist, he hopes the need will soon be realized. While seemingly slow to Baire, the development of the school system has been significant; Baire remembers when he was a child (in the late 1960s) four kids including himself attended school and now in the same village, close to 200 kids attend the school.

I sat in on a few classes at the school in Amani. The teachers spoke passionately and knowledgeably about their subjects, while the kids seemed utterly uninterested. I thought back to my years of elementary and middle-school figuring this was pretty typical, yet the disinterest went beyond simple boredom--the children often could not understand the subject being taught. Rather than looking confused and lost, their faces showed defeat; the kids had given up learning.

Moved by the behavior in the classroom, I followed my visit with an interview with Baire. I hoped he would be able to offer an explanation for the behavior of the children, thinking perhaps it related to the general view surrounding the development of the schooling system; perhaps the kids had negative opinions about the schools. To unearth the reason, I first questioned Baire about the how exactly these schools came to be and what was the force driving the development. He explained to me that in theory, the government should build and fund the public schools. However in my research, I found that today, of the 2500 primary schools considered community schools by the Malian government, 62% are funded by USAID (32% by Save the Children, 27% by World Education and 3% by Africare) according to a 2001 study (DeStefano, 2006). Baire concurs explaining that in reality, "It's the whites, the foreign help" that are stepping in to make the education development possible (Dolo Apr. 15). Curious about

the impact of the foreign aid, I probed the subject further asking, “Do people have a problem with this aid? The kids seemed, well, upset at what they were learning.” Baïré smiled. “No, no,” he explained, “It is not what they are learning. The fact is the kids often have a lot of difficult understanding French,” he explained.

The clash came into view: with the arrival of schools, came the arrival of French. The French language, I realized, was an aspect of the development of the education system that would surely have a significant impact on the culture of the Dogon people. As with many of the different communities in Mali, the Dogon speak their own language, namely, Dogon. According to Baïré, starting in their third year, children begin to learn and use French for the rest of their studies. For the first two years, each school teaches in a different dialect, depending on the location of the school. For example in Bamako, Bambara is used, in Sangha, Dogon. Following the first two years, the rest of their courses are conducted solely in French. I was floored at the fact that his secondary school class, children who had been learning French for nearly six years, still had difficulty understanding the language. “They do not speak it at home and I think, it is not taught early enough” (Dolo Apr. 15). Initially, the system was put into place to ease children into learning French by first educating them in their native language and then making the transition to French. Baïré hopes and expects this will soon change. “They should start immediately in French” he explains, saying that he recognizes the importance of the Dogon language to their culture but ultimately, French is the national language.

However, Baïré may not have the view of the average Malian—many Malians are still fighting against the use of the “colonists tongue” (Dolo, Apr. 15). As language is often an integral aspect of culture, with the development of schools, the ancient

languages may begin to disappear. For me, it seemed that French was slowly acting as a blackness, blanketing over the traditional local tongues. When I expressed my worry to Bairé, he revealed without a second thought that in his experience education comes before all else. "It will not affect the culture, I don't think" Bairé explained, "It will give the kids an opportunity to learn and in fact continue the culture. They will continue to speak the Dogon language at home" (Dolo, Apr. 15). Bairé seemed confident; I was not convinced. As I continued to examine the role of the French language in Dogon society, I began to understand that perhaps Bairé was right: French has arrived but has not yet erased the Dogon. Looking at Bamako for comparison, I found that the French language was forced upon the citizens hundreds of years ago yet still today, even the most educated people I spoke with, people who had been speaking and understanding French for generations, still spoke their local language at home. Coming from America, my native tongue was the same as the language used in school yet I realized, in much of the world this is not the case. Therefore, I determined that on one level (and I cannot argue for all aspects of education of course) the development of the education system and resultant arrival of French has not clashed with the culture, rather, it melded.

The Development of Religion among Traditions and Beliefs

The Dogon have innumerable beliefs and small traditions that have arisen and disappeared over the years. Two principal traditions that have remained for years and continue to be recognized are the Dama mask dance and the Sigi Feast. The mask dance tradition began, as the story goes, centuries ago with a young woman in Youga-Dougourou (a village in the Commune of Sangha of central importance to Dogon

history). One day, the woman was sent to guard her family fields and a masked creature emerged from a cave, and began to dance before it vanished. When the young woman returned home and told her father of what she had seen, he gave her a mix of complex traditional medicines and instructed her to throw them upon the creature the next time he appeared. Sure enough, the next day it came again and the woman tossed the medicine mixture. The creature, she realized, was a genie. It froze, unable to become invisible. Bringing the genie back to the village, the Dogon people replicated his original mask and since then, have created many more intricate masks showing animals, people, values and such, all of which represent “things you should never forget, things which will allow you to live in peace” (Dolo, Apr 21). Following the discovery of the first mask, the Dogons began the Dama mask dance tradition at the great funerals—funerals which happen around once a year and honor all those who have died during that year. The men sport the masks and red costumes made from the bark of the baobab trees, the red representing the earth and action. Baïré explained the necessity of action and forward movement is fundamental in Dogon culture, again reinforcing the importance of the color red. “The world itself is moving,” explained Baïré, “what not men?” (Dolo, Apr 21).

Along with the mask dance, the celebration of the Sigi ceremony to honor the dead has remained a critical ritual in the Dogon culture. The tradition began in Youga-Dougourou (where the mask was found) and has been happening every 60 years for the last 600 years (the next Sigi will occur in the year 2027). The Sigi acts first, as a regeneration of the entire Dogon society and reminds its people to continue to respect and practice the ancient traditions and second, as an invigoration of the link between the dead ancestors with Amma and the living Dogon people on earth. Every aspect of the Sigi has

a precise and sometime elaborate meaning behind it. For example, the word “Sigi” in Dogon means quite literally “navel”. The navel is first, the center of the body (and thus the Sigi is the center of the Dogon culture) and second, a link or connection to the mother through the umbilical cord (and thus the link to ancestors). Furthermore, the Sigi happens every 60 years for two reasons. The first is because in Dogon culture, when a man turns 60 he comes an elder and must be reborn. “It is important that the man becomes linked at this point with Amma because elders and ancestors share some of Amma’s knowledge and wisdom,” Bairé explained. (Dolo, Apr. 21). The second reason reflects the physical connection to the celestial world through the star Sirius (or Dogstar). More specifically, the Dogon are concerned with what the Western world calls Sirius B—Sirius is actually comprised of more than one star, one of which (Sirius B) is believed to have shone red. The Dogon believe this red star will appear exactly every 60 years, and thus held their feast of rebirth on the night Sirius appears.

The mask dance and Sigi are just two important aspects of a culture dominated by a belief in animism. From its beginning, animism was a belief that a soul or spirit existed in every object, even if it was inanimate (Guimaraes and Hefner, 2009). Practiced by many ancient hunter-gatherer cultures, Animism has traditionally played a significant role in Dogon culture. Belief in animism among early humans was the basis for the later evolution of religions. However, for the Dogon people, their animist beliefs and traditions remained strong for years as they *avoided* much of the outside religious influence that *fell* upon the rest of Mali.

Yet today, Islam and Christianity both exist alongside animism in the Pays Dogon. In looking at development as denoting change, I wanted to explore the impact of

these religions on the Dogon culture. In asking multiple inhabitants what religion they practice, I found the answers to be varied and more complex than I expected, noting that animistic beliefs often seemed to blend with other religions; While most recognize and respect some form of animism, many Dogons consider themselves to be a member of a different religion. "I'm a Muslim," Unise, a matron at the Hospital in Sangha explained, "but like everyone else I know animism" (Unise, Apr. 11). What Unise meant by "knowing" animism was unclear at first but I began to understand it as I continued with my interviews. Many Dogons have converted to Christianity or Islam but continue to practice ancient traditions associated with animism; they are members of another religion but retains their animist beliefs. For example, while living in the Pays Dogon, I was able to attend a mask dance at a funeral, during which the men traditionally celebrate by consuming gourds and calabash bowls full of homebrewed "millet beer". After being invited into one of the huts to join the men, I poked my head in only to see a man named Ouro, a practicing Muslim, tipping a bowl into his mouth. He smiled and told me to join in.

The clash between religions did not seem to exist either. I would have expected the arrival of outside religions and the developments of churches and mosques to act like the black shadow I saw cast over Sanankoroba. Instead, the Dogon continued to celebrate the Sigi and believe in their red star (incidentally modern science has found a plethora of information disproving the Dogons theories surrounding the Sirius star, one being that Sirius B passed through it's "red giant" stage over 120 million years ago (Whittet, 1999)). They continue to guard their animist beliefs and mix them with the anewly arrived religions; again, I discovered a mesh not a clash.

The Administration of Community Associations and the Effects of Tourism

In the past ten years, the number of community associations has begun to increase. To ascertain the presence of such associations in the Dogon society I set up three interviews: one with a woman named Djeneba Dolo, the president of an association called “Monibiem”, one with Hawa Dara, the president of an association called “Dogo Djougo” and one with Naire Dolo, the president of an association called “Communauté de Protection de Patrimoine.”

After conducting all three interviews, I found Naire Dolo’s to be the most informative and fascinating relating to a clash between development and culture. I met with him initially to discuss his position as president of the Communauté de Protection de Patrimoine (CPP). Naire was born in 1933 and as a 76 year-old, he is much respected in his village--a main reason for his aptitude for his current post. The CPP works in conjunction with a French NGO called Vision du Monde to use tourism to promote culture and fund development. For example, Vision du Monde has organized a program, charging tourists 6000fcfa to see the traditional Dogon Dama Mask Dance. This money goes to Naire and the association (according to him, the total sum he receives is 6000fcfa per tourist, I was not able to determine the actual price each tourist pays, assuming Vision de Monde takes a slice) and is used for development projects--in 2008 the money went towards purchasing eight mattresses for the hospital and 10 desks for the primary school.

Looking to spot the clash, I asked all three for their opinions regarding the impact of the aforementioned development on the Dogon culture; Djeneba smiled, Hawa laughed and Naire said frankly "Keeping tradition alive is most important and development will

come next" (Dolo Apr. 16). When I mentioned that oftentimes, Americans (like my fellow students and I in Sanankoroba for example) feel that development can destroy a culture, they disagreed whole-heartedly, assuring me that in their minds, development is not only positive but necessary. In Naire's case, he feels that in fact by promoting their culture, they are fueling development.

It seemed that Naire was trying to claim that no clash existed between the arrival of development to help their heritage association. I did not believe it could be that simple and thus probed Naire a bit further. Slowly, he began to understand what I was asking him as I reworded question after question and I began to discover that development was certainly having some impact on the culture; as the association funds and promotes tourism, this often comes paired with negative consequences. Naire mentioned that oftentimes, the resultant increase in money flow in the Pays Dogon coupled with the arrival of "les blancs" for either tourism or aid has led to a significant increase in the amount and severity of the begging and harassment done by children--something I noticed immediately which lasted the duration of my stay. The kids in Sangha would see anyone with white skin as way to make money, squealing "Donne-moi un cadeaux! Donne-moi de l'argent!" In my eyes, this impact was huge and hugely negative; a part of me left Sangha and breathed a sigh of relief to be leaving the children. Alain Vallet, the coordinator of a French NGO called Via-Sahel located right in Sangha offered me some insight during an interview, "The problem now," he explained, "is that because of the flood of money in areas like Sangha, the Dogon people now consider it their *right* to have outside help, the kids think all whites should just give them money when in reality, the help is above and beyond" (Vallet, Apr. 22). Alain expressed his opinion that

development in isolated and rural communities like this one should continue, but not simply with passive monetary handouts; physical and active presence will yield better results. “I think the establishment of associations is good,” Vallet explained, “just as long as we are teaching them to help themselves.”

In listening to Vallet discuss tourism, I realized this was another topic in itself—riddled with intricacies and definitions. Tourism itself is a controversial subject and I did not want to bury myself in analyzing the effects of tourism on the people of Sangha (something that would be fascinating to study in depth). What I did discern was that the development of community associations was certainly clashing with the culture—both positively and negatively.

The Function of the Modern Health Care System and its Effect on Traditional Medicine

In order to examine the development of the health care system in Sangha, I first determined its different domains. I immediately learned that in the field of medicine, both traditional and conventional (often referred to as modern) medicinal practices exist.

In order to see the modern side of the health scale, I decided to explore the CSCOM—Centre de Sante Communautaire—in Sangha to analyze its role in development. So I tracked down the president, a man named Bairé Dolo (who ended up becoming my indispensable advisor) to conduct an interview. Bairé Dolo was born in 1965 in the village of Ogol-Leye and presently lives part time in Diameni-Goura and part time in Amani (all in the Commune of Sangha) where he teaches English at the Secondary school. Unlike the majority of his peers, Bairé went to school in Bamako for four years and left the country to find work. He ended up in Cote d’Ivoire where he worked as a

teacher and librarian. In 1999, Baïré found himself back in Sangha and was elected vice-president of the CSCOM in 2000. In 2006, he was promoted to president and has been in the position since.

As president, Baïré explained, his work is voluntary and often difficult—not strenuous but rather discouraging—for all 13 members of the ASACO (Association de Santé Communautaire, essentially the group of village members who manages and operates the CSCOM) are volunteers and often do not participate in activities. The goal of the CSCOM in Sangha (and ideally throughout Mali) is to improve the health conditions of individuals in the villages. The aim is that the CSCOM will be run from inside the community in order to find solutions to health care problems at "affordable costs" (Gerber and Togola, 2007). The idea of decentralization is seemingly positive but in reality quite difficult in rural areas like Sangha which often do not have the means to find any solutions to their health problems. According to a World Bank report, populations in 50 of the world's poorest countries will double by 2050 meaning greater increases in health care funding will be needed and third world nations need to make health care a top priority now (Block 2006). Thus the ASACO works primarily to recruit personnel, organize and manage funds, promote healthy practices and pay for health equipment. Because of the lack of government funding, the ASACO must work closely with a number of NGOs and outside partners to see any progress. Baïré has found his work ultimately rewarding and he feels that, while the single CSCOM is certainly not sufficient for all of Sangha, they have established a relationship with a number of partners and are continuing to progress. The Malian Demographic and Health Survey in 2002 showed "the

number of Malians who have access to health care in a 15 km radius increased from 40% in 1998 to 63%" (Geber and Togola, 2007).

Fascinated by the role of traditional medicine in the Dogon culture, I arranged an interview with a man named Joël Dougnon—a practicing “guérisseur” and “thérapeute” (an important distinction between healer and therapist will be made shortly). Joël was born into a family of healers and thus as a young boy was forced into becoming a healer himself one day. “It was not a choice,” Joël explained, but the job is highly revered in the Dogon community and Joël has found success (Dougnon, Apr. 14). According to him, the majority of the Dogon community will see a healer before going to the hospital; the use of traditional medicine men remains widespread throughout the villages. “But it depends on the severity of course” Joël assured me (Dougnon, Apr. 14). Unlike his father who Joël described as a traditional stagnant healer, Joël left home and became an “ambulant” therapist—one who moves from place to place rather than remaining in his village. Today, although he has returned to his village of Ogol-dah, he is part of an association of traditional medicine established in 2002, working with other therapists and ultimately beginning the process of sharing knowledge.

Joël, then, is essentially a living oxymoron: he embodies the stages of development affecting traditional medicine. Joël works as a healer—a traditional medicine man, one *born* with a gift and given most of his knowledge from his father, as well as a therapist—a modern version of the classic healer, one who has studied observable effects of certain plants and shared aforesaid knowledge with other therapists. Ironically, Joël explains that most Dogons trust a “vrai guérisseur” significantly more with their maladies because customarily, the true healers do not practice medicine in

order to make money whereas the conventional doctor is in the business to make a buck (Dougnon, Apr. 14). However, in a seemingly contradictory manner, the healers place primary importance on keeping the secrets behind their healing expertise. (Shocked, I asked Joël to clarify wondering whether healers truly rank the protection of their secrets above healing their patients and he assured me that was accurate, explaining that revealing one's secrets would allow others to use their knowledge to deceive them and take their clients.) (Dougnon, Apr. 14). It did not add up. They didn't want anyone to take their clients but they were not in the business for money? I pried further but was not able to extract much more information from him regarding the matter—secrets are secrets of course.

Seeing an observable development in the modern health care industry, slow but constant, and listening to Joël explain his role as a mixture of the modern and traditional, I questioned him on his views of the optimism (and pessimism) of the arrival of conventional medicine and whether or not he felt that it was responsible for diminishing the number of true healers. Almost grudgingly, Joël admitted that the number of true healers has diminished (he himself is only half a healer I suppose) but he strongly believes that in the Dogon culture, “les guérisseurs ne sont jamais, jamais disparaître” (Dougnon, Apr. 14). Bairé agreed but in a more optimistic manner. When I questioned him he replied, “The affect is positive, I believe” (Dolo Apr. 12). I asked what he thought about healers disappearing and he said, quite simply, they won't. Instead, they are just learning. He equated the progress of the healthcare system with the progress of the education system feeling both are necessary and constructive because of the *way* that they are developing: by supplying information. With general education and the promotion and

sensitization of healthy practices, Baïré feels that the Dogon people are being offered more options for lifestyles, options he feels are generally positive. By increasing the circulation of knowledge, the Dogon people can decide which methods and systems they will adopt without fearing change. “Change,” Baïré explained, “is something that is important in our Dogon values, we must be constantly moving” (Dolo, Apr. 12).

Thus with medicine, clash has created a new beast—the therapists. Instead of modern medicine blacking out traditional medicine (my biggest fear), the two systems are both existing and have created a third system as a combination.

CONCLUSION

Development comes from within, Change is inevitable, and Culture runs deep

In his book on African development, Haskel Ward quoted, “Real development can only begin from where you are, from your own culture.” As I looked through all the information I had gathered during my two weeks of research, I began to comprehend that Ward had a point. Development is something that I found to be both warranted and wanted by the Dogon people. Every Dogon I spoke to, formally and informally, expressed a desire to develop in some way—sometimes with forward progression and sometimes with preservation. Naire worked to preserve traditional practices and Baire fought for more schools. However often what was generally absent was the desire to develop from within, rather most of the development was made possible from “les blancs.” Countless Dogons expressed the need for outside aid and monetary donations when oftentimes, they lacked the internal desire to take control of their problems. I once heard an old Malian proverb that goes, « Si vous demandez aux autres de vous vous aider

à achever votre lion blessé, c'est que vous-même teniez la tête », which means, “If you ask for the help of others to kill your injured lion, it's because you have already grabbed the head.” African cultures need to catalyze their development; they need to be at the base. Not only will this provide more viable results (as Alain Vallet mentioned previously) but also, when the Dogon take control of their development strategies, they have more control over what characteristics they must preserve.

No matter how firmly certain traditions or religions are believed or practice, in all cultures, change is inevitable. As Boas argued in his discourse, a culture is always in flux. It was difficult for me to understand at first because in the past, I categorized African culture as more stagnant. American culture has been rapidly changing for such a long time, I simply accepted it; when I buy an ipod, I'm well aware that in just a few years, the model may be essentially obsolete. However with African culture I was stuck imploring preservation since historically, the rate of change has been significantly slower. Globalization is sweeping the world and countries are advancing and interconnecting faster than ever before. Thus, I cannot predict what the Dogon culture will look like ten years from now but it is certain it will have changed.

Initially, my worry was that with the rapid development that characterizes today's world, the Dogon culture would be destroyed without them even realizing. I now perceive this thought to be considerably more complex than expected. First and foremost, my initial perception of culture was flawed—I was thinking of culture as superficial characteristics of a society. When I thought of American culture, I thought of what has characterized my people for the last 10, maybe 15 years on the surface: The internet, investment banking, and fast-food. When I thought of Malian culture (even Dogon

culture) I thought of mud-huts, spears, and pastoralism. What I learned with my exploration is that while the concept of culture is often complicated, at the base of most cultures lays a foundation of beliefs. The Dogons have continued to persist through outside influence—passing on the mask dance traditions from generation to generation, honoring animism while adopting new religions and clutching onto certain aspects of traditional medicine. No matter how many power lines are built along the roads, the Dogon people will continue to respect their elders. In 2027, the Sigi festival will occur. No matter how much black is mixed in, you can still see some of the red.

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ONE PAGE SUMMARY

Kathleen Remington/Fanta Dicko

Spring 2009

For my Independent Study Project (ISP) I focused my research on struggling to understand the relationship between development and culture in an isolated community. I chose to study the Dogon people located in Sangha, Mali and spent 17 days studying and living among them. By conducting a series of interviews daily, I explored the land and the hearts of the people in order to obtain a meaningful understanding of their culture as well as, to acquire first hand knowledge of the ongoing development.

My paper begins by analyzing general definitions and discourses of both culture and development. I then detail my research methods and give a comprehensive background on the study area and people. Finally, the report funnels into the development and culture of the distinctive Dogon people and the specific areas in which development has impacted culture in areas including education, religion, community associations and health care systems. I conclude that by examining the current development of and understanding the unique culture of the Dogon people in Sangha, Mali, I have altered my previous beliefs--that development ultimately destroys a culture--to understand that while development will inevitably cause a change in culture, the Dogon people have integrated these changes into their society allowing certain aspects to merge and others to endure.

Fieldwork Journal: ISP Kathleen Remington

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(note: throughout the time spent in the field, many informal interviews were performed to gather information. The information gathered in the informal interviews is not recorded and not cited but rather treated as new knowledge)

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