

Reviving Ancient Traditions:

A New Approach to the Emancipation of Malian Women

Claire Crowley dit « Nana dicko »

Advisor : M'Baye Kadiatou Keita

Academic Directors : Modibo Coulibaly, Harber Mama Toure

School for International Training
Mali : Gender, Health and Development Program
Fall 2008

*For all the women in my life both in the United States and Mali who
have helped me come to understand my own worth through their
example.*

*And for all the women who have ever been ashamed of their femininity;
that they may come to understand that they are beautiful, strong
and undeniably worthy.*

Table of Contents

Statement of Research	.....	4
Research Methodology	.....	5
I. Introduction	.....	7
II. Mali Today: The Subjugation of Women	.....	8
III. Ancient Mali: A Matriarchal Society?	.....	12
a. Statues, Masks and Myths of Ancient Mali	.....	13
b. Ancient Manuscripts	.....	16
c. The Language of Bambanakan	.....	17
IV. The Arrival Islam	.....	20
V. The Patriarchy of Colonialism	.....	22
VI. Conclusion: No Need for an Imported Solution	.....	23

Statement of Research

Being immersed in a Malian family for over three months has given me an opportunity to observe and experience certain dynamics of the culture not afforded to the average traveller. It was this very experience which served to inspire this project, a diversion from my original research topic of polygamy. While the textbooks focused on the compliance and submission of Malian women, each day spent immersed in the culture and my family hinted at something more. My family's lifeline and backbone are the women who manage the household; particularly my Maman and sister. While many acknowledge that Malian women carry the brunt of the workload each day, the strength and autonomy of these same women is rarely emphasized. Each day spent immersed in the culture advanced my conviction that Malian women (both historically and currently) were constrained by a limited conceptualization of Malian women which highlighted submission and oppression. The common construction of Malian women neglected both their strength and agency within society – a disservice to the movement for the emancipation of women. Thus, I decided to further explore the situation of Malian women; the realities of their hardships, their perceptions of the feminist movement and obstacles delaying change. Through an exploration of these questions, I intend this study to project an accurate representation of the strength and autonomy of the women throughout Mali and to present possible vehicles for change within the feminist movement today.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted largely through the use primary sources; incorporating a series of structured and unstructured interviews, and participant observation. In conducting structured interviews with linguists, historians, religious leaders and women's rights activists, I was able to directly explore areas of interest within the research project through a set of predetermined questions formulated specifically for each of these interviews.

In an effort to understand wider contemporary Malian perceptions of the feminist movement, a series of questions was formulated which was then used for the structured interviews of 15 participant informers. Due to the semi-controversial nature of the questions and in an effort to gain the most open and honest answers, these fifteen interviewees were assured confidentiality and are referred to throughout the study as Informants 1-15, numbered according to the date of interviews. Supplementing this understanding of the general perceptions of the population, numerous unstructured, informal interviews on the subject were conducted prior to and throughout the designated research period. With no specific set of questions, these 'guided conversations' allowed a discovery of certain aspects of the subject which may have otherwise been neglected.

As the majority of women's rights organizations are based in Bamako, the capital city of Mali, I chose to conduct the research in that area. As this was also where the majority of my time was spent prior to the research period, it must be specified that the three months of participant observation which helped me to conceptualize Malian ideas of the feminist movement were also derived in the urban setting of Bamako. Thus, the perceptions and ideas of the feminist movement which are presented in this study are those found in the largest and most industrialized city in Mali. While time restrictions constrained an in-depth exploration of the differences between urban and rural ideals, several short stays in various villages gave me an introduction to the sentiments of rural Mali as compared to the urban hub of Bamako. This

participant observation along with previous studies assured me that the aversion to the 'feminist movement' and 'abandonment of tradition' which is evident throughout Bamako is just as strong, if not stronger among rural Malians.

This primary research was then supplemented with previously published statistics and literature on various subjects relating to the study. This literature helped to form much of the theoretical framework within which I present my thesis, as well as providing valuable knowledge and statistics involving the status of women in Mali and around the world.

I. Introduction

Empirical research in recent years has brought to light the extent to which women occupy disadvantaged positions in both traditional economic and social arrangements around the world. While gender inequalities can still be observed throughout ‘developed’ nations such as Europe and North America, the marginalization of women in the ‘Third World’ is much more acute and visible to the Western eye. Certainly, the oppression and subjugation which many women in the South face every day is both indisputable and intolerable. In substantial parts of Asia and North Africa, disparate morbidity and mortality rates between genders demonstrate insufficient attention and medical care for females to the worst degree. Inadequate education, labor exploitation, economic marginalization and legalized forms of violence against women and young girls such as excision; all of which exist today, leave many western scholars skeptical of any feminine progress or respect for women in many countries of the South.

Yet within the postcolonial feminist movement, specifically in Africa, there has been a move to acknowledge the true origins of these patriarchal tendencies and to re-establish the indigenous respect for women which once existed. Prior to colonialism, many African political and economic structures could be described as dual-sex. Gender roles were less rigidly defined, with women and men working side by side in artisanship, agricultural work, and even trade. Studies such as those presenting traditional Igbo culture- in which the women even had their own Governing Councils to address their specific concerns and needs as women - have laid a basis for the autonomy thesis asserting the pre-colonial status of traditional African women.¹

While some may argue that studies such as this are little more than a romantic recreation of a pre-colonial reality that has little relevance to the third-worlds postcolonial

¹ Nkiru Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Tradition,” *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (Oxford: New York, 1995) 446.

condition; I will proceed to argue that a factual re-examination of pre-colonial reality is not only relevant but vital to the emancipation of postcolonial Africa today. In fact, it is this very history which has the potential to mobilize Malian women to dismantle many of the colonial legacies which continue to haunt them today.

II. Mali Today: The Subjugation of Women

While I feel that this argument has incredible relevance throughout Africa, I will make my case through a detailed examination of Mali, a country often described as historically oppressive and domineering toward its women. While Mali is a country that has made substantial progress in women's rights development throughout the past years, numerous critical issues remain unaddressed. Like most countries throughout the world, Mali lacks gender equality in both the workforce and the household. Women represent 52% of the Malian population, yet only 12% of the formal workforce.² An equally dismal number of Malian women occupy governmental positions of power, currently with four women ministers out of 28, fifteen women deputies out of 147 in the national assembly, and seven women out of 701 mayors.³

Not only marginalized from the workforce and politics, Malian women are faced with many socialized forms of discrimination which only serve to continue the cycle of marginalization, with a deterioration of the women's psychological and physical wellbeing. The most acutely apparent to the eyes of the West and what some see to be the most severe form of female repression in Mali is excision.⁴ According to the World Health Organization, excision is defined as "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female

² La FFE, Bureau Du Mali, ed. *La Femme au Mali: Cadre de Vie, Promotion, Organisations*, (Bamako, Mali 2000) 114.

³ *Décentralisation*, Gender and Development Seminar, October 2008

⁴ While many Western organizations refer to this as 'Female Genital Mutilation' (FGM), I chose to use the term 'excision' as this is the term most widely used throughout Mali and remains the most objective way of naming the traditional practice.

genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”. Type I excision refers to partial or total removal of the clitoris and occasionally the prepuce as well. Type II excision refers to removal of the clitoris and partial or total excision of the labia minora; and Type III, known as infibulation, is a removal of part or all of the external genitalia followed by a narrowing of the vaginal opening. Immediate consequences of excision include “severe pain, shock, haemorrhage, urine retention, ulceration of the genital region and injury to adjacent tissue”. Long term consequences may include cysts and abscesses, keloid scar formation, damage to the urethra resulting in urinary incontinence, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse) and sexual dysfunction and difficulties with childbirth.⁵ Despite the severity of these complications, Malians have tenaciously held onto this traditional practice. It is reported that approximately 93.7% of Malian women ages 15 – 49 have been excised, the great majority of which are Type I and II.⁶ While the majority of Malians who favour excisions do so because of custom and tradition, women’s rights and health organizations point out that the historical significance once attached to the practice has disappeared. While excision was traditionally performed as a rite of passage for young girls entering puberty, the overwhelming majority of excisions in Mali are now performed soon after birth, devoid of any consent from the young girl. Thus activists argue that excision has lost its traditional significance, becoming a manifestation of female oppression - a violation of a woman’s physical integrity and human rights.

Another form of discrimination against the woman can be seen in Mali’s education system and the disparate literacy rates which exist between the sexes. Women’s literacy in Mali falls far below that of men’s as poor families place priority on educating their sons and often can not afford to lose their young girls’ help with domestic work or trade. Those in school often drop out early in order to get married at young ages. While the legal marriage

⁵ World Health Organization, Female Genital Mutilation: Factsheet N°241, (May 2008).

⁶ La Femme au Mali, 117

age for men is eighteen, it is fifteen for women; a law which contradicts the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children do not become adults until they are eighteen. With such a young legal marriage age, it is difficult for girls to remain in school once they are married and begin having children. According to the Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy, 10 percent of 15 year old Malian girls have been pregnant, 46 percent of 17 year old girls, and 69 percent of 19 year old women have been pregnant.⁷ Giving birth at such a young age can have desperate consequences, and complications in connection to pregnancy and delivery have become the most important causes of death for [African] girls 15 to 19 years.⁸ Statistics such as these clearly demonstrate that practices such as early and forced marriages not only perpetuate educational inequalities for women but can have devastating psychological and physical health consequences for the young girls as well, only continuing the cycle of oppression.

While Malian women recognize similar obstacles facing women throughout the world, they believe that their situation is only made worse by their extreme poverty. According to the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Program, Mali is the third poorest country in the world, with the burden of this poverty falling disproportionately on women.⁹ In addition to searching for ways to supplement their husband's incomes, it is the women who remain responsible for the wellbeing of the household. For many Malian women, this means waking up before dawn to perform domestic work and prepare for a day at the market selling vegetables before returning home to prepare the dinner meal and perform the rest of her domestic work. A recurrent sentiment of fatigue was evident throughout the interviews conducted with Malian women in Bamako, as one after another they told me of the work of their day. Yet as one woman described to me, what is worse is the simple lack of

⁷ Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP), 135

⁸ Skard, T., Continent of mothers, continent of hope: understanding and promoting development in Africa today, (London, New York Zed Press 2003) 72.

⁹ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Annual Human Development Report, 2007.

respect shown for women and the work that they do. “If you do something well,” she explained to me, “even if it is hard, when it is over you can feel proud of yourself and know that it was good. But for us, it is hard to feel proud. We are not respected for the work that we do. That is what makes us tired.”¹⁰

Despite the women’s repeated sentiment of fatigue and the urgency of the majority of these issues, the Malian feminist movement is facing considerable resistance from both men and women alike. After nearly a century of French colonial rule which erased and silenced much of the native history and culture; the independence of Mali, like the majority of African countries, has been plagued by neo-colonial politics and economics. Tired of their traditions being mutilated and abused, many Malians have become wary of foreign cultures telling them to abandon indigenous practices and beliefs. And for many Malians, “the feminist movement” represents yet another Western imposition chiding them to abandon their traditions and move toward a western and foreign way of life. While many interviewees stressed or at least acknowledged a need to move toward equality between the sexes, when asked to define what it meant to be a ‘feminist’; perceptions were overwhelmingly negative. “A feminist is a woman who wants to be a man,” one woman told me. “She does not know how to cook or care for children and men don’t want to marry a woman like that. For [feminists], being a woman isn’t enough.”¹¹ As another informant explained, “Feminists are women who study in the West. They come back and they look down on the way [Maliens] live, the way their mothers lived... They think we are weak if we are not like them.”¹²

According to M’Baye Kadiatou Keita, director of APDF, one of Mali’s first and largest women’s rights organizations; similar negative perceptions of the Malian feminist movement are all too common. “For many Malian women, the feminist movement scares them – it is unfamiliar,” Keita explained. “They think they will have to abandon their

¹⁰ Informant 6, Personal Interview, 19 Nov. 2008.

¹¹ Informant 10, Personal Interview, 23 Nov. 2008.

¹² Informant 3, Personal Interview, 15 Nov. 2008.

traditions and become like the women in the West... It is this that worries them.”¹³ This fear of western imposition and desire to create a feminist movement which is geographically, historically and culturally grounded in Malian tradition can hardly be criticized. For years, third-wave and post-colonial feminists have rejected the universalization of the female experience, which neglects to acknowledge differences in the feminine experience across such paradigms as race, culture, and class. Yet amidst the resources available to Malian women looking to improve their situation, feminist organizations which reject western standards and look to Malian history as a basis for change are scarce, if not nonexistent. .

Through the subsequent examination and study of ancient Malian culture and history, which appears to have respected and even worshiped its women; I will argue that the Malian feminist movement has no need for an imported solution, and if given the chance, could create an example from which even the West could learn.

III. Ancient Mali: A Matriarchal Society?

The belief that the history of Malian women has been one solely of oppression and compliance is common throughout the West as well as within Mali today. Yet to claim that respect for women is contrary to Malian tradition is untrue, and is a misconception which serves only as an impediment to the feminist movement. In examining the ancient history and culture of Mali, one can observe matriarchal tendencies and ancient respect for women of which even the West is unable to boast. Through oral history and myths, ancient traditions, and a matriarchal based indigenous language; evidence of an ancient respect and reverence for women in Malian society is hard to deny. While centuries of colonialism have obviously wrought great changes on these values and traditions, indigenous knowledge systems continue to exist, and traces of these matriarchal tendencies are observed into modern times.

¹³ M’Baye Kadiatou Keita: Directrice APDF, Personal Interview, 17 Nov. 2008

A. Statues, Masks and Myths of Ancient Mali

As with the majority of African histories, much of what we know of Mali's past comes from oral sources passed down from one generation to the next. Even today, oral history is both honoured and respected in Mali as an imperative source of knowledge for its youth. The vital role which oral history has played and continues to play in discovering and understanding ancient Mali makes an examination of ancient statues, masks and myths imperative to this study. And while colonials and early western anthropologists and historians may have been quick to overlook or underestimate the early African woman's role in society; the honoured position which Malian women historically held is apparent throughout the culture's oral tradition.

An acute contrast to early Western history, one does not have to search long to find examples of ancient Malian women who were figures of power. In fact, the God of the Bamanan people, Ba Faro, is represented in the form of a beautiful woman – Goddess of the Niger. It is Faro who is said to empower things to happen, and it was she who taught the first men – with whom she descended on earth – the main creative activities (agriculture, fishing, forging, etc).¹⁴ The path of the Niger is said to follow her form, and it is Ba Faro who ensures the prosperity of the country between the Mande and Segou.

A Fulani poet with whom I spoke defined Ba Faro as a more ephemeral concept, a name which embodied the strength and autonomy of women throughout history. In his poem entitled 'Ba Faro', he honours the women throughout Malian history who were figures of power, deserving of respect and tribute. "Oh Faro, my mother!" Diallo writes. "Deity of abundance, goddess of fertility! You give life Ba Faro, mother of all; receive the offering!" The poem goes on to pay tribute to Malian women of power such as Sogolon, mother of Sundiata; Do Nyeleni, symbol of women in agriculture; and Bouctou, the founder of the

¹⁴ Adama Ba Konare, *Dictionnaire des Femmes Célèbres au Mali*, (Editions JAMANA; Bamako, Mali) 99.

legendary city of Timbuctou. Ending with another salutation to the power of “Ba Faro, mother of all”, the poet again identifies Ba Faro as an all-encompassing personification of the strength and agency of Malian women.

Moving past the creation story of Ba Faro into the 13th century, one finds Do Nyeleni, a legendary agriculturalist who became a symbol of hope for many women. Nyeleni was a Malian peasant whose existence is known through African oral tradition. Originally from the region of Segou, she was the pride of her parents and a great agriculturalist. She is credited with the domestication of fonio, a tiny grain grown in the Sahelian region of West Africa. Nyeleni is today known as a symbol of the commitment and endurance of women in Malian society and of their power in the agricultural sector. Through the legendary Do Nyeleni, we can see the true ancient Malian woman as a powerful agriculturalist, hardly the image of the submissive domestic which is often portrayed.

Throughout these myths and into today, it is said that children inherit their noble qualities from their mothers. It is the woman who is thought to be adorned with a kind of mystical force, which in turn benefits her children. It is perhaps for this reason that fathers are virtually absent in the gesture of Malian heroes. Even the masculine heroes and legends are remembered by the name of their mother. Perhaps the most prevalent of these examples is that of the great Malian emperor Sundiata, who is remembered even today as the son of Sogolon. In this semi-historical epic of Sundiata, founder of the Malian empire, the role which his mother and sister played in his rise to greatness are central to the story and are never forgotten. Yet Sogolon, mother of Sundiata is not the only example of this tradition; and figures such as Kassai, mother of Askia Mohamed and Massounoun Sacko, mother of Biton Coulibaly are only several more examples of the many heroes throughout Malian history who are remembered by their mothers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Adama Ba Konare, 26

As with oral tradition, the masks and statues of the Malian people play a large role in their culture and history. Thus it cannot be ignored that Malian history recognizes the woman as the initial founder of the masks among the Malinke and Dogon people of Mali. According to the museum curator and historian at the National Museum of Mali, not only are female forms and figures dominant through the masks and statues of Ancient Mali, it was the Malinke and Dogon women who first brought the masks to the region. Oral history presents two different stories linking women to the origin of these masks.

The first story involves the Mande, or Malinke people, and dates back to the trans-Saharan trade between the Mande and the Middle East. When the king of the Malian Empire, Mansa Maghan, travelled to Mecca in the beginning of the 12th century, there is said to have been with him a caravan of over a hundred women. It was these women who are said to have recognized the value in the masks and returned to Mali organizing the first manifestation of the masks. Among the Dogon, oral history tells of a group of women who were performing their daily tasks in the bush when they heard singing. Following the voices, the women came to a clearing in which genies were dancing, clothed in red costumes and masks. Upon the depart of the genies, the women are said to have snuck into the clearing and brought the costumes and masks back to their people. Into today there exists one particular Dogon mask named Satimbe, which honours these women and their discovery.¹⁶

The extensive representation of Malian women throughout ancient masks and figures, along with Malian history which places women at the base of the mask are both demonstrations of the respect given to women in Malian society. The female body is continuously represented in the masks and statues as a sign of beauty, fertility, and power. These positive representations of women reveal veneration once accorded to women and the indispensable role which they played and continue to play in Malian society.

¹⁶ Oumar Yamadou Diallo: Historian and Curator at Musee National du Mali, Personal Interview, 20 Nov. 2008.

B. Ancient Manuscripts

While the majority of our knowledge about the ancient Malian empire comes from oral history; rare ancient manuscripts, written mainly by Arab explorers, provide a preciously detailed and unaltered description of ancient Mali. One of the earliest travellers to write an eyewitness account of Africa was Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan explorer who travelled by camel caravan from Morocco to Mali between 1352-54. Battuta's accounts of his travels give detailed descriptions of everything from royal governments to the masked dancers he saw in the empire of Mali. Also included, and particularly remarkable is Battuta's description of the women and the respect shown for them in the Malian empire. As translated by H.A.R. Gibb, Ibn Battuta writes,

“[Malian] women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men... Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending the prayers.”¹⁷

As Ibn Battuta describes the respect for and self-assurance of the women of the Malian empire, one can see his struggle in rationalizing such matrilineal practices, as it is clearly not the custom of the time. In the *Dictionnaire des Femmes Célèbres du Mali*, Adama Ba Konare cites the medieval traveler Andalusian El Bekri for noting that among the Soninke ethnic group of Mali as well, it was always the uterine nephew of the emperor who succeeded him.¹⁸ In an ancient history which is known nearly exclusively through oral sources, for two of the earliest written accounts of Malian history to both explicitly recognize the role of Malian women is incredible. It is these writings which help to affirm the extensive evidence found

¹⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, tr. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929)

¹⁸ Adama Ba Konare, 25

throughout oral sources which indicate the ancient Malian Empire to have held women in the highest regard.

D. The Language of Bamankan

One of the most clear and relevant ways in which the ancient respect for women is manifested in contemporary Malian society is through the language of Bamankan. Although French is the official language of Mali and is used for communication in governmental institutions, approximately 80% of the population can speak or understand Bamankan, and it has become the unofficial lingua franca of Mali.¹⁹ With less than half of Malians over the age of fifteen literate in French, the Bambara language is essential for trade and communication across the nation.

As language helps to shape one's thoughts and emotions, it can also determine one's perception of reality. It is for this reason that languages have been studied throughout the centuries as a window into foreign cultures, as the terminology used by a culture reflects its interests and concerns. Thus, one cannot study and accurately depict the history and culture of Mali without also examining the indigenous language of Bambara.

Even when equipped with only a modest comprehension of the Bambara language, it is difficult to ignore the recurring instances in which women are accorded respect and agency throughout the language. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in the Bambara greetings – specifically in the contrasting responses appointed to men and women. Salutations play a large role in Malian culture; and the extensive greetings accorded to even strangers demonstrate this import. To fail to greet an acquaintance or an elder is seen as impertinence and a patent sign of disrespect for the person and the culture. The simple quantity of greetings for the various times of day is a reflection of this value; as morning, afternoon, evening and night each have their own distinct greeting. With each greeting the responses are the same,

¹⁹ TheWorld Factbook, CIA (2008)

though men and women respond differently. Women answer with “n’sé,” meaning “I am able” or “my power”, while men say “n’ba”, meaning “my mother”. While men refer to their mothers because it is their mothers who protect them, women refer to their capability because it is they who have to face the problems and tasks of the day.²⁰ This gives women agency in two regards: as mothers protecting their sons and as women conquering the day. This case in point illustrates the explicit contrast between ancient Malian respect for women and traditional Western ideas of femininity in which agency was associated with men and women were portrayed as passive and in need of protection.

Another recurring theme in Bamanankan is the significance attached to words relating to women, particularly mothers. The Bambara word for mother, “ba”, is the same word used for river, one of the most important aspects of life in ancient Bambarann society. Like the Nile River in ancient Egypt, the Niger River in Mali (both historically and currently) has been essential in travel, trade and culture. The ancient Malian empire was based around this river, and as an agricultural society, it was the river which gave life and fertility. As such, it is no surprise that that the word for mother in Bambara shares its meaning with the river, both vital aspects in continuing the Malian empire.

“Ba” is also used throughout the language of Bambara as an augmentative suffix derived from the word mother. Adding the suffix “ba” to a word is comparable to adding great to an English word. For example, changing “wara” to “waraba” would consequently shift the meaning from ‘lion’ to ‘great lion’. “Ba” is used frequently as an augmentative suffix, and in several instances it proceeds to alter the meaning of the word to become “essential”.²¹

Various others words which include the word “ba” and are associated with mothering are equally effective in demonstrating the great import placed on the role of mothers in the Bambara society. “Denbaya”, the Bambarankan word for family, can be broken down into

²⁰ Lamine Bagayoko, Personal Interview, 20 Nov. 2008.

²¹ Charles Bailleul, Dictionnaire Bambara-Francaise. (Editions Donniya ; Bamako, Mali) 1996.

“den” (child), “ba” (mother) and the suffix “-ya”, which when added to “ba” transforms it into motherhood. The fact that the Bambara word for family so acutely acknowledges the import of mothers is remarkable.

The word for a blessed child also gives due respect to the mother. As Adame Ba Konare asserts in the *Dictionnaire de Femmes Célèbres au Mali*, it is the mother who is said to pass down her blessings, noble qualities and mythical powers of protection.²²

“Badugaden” can be split into “ba”, “duga” and “den”, with “duga” meaning blessed.

Lastly, yet equally important, comes the Bambara word “denso”. While this word does not include the word “ba”, it awards paramount respect to the abilities of the female body. It is this word which means both uterus and home in Bamanankan. As with many cultures, the Bambara home is seen as a place of refuge and wellbeing. The language’s acknowledgement of the role which the mother plays in advancing these same sentiments both before and after birth cannot be ignored.

The scarcity of multiple uses of the Bambara word “fa”, meaning father, contrasts sharply with the plethora of words associated with mother. Unlike “ba”, “fa” is neither used as a suffix or a prefix. While the word “cE” (man) is visible as the base of “cEya”, meaning virility and bravery; one of the only other multiple meanings of “Fa” is that indicating craziness or rage.

Throughout the Bambara language, the positive emphasis placed on mothers and their agency as such cannot be ignored. Each day, as women respond to greetings referring to their capabilities and powers, the culture’s ancient respect for women is manifested in contemporary Malian society. As Joe Doe asserts in the introduction of “African Masculinities”, “Indigenous knowledge is not a closed system. While centuries of colonialism have obviously wrought great changes on values and worldviews, indigenous knowledge

²² Adama Ba Konare, 26

systems exist, and particularly amongst those who have a historical connection with the social processes and institutions that gave life to them, they remain significant.”²³ It is for this reason that one can easily see the role of women in the continuation of the Bambara language. As one Malian woman asserted in an interview discussing the struggle between French and Bambara, “If you loose your [native] language, you risk loosing your culture and thus loosing yourself”.²⁴ Although the arrival of foreign cultures have since damaged and disfigured many of the ancient traditions of Malian society, it is clear that acknowledging and reviving these traditional forms of respect for women is essential to the promotion of a feminism which is both historically and culturally grounded.

IV. The Arrival of Islam, Misinterpreted?

After examining the many ways in which ancient Malian tradition honoured and revered its women, the contemporary situation of the Malian woman stands in sharp contrast; begging an exploration of what forced such devastating changes on the country’s rich tradition. In this, the arrival of both Islam and French Colonialism are central, as they both served to disfigure the face of indigenous beliefs, practices and traditions. As Islam began to spread to North Africa in the 10th century, it became the earliest foreign imposition on Malian society. Since then, Islam has wrought great changes on the traditions of Mali and with nearly 90% of the population today practicing Islam, its impact and role in society cannot be ignored.

While the religion of Islam itself is often erroneously portrayed or misinterpreted as being inherently misogynistic and oppressive toward its women, the majority of religious scholars declare this to be false. While many Muslim women in Mali and around the world have suffered suppression in the name of their religion; this can be seen to come from a grave misinterpretation of the Koran, not the religion itself. While verses of the Koran, if taken

²³ African Masculinities, pg. 7

²⁴ Informant 5, Personal Interview, 18 Nov. 2008.

literally, could be interpreted as a declaration of the inferior status of women; this is not their purpose. Affirming the differences between men and women, verses in the Koran such as *Qur'* 92:3 – 4 and *Qur'* 4:34²⁵ are often used as justifications for the unequal and oppressive treatment of women. According to the Imam at the Islamic Cultural Center in Bamako, these verses are simply a declaration that God created men and women to be different, with unique roles, functions and qualities. Generally, Islam upholds that women are entrusted with the nurturing role, and men, with the guardian role. This role as guardian requires that men provide women with not only monetary support but also physical protection and kind and respectful treatment.²⁶

For many Muslims, the fact that Islam is used as a justification for practices such as excision and marginalization from education is a perverse and shameful abuse of a valued religion. Women's Rights activist Kadiatou Keita described this trend as "a sad disfiguration of my religion which has become a large obstacle for the feminist movement in Mali." Yet despite this continuous debate discussing the true place of the Muslim woman in society, the historic and continued oppression of women in the name of Islam is undeniable. It is for this reason that one can place Islam as one of the first foreign influences to distort the ancient respect for women found in the Malian Empire. With the arrival of the Arabic-North African trade came Islam as interpreted by the Arabic culture at that place and time. Knowing the rich history of the matriarchal tendencies of the ancient Malian culture, one can assert that the interpretation of Islam in the Arabic tradition at the time clashed greatly with the indigenous traditions already in place. While there is no reason why the religion of Islam today cannot be a part of Mali's move toward an equal and progressive society; it is clear that the arrival of the

²⁵ *"The creation of male and female; Verily, (the end ye) trying to get are diverse." (Qur' 92:3 - 4)*
"Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend of their wealth (for the support of women)." (Qur'an 4:34)

²⁶ Ibrissa Diarra: Imamm of Islamic Cultural Center, Personal Interview, 25 Nov. 2008.

religion played a large role in the damage and concealment of Mali's indigenous respect for women.

V. The Patriarchy of French Colonialism

With the arrival of French colonialism in 1880 came yet another distortion of Mali's traditional respect for women; this one based largely on the capitalistic mode of economy of the French colonialists. Despite the Malian women's rich tradition as leaders in both cultural and economic activities, the introduction of cash crops and technologies, of education and wage-employment opportunities, left Malian women marginalized. While men were drawn into the modern sectors, women's productivity was eroded, as the colonial perception of women as home-makers eclipsed women's history as active agents in both the cultural and economic sphere. This was true across Africa, as colonial perceptions of femininity clashed with those indigenous ideals already in place. "In the colonial period," Ester Boserup asserts in her essay on economic change and the role of women, "married European women, and often unmarried ones too, were denied adult status, and the official ideal of a woman was the faithful, domestic housewife and mother, devoting her work and interests exclusively to husband and children. If administrators and missionaries discovered indigenous women with more sexual and economic freedom than corresponded to this ideal, they did their best to change the customs by legislation and education"²⁷

With colonial schools created largely to continue the administration and exploitation of conquered territories, colonizers used these schools to train junior officers to perform various administrative tasks and likewise for them. Moulding the schools to cater to the needs of the Colonial governments, the education of Malian girls was neglected by the colonial administration and continued under the military administration of Mali. Colonial legislation granting male property rights only continued this marginalization, further reducing women's

²⁷ Ester Boserup, "Economic Change and the Roles of Women," Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development, ed. Irene Tinker (Oxford: New York, 1990) 23.

independence. Social, cultural and economic autonomy which had once been enjoyed by both sexes was now becoming a nearly exclusively male sphere. Despite venerable efforts by women to preserve their established autonomy during colonial times, colonialism and its market economy continued to revolutionize the family division of labour, and the family itself. Slowly, ever-more rigidly defined gender roles which mimicked a western conception of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ became assimilated into the culture. One academic described this shift as ‘colonial traumatization’, which he explained as the process through which the Malians began to forget their roots and believe the lies which they were told. “People began to believe that this is the way things have always been,” he told me. “If you do not know where you come from, you won’t know where you need to go. ... This is what has happened to our people.”²⁸

VI. Conclusion: No Need for an Imported Solution

Thus the Malian feminist movement of today is left struggling. While the legacies of foreign rule continue to suppress and restrict the role of women in Mali, few people see feminism as a desirable solution. After nearly a century of direct rule and the succeeding years of “freedom” in which the country has been incessantly plagued by neo-colonial economics, Malians are wary of abandoning their traditions. The majority of Malians interviewed, men and women alike, stressed that the feminist movement was against Malian tradition, something which they did not support. When asked to explain her aversion toward the feminist movement, one informant explained to me, “I have sacrificed enough of myself, of my heritage. When the white come here to tell us not to do something because it is not a good tradition, we are tired. ... Every day we loose more of our traditions. More and more each day.”²⁹

²⁸ Informant 4, Personal Interview, 15 Nov. 2008.

²⁹ Informant 9, Personal Interview, 26 Nov. 2008.

Statements such as these facilitate an understanding of the distaste so many Malians feel toward the feminist movement, as they are tired of sacrificing themselves for imported Western ideals. It is for this reason that the misconceptions involving Malian history and tradition are so detrimental to the Women's Rights movement. In order for the movement to make substantial progress in Mali today, the myth that '*freedom* is western and *submission and oppression* are traditional' needs to be dispelled. As the oral history, myths, ancient traditions and matriarchal based indigenous language of Bambara have shown, the true tradition of Mali is an ancient respect and reverence for women of which few others cultures can boast. Malian women can continue to be strong and active agents in their society as they have been for years without "rejecting tradition". Through a unification of the existing campaigns to fight the oppression of women *and* a conscientization of the true history of Malian culture which boasts a sincere respect and reverence for the woman; the Malian feminist movement could construct a new approach for the emancipation of women, with no need for an imported solution.

References

- Adama Ba Konare, Dictionnaire des Femmes Célèbres au Mali, (Editions JAMANA; Bamako, Mali) 99.
- Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP), 135
- Charles Bailleul, Dictionnaire Bambara-Francaise, (Editions Donniya ; Bamako, Mali) 1996.
- Décentralisation* , Gender and Development Seminar Lecture, October 2008
- Ester Boserup, “Economic Change and the Roles of Women,” Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development, ed. Irene Tinker (Oxford: New York, 1990) 23.
- Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354, tr. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929)
- Ibrissa Diarra: Imamm of Islamic Cultural Center, Personal Interview, 25 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 2, Personal Interview, 15 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 4, Personal Interview, 15 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 5, Personal Interview, 18 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 6, Personal Interview, 19 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 9, Personal Interview, 23 Nov. 2008.
- Informant 10, Personal Interview, 29 Nov. 2008.
- La FFE, Bureau Du Mali, ed. La Femme au Mali: Cadre de Vie, Promotion, Organisations, (Bamako, Mali 2000) 114.
- Lamine Bagayoko, Personal Interview, 20 Nov. 2008.
- M’Baye Kadiatou Keita: Directrice APDF, Personal Interview, 17 Nov. 2008
- Oumar Yamadou Diallo: Historian and Curator at Musee National du Mali, Personal Interview, 20 Nov. 2008.

Nkiru Nzegwu, "Recovering Igbo Tradition," Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (Oxford: New York, 1995) 446

Skard, T., Continent of mothers, continent of hope: understanding and promoting development in Africa today, (London, New York Zed Press 2003) 72.

TheWorld Factbook, CIA (2008)

United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Annual Human Development Report, 2007.

World Health Organization, Female Genital Mutilation: Factsheet N°241, (May 2008).