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When male becomes female and female becomes male in Mande1

Kassim Kone

Though patrilineality and male domination may be apparent in many Mande cultures, both males and females may assume or have imposed upon them each other's roles and functions in certain contexts. The distinction between the genders and gender-based cultural behaviors is not an absolute but a relative one. The ideologies of masculinity in the Mande are challenged both in sociocultural behaviors and in language use. For example, a man may be linguistically referred to as "wife" by his older sister's husband. Language use sometimes indicates gender distinction (e.g. gender based linguistic alternatives such as lexical choices) and gender inequalities but it may also indicate the relative nature of masculinity and femininity. For example, the root of the Bamana word for maternal uncle *bènkè* is *ba* (mother) with the suffix *kè* (male) and the maternal uncle among the Bamana is perceived in many ways as an extension of the mother

This paper will explore some forms of the ideologies of masculinity among the Bamana as well as some contextual sociocultural challenges to such ideologies in cultural and linguistic behaviors. The paper will focus mainly on examples drawn from the Bamana culture, which is my own.

Masculinity is broadly defined as *cèya*, manhood. *Cèya* is primarily physiologically based since it is determined by the presence of the male genitalia, and it is also one of the euphemistic words referring to the male genitalia. *Cèya* also refers to the requirements of specific behaviors expected of males, introduced since childhood, reinforced at circumcision and later initiation rituals. To be circumcised and initiated into male secret societies is thought of as joining the ranks of men: *ka taa cèw fè*; lit. to join the men. Joining the men culminates with wearing a particular type of clothing: *ka kulusi ta*, to take up pants, *ka fini ta*, to wear clothes. To be a man for the Bamana goes beyond the physiological requirement. When the Bamana say that "so and so is a man" (*karisa ye cè ye*), it includes qualities such as bravery, leadership and physical endurance.

Femininity may be defined in ways parallel to and complementing the male definition. *Musoya* is also physiologically based and follows the same characteristics of *cèya* though it semantically extends to include the hymen. *Ka taa musow fè*, means joining the ranks of women through excision and *ka fini ta*, to wear clothes means to become an adult. *Musoya* involves several categories of women: *muso kisè* (lit. the kernel woman) or *muso tafetigi* (lit. woman with a loin cloth) is a dynamic woman, a brave one, a hardworking one, or even a *femme fatale*; *muso kulusitigi* (woman with pants) is the quintessential manly woman with all the capacities and prerogatives of the traditional adult male: entrepreneurial, fearless, a woman who successfully operates in the spaces culture exclusively assigns to men such as heading a family, farming, and aspects of sorcery which are for men only (*domaya/somaya*). The Mande culture is explicit about women's participation in this type of sorcery as is shown by the following proverb: *Muso de be soma wolo, n'ò tè, a tè kè soma ye* : A woman may give birth to a soma, a woman does not become a soma).

The opposite to muso kulusitigi is the cè fugari (worthless, cowardly and lazy man) or in a more negative with sexual overtones the cèmusonin (little manwoman) a man whose overall behaviors resemble that of women. The category cè tafetigi (man with loincloth) does not exist as such in the Bamana language. However, one of the worst insults to the male ego occurs when a woman says to him “Exchange your pants against my loin cloth.” Such a request as an indication that the man is not worthy of the category male. A more recent category in the Bamana language muso filanan (falling tone on the last syllable; the second female) has replaced the Bamana term for homosexual male which used to be cètèmusotè (not male not female) or a more frequently used word borrowed from the Wolof, gorjigèn (male female). Cètèmusotè means both homosexual male or female and the hermaphrodite. The Bamana preference for gorjigèn, the Wolof term, may be an indication of their perception of homosexuality as a foreign lifestyle thus displacing it and attributing it to the Wolof.

Gender Ideology

The public transcript, i.e. the exhibition of relations in public², among the Bamana is that kinship through males is more important than that through females. From this ideological standpoint, the relationship between two uterine brothers or sisters is viewed as less binding than that through their father. As students of Mande, we know from the fadenya and badenya social theories that this ideology is weak. This male-dominated ideology is encapsulated in the following saying: “Kulusijala ka surun sinji ye,” lit. “the two ends of the belt get [buckle] closer than the breast milk.” In other words, there is unity, continuity, and closeness in the belt (i.e. the relationship through the penis) than in the succession on the breast milk. Taken one step further, and in analogy with the saying in English that “blood is thicker than water,” the Bamana saying means that “Sperm is thicker than breast milk.” Children born to the same father are said to be of the same essence inherited from their father. The father is from the older generation and is older than the children, but ideologically they are the same essence, despite having nursed from different mothers. This ideology further supports the notion that mothers are simply vessels for the birth of children and that with or without the same wives, the same children would be born to their father.

The public transcript is intended to reduce the fadenya ideology but in reality does not displace the importance of badenya or sinjiya (lit. breastmilkhood). Sinjiya stands here as the opposite of kulusijala. It is a relationship which involves the children who have replaced each other on the same mother’s breasts and their descendants. The tension between fadenya and badenya is very similar to that between kulusijala and sinjiya ideologies. The hidden transcript, the critique of patrilineal authority offstage, is that in private everyone thinks more highly of badenya/sinjiya than of fadenya/kulusijala ideologies. People who are descended through the same wife-and, surprisingly, those who are descended through the same male-who look alike are said to share an “afterbreast” (sinkò: lit. after-breast, i.e. the physical resemblance people may have when they have been breastfed by the same mother).

The ideology of the *kulusijala* gives the father more rights over the children than to the mother(s). The father or his family names the first two children in any sequence; every third child is given to the mother or her family to name. Thus a wife or her family will only name her third, sixth and ninth children. In theory 2/3 of the wife's children belong to the husband while 1/3 belongs to her. The power and authority of the father in practice is in full effect when he is the breadwinner of the family. As he grows old and increasingly becomes a dependent of his grown children, the power and authority of his wives begin to rise significantly.

There are many problems in the *kulusijala* ideology that the patriline cannot resolve. The strength of the ideology lies in the genetic and essential equality of all of the patrilineal descendants no matter who their mothers or what their generations are. At every generational level, and among the descendants of the same man married to more than one wife, the relationship between every child and his father is twofold. The father is both father (in this case both genitor and pater) and mother's husband. Due to this a child maintains a dual relationship with the father which is influenced by the relationship between the mother and father. In a polygynous culture the widespread unequal treatment of wives by their common husband dooms the efficacy of the *kulusijala* ideology. Another problem that the *kulusijala* ideology ignores totally is its equivalent, *kònwolo*, (lit. the stomach, the womb), i.e. the relationship through coming from the same womb. As a male can have children from several females, a female can also have children from several males. Due to weight of the Bamana patrilineal ideology, the *kònwolo* ideological alternative is an underused category. *Badenya* (motherchildness) and *sinjiya* (breastmilkhood) are preferred categories instead.

The *kulusijala* ideology downplays the genetic contribution of mothers. I have heard on a few occasions men saying that with or without given wife they would have begotten the same children with another wife. Such a belief denies the exclusive genetic input of the women. This cannot be explained by Bamana ignorance of the female genetic contribution in procreation. Men recognize that it is their "liquid" (*ji*) or "back liquid" (*kòji*) that mixes with the blood of the women to make children. Men's emphasis on the *kulusijala* and the breastmilk contribute to making the former the dominant ideology, at least publicly, at the expense of the *kònwolo* (the womb). When a father curses his child he may do it through his own genes or through his contribution to the milk the mother fed the child with. When a mother curses, she may do it through her womb and/or through her breastmilk.³ While the father and his family use the *kulusijala* to appeal children emotionally, the mother and her family use the womb and the breastmilk to do the same.

Paralinguistic behavior is one area where there are distinctions between the masculine and feminine behaviors. For example, traditional Bamana culture prescribes patterns of crying which are specific to males and females. The Bamana refer to certain patterns of crying as *cènkule* (lit. little man's crying), the sounds of sufferings men utter when in extreme pain or playfully during *Kòmò* celebrations. Similarly, there is a particularly way of crying called

musoninkule (lit. little woman's crying) usually understood as wailings and cries of distress women utter at events such as funerals. Cèninkule is always associated with men but never with women, while musoninkule is associated with both women and men who are considered weak and cowardly.

Many areas in the language give supremacy to the male gender in Bamana. One of these is the verb 'to marry,' *ka furu* (though there is the possibility of *ka furu nyògòn ma*, lit. to marry each other). In Bamana, only a man marries a woman and a woman gets married to the man, putting the woman in the patient and subordinate position. When in anger a man says to his wife "Did you marry me?" (*E ye ne furu wa?*), he wants to remind her of her subordinate position in the family structure. Others may ask the same question to a woman to remind her that she has overstepped her bounds. The verb *furu* also has another possible semantic extension similar in meaning to the Bamana expression *ka X musoya ta* (lit. to take X's womanhood, i.e. to deflower X). Physiologically, since males do not have a hymen, the act of deflowering gives them an ideological edge of supremacy over women through the medium of language.

When Does a Man Become a Woman?

Many previous studies of African societies have remarked that the relationship between the uterine nephew and uncle in patrilineal or patriarchal institutions mimics the child's relationship with his/her mother (Radcliffe-Brown 1924, Hoernle 1925). The same is true of the Bamana where the sister's child, and more importantly her son, takes more liberties with his mother's brother than with any adult male of his parents' generation. The same cultural behavior is found among the Bamana where the *bènkè*,⁴ the male mother/maternal male, is seen as an extension of the mother and is not seen as authoritative a figure as any adults on the father's side of the family regardless of their gender. For many, mother's family of orientation is perceived as having been conquered by the father's side.

The nephew expects his uncle to give him anything he asks for, including the uncle's daughter, while he does not have such expectations from his father's brother. The expectation of generosity from the maternal uncle parallels the expectation of generosity from the mother. The neck of every animal the uncle slaughters goes to his nephews and nieces. The Bamana have a saying that "when your uncle refuses to give you his daughter, he is no longer your uncle but your mother's brother (*n'i bènkè y'i ban k'a denmuso d'i ma, i bènkè tè tuguni, i ba balimakè de don*). Here, the relationship is perceived again as a dual one: on the one hand, the uncle who agrees with the cultural rule is assimilated with the mother who cannot refuse her son anything; on the other, the uncle violating the rule is reduced to the male sibling of one's mother.

Another area where male and female suspend their assigned gender role and contextually assume that of the opposite gender occurs in the performance of affinal kinship roles. There are two categories of in-laws among the Bamana: the category of in-laws older than one's spouse that one must respect (*buranw*) and the category younger than one's spouse that one takes broad

liberties with (nimògòw). When a man meets his older sister's husband, he may entertain the brother-in-law using a wife's jokes toward her husband. If the brother-in-law (married to his older sister) is talking to a young woman he does not know, for example, he may play a jealous wife and say "he is not available, he's my husband." The brother-in-law may introduce his wife's younger brother as his wife and entertain the latter with the same cross-gender jokes husbands make towards their wives.

Certain acts are expected of one gender and frowned upon when committed by the other gender. Violence, especially physical violence, or any deliberate action that is likely to lead to bloodletting is one such act expected more of males than of females. Females are taught since early age that they are lifegivers, not lifetakers. Little girls are constantly reminded that they should not kill even small insects because they are mothers to be. Boys on the other hand are scolded for the killing of other creatures when they do this frequently unless the killing occurs during the hunting of lizards, birds or the other small animals boys kill for snacks. Bamana adult females never kill the chicken and guinea fowls destined for meals. Rather, once they secure these birds and no adult male is around for the killing, they will go from house to house if necessary to find an adult male to slaughter the bird. However, the husband of a pregnant woman, in many Bamana communities, must refrain from killing. Should he decide to kill, the culture still discourages from killing certain animals including snakes. In this cultural belief, the husband of a pregnant wife is by extension pregnant himself.

As explained above, some of the definitions of masculinity are physiologically based. In this respect manhood (cèya) is also defined as virility for a man who becomes impotent is said to have left manhood, ka bò cèya la (lit. to leave manhood). This definition does not mean that a man who becomes impotent becomes a woman. He is an incomplete man, closer to women by the fact that he cannot perform sexually anymore like a healthy man. The Bamana also say the back of such a man is dead (a kò salen: his back is dead), the back being considered one of the seats of manhood.

Men who are very fat are likened to women due to their difficulties in performing certain physical tasks categorized as male (farming, hunting, and war). Many Bamana men believe that men who grow fat are effeminate and idle thinkers "like women." In this regard, there is an anecdote according to which the Moro Naba of the Mossi once made fun of Babènba, the king of Kenedugu, for the latter being too skinny for a king. In return, Babènba, replied that real men with real responsibilities, including the leadership of other real men cannot put on weight.

It is only men who engage in the violent act of war, kèlè. For the Bamana, traditionally war is a male act that is admired for its capacities to protect or improve life; by extension, activities such as in hunting are also prestigious. The procreating power of the female has the same quality for the Bamana. The act of giving birth is euphemistically called women's war (muso kèlè), especially when it results in the death of the woman giving birth. Traditionally, men who die at war and women who die during childbirth are buried the same way, that is above the earth

beneath a pile of leaves covered with stones.

When does a Woman Become a Man?

Though it appears that masculinity is a dominant theme in Bamana language and culture the Bamana acknowledge the essential power of women. As a Bamana proverb says “It is the worthless woman that makes womanhood something to regret. It is the woman that gives birth to the powerful and the wealthy [men]” (in Bamana: “Muso kolon de bè musoya kè mònè ye. N’o tè, muso de bè faama wolo, muso de bè baana wolo.”). Culture and context, especially ritual context, make conceptual males out of females by assigning males roles, functions and prerogatives to females. The Bamana, even when making these assignments jokingly mostly take them seriously.

Bamana culture sometimes assigns females the role and functions of men. A paternal aunt, *tènèmuso*, the sacred or taboo female, falls into the category of father (*fa*), for her brothers’ children who fear and respect her⁵. The husband’s younger sister falls into the category of husband, *cè*, for her brothers’ wives and addresses male jokes to them. The female father/paternal female enjoys much power and authority in her family of orientation, a fact which does not appear prominently in gender studies since many such studies are based on women in their families of procreation. Cultural practices and family events tend to reinforce the high position of the sister. Among some Mande, the *Maninka*, for example, the paternal aunt always receives the lower back of slaughtered animals. She is perceived as the backbone of the family.⁶ For the Bamana, the most feared curses are those of the aunt and of the sister since these are believed to continue to have effect for several generations⁷. Because of this the sisters play a very robust role in the internal politics of their families of orientation.

Women enjoy male ritual prerogatives by accident when the timing of their birth coincides with a male ritual activity, e.g. the celebration of the *Kòmò* or of the *Do* secret societies. When a girl is born during such a celebration, a male initiate brings her to the celebration area, a male space. Her initiation hen is slaughtered and she immediately becomes not an honorary but a full-fledged member of the society with equal prerogatives and protection. Among the Bamana, most females named *Kòmòtènè* (lit. the *Kòmò*’s totem, i.e. protected by the *Kòmò*), *Kònse* (lit. the time of *Kòmò* celebration has arrived) and *Gwanse* (the time of the celebration of *Gwan*, a *Do* ritual object, has arrived), *Gwankura* (the new *Gwan*) are respectively some of the names of females born during the *Kòmò* and *Do* celebrations.⁸ Though the Bamana discourage such females from actively participating in the celebrations of these secret societies, especially in their child bearing years, they enjoy the same rights as the men. These females do not have to change their travel plans due to the celebration of the secret society during which they were born. When needed, the society may give them assignments such as running errands between the village and the performance arena which will put them in contact with initiated men only while the non-initiated males and the women are secluded behind closed doors.

The fact that this male gendered space of the Kòmò is not off-limit to females born during ritual celebration brings into question the explanation of gender through physiology alone. For the Bamana both boys and girls are androgynous throughout bilakoroya (state of being uncircumcised). It is only when they are circumcised/excised and initiated that they are fully genderized into male and female.

One area in which female and male tend not to think about their genders is when they happen to share the same name. Among the Bamana some names are not gendered because such names are given to females and males equally. Many of these names are ritual names. For example, the name Bugu (lit. Hut) is given to both females and males born during ritual celebration of the Do; Filifèn (Thing to throw away) is given similarly to children of both gender when the mother experiences many stillbirths or her previous children died young; and finally children born after twins irregardless of their gender can be named Sajo or Koninba. When female and male are named the same ritually or otherwise they call each other n'tògòma (lit. the one with my name, i.e. my namesake). This relationship may extend to their descendants. A child whose mother's name is Bugu, for example can call a man by the same name n'ba tògòma (lit. the one with my mother's name, i.e. my mother's namesake), and vice versa.

Though shared names are an equalizer, there are some inequalities between female and male. A woman who marries among the Bamana keeps her family identity but at the same time adopts that of her family of procreation. A married woman is discouraged from calling her husband by his name. Some women avoid calling their husband altogether until their first child is born and she begins to call the husband as X's Father (X being the name of the child). Husbands sometimes reciprocate this but are not obliged to do so. A married woman is also encouraged to call her husband's namesake by n'tògòma (my namesake) while a husband will only jokingly call his wife's namesake this way. When a woman's husband's namesake is a woman such as in the ritual names discussed above, she can still call her namesake or address her as her husband.

Age and physiological changes in the body bring about changes in cultural behavior acquired during the genderization process. When women reach menopause, they are involved in many family and village affairs that men traditionally take care of exclusively while the women are in their child-bearing years. A post-menopausal woman ceases to be perceived as a major threat also for many ritual organizations.⁹ She can prepare foods and medicines and she can go to places that once had been off-limits to her. Females born during male ritual celebration can, if they wish, actively participate in the male activities. After menopause female gender behavior grows closer and closer to that of males, while male behavior, without growing so much closer to that of the females, weakens. One area where such behavior becomes noticeable is that of language.

Changes in the linguistic performance take place after females reach menopause with regards to both topics to be introduced, discussed and gendered lexical choices. For example, in Bamana some insults are non-gendered while others are either male or female. Male insults directly refer to areas of the male genitalia and the same is true for female insults. At menopause many male

insults creep into the language of women. They may use such insults towards their male grandchildren or simply as curses when there are no elderly males or adult sons around. Sometimes male grandchildren may provoke their grandmothers into saying such insults which the grandchildren find funny. At other times, grandchildren will make their grandmothers say them to embarrass the latter who may not know that an adult male she respects is an earshot from her. The opposite behavior will never take place in the language of the elderly male. Only an old man out of his mind or under the influence of alcohol may use female insults¹⁰.

With old age and adult children most females are not perceived as females anymore but just as mothers and grandmothers. They advise their sons and daughters on the most important issues of their families even when their husbands are still alive. In many cases, in their old age, roles tend to be reversed since the wives become the caretakers of their husbands. The older a couple grows together, the greater the chances that the wife will have more power and authority than the husband; these will, be exercised in the background.

The Relativity of Gender

An ideology of masculinity among the Bamana is based on the belief of supremacy of the male biological heritage over the female heritage in procreation. The male's position is perceived as more important than that of the female. This is reflected in the typical distribution of sex and gender roles. The statuses and roles of Bamana men and women remain culturally and contextually fluid however. There are many instances when males play culturally female roles and vice versa. While there seems to be some degree of subordination of women a clear picture of the gender relations requires an understanding of their roles and their power and authority in their families of orientation. Similarly, an understanding of Bamana male domination must take into account the complexities of men's relationship with their sisters and their sisters' children as well as the increasing authority of mothers and wives as they grow older.

The patrilineal ideology and its power over the Bamana society must also be seen in the light of both the public and private aspects of such an ideology. The public performance of the patriarchal ideology is challenged by the private matrifocal behavior. The matrilineal challenge is mute but obvious and can be found in aspects of language when it subverts the dominant patrilineal ideology. Bamana culture allows the conceptual suspension of one gender and the adoption of another in certain circumstances and the contexts. The distinction between the genders among the Bamana, I therefore conclude, is not an absolute but a relative one.

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Scott, James C. (1990). "Domination and the Arts of Resistance." Cited in Conrad Philip Kottak. 1994. Cultural Anthropology. Sixth Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. p. 367.

[1] An earlier version of this paper appeared in Mande Studies (4) 2002: 21-29.

[2] Scott (1990) developed the concept of public and hidden transcripts. The public transcript is the exhibition of relations in public between dominators and oppressed in which any expression of resistance is muted. The hidden transcript is the critique of such authority offstage. Thus, behavior in the patriarchal Bamana ideology must be understood as having public and private dimensions.

[3] When a father curses his child he believes that if he uses his genes in the cursing words the child is going to receive the curse provided that the child is really his. The use of his contribution to the mother's breast milk is a last resort in the case the particular child is not his own. Such a curse goes like this: "If X is my child then [curse]...If X is not my child but I have provided food to X's mother and that food helped produce milk that fed X as a baby then [curse]. Women, having no doubts on whether or not their children are theirs, can curse them anyway they like but usually use the womb and milk in their curses. A mother's curse may be formulated like the following: "If I have borne you in my womb for nine months...If I have fed you with my breast milk...etc...then [curse]"

[4] In present-day language use father's brother is wrongly called *bènkè* especially in French educated circles, a possible borrowed kinship concept. *Bènògòkè* is a term used to refer to father's brother in Maninka and Jula and is from the root *ba*: daddy, and the suffix *dògòkè*: younger brother.

[5] Previous research efforts in African kinship in patrilineal societies have found similar cultural behavior (Junod 1913, Radcliffe-Brown 1924).

[6] When there is not any direct aunt to receive the lower back part of the animal, a distant aunt may be chosen as a surrogate to receive this gift. Fodeba Diaby, personal communication, New York, June 7, 2002.

[7] One of the reasons for this is that part of the sister's bridewealth was used to marry new wives for her brothers. Thus the sister was essential for the continuity of the patrilineal bloodline.

[8] Boys born during such celebrations may take *Kòmò* and *Do* related names and are also initiated on their birthday.

[9] Menstruation and the capacity to menstruate constitute one of the reasons why women are excluded from many African male related societies. The Bamana share similar beliefs.

[10] This is not true of certain castes. In the Woloso caste (descendants of former slaves) males and females will make cross gender insults to embarrass a noble or other artisan castes.