

### 3 *Becoming Human in Dogon, Mali*

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#### *Introduction*

As in many parts of Africa, a Dogon only gradually becomes a full-blown person in the course of her or his life. It is not birth itself that constitutes the primary ritual focus in this process, since the subsequent phases of the development of the person are subject to more elaboration. So being born is, culturally speaking, not nearly as important as - say - death, with its concomitant rituals of burial and masks. But, though the grand spectacles of Dogon culture, the famed *dama* masquerades and the captivating *nyu yana* burials, all address death, birth is tied in with these major ritual cycles in a complex way. First, the fundamental notions of the human psychical make-up are part and parcel of the Dogon ideas about conception and birth. Then, viewing the grand rituals of the mask complex from the vantage point of fertility, both the *dama* and the *sigui* - to be discussed later - appear to have a strong connection with agricultural and human procreation. That they deny the autonomous power of the female role in fertility highlights the importance of fertility of birth and the continuation of life and, in an oblique way, of women. Besides, such a disregard for the 'facts of life' calls into question some fundamental themes in the interpretation of ritual generally and, especially, that of the rationality of beliefs.

#### *Menstruation, the Male Scare*

When a menstruating woman loses blood for more than five days, she should be treated. One way to stop the blood is to grind the dried liver of a *duwo* (a bird), mix it in water with the bark of a tree that walks at night, preferably a tamarind,

and have the woman drink it and wash herself with it. Then the flowing will stop. Few health problems occupy the thoughts of the Dogon of Mali as much as the prolongation of menses. A large range of medicines is aimed at restoring the normal order, that is a monthly period each 27 or 28 days, and one five-day week of seclusion in the menstrual hut of the village ward. It is strongly prohibited for Dogon men to see, touch or smell anything relating to menstrual flow, and many even refrain from talking with the *yapunu*, women in their period. Cooking for others is out of the question for the women, and washing has to be done separately as well, reason enough to remain in the menstrual hut or, among Christians and Muslims nowadays, to keep to their own personal hut, hidden from the rest of the family. Men risk losing their virility through contact with menses, and would have to undergo elaborate purification rituals. Also, their status as officiators in sacrifice would be in jeopardy. So when the *yapunu ginu*, menstrual hut, has to be replastered, the old men of the ward set about performing this delicate task. Their sexuality is deemed less essential than that of the younger men; in fact, with sons that are sexually active, their own sexual activities are about to cease anyway.

Menstruation is emblematic of womanhood in Dogon, and of fertility. Female procreation is of utmost importance for both genders, but considered to be a female domain. The full gamut of female reproductive functions is taboo for men: menstruation, parturition and the care of the very young child. These male taboos are balanced by a similar taboo of women against *emna*, masks, the emblem of mature masculinity (van Beek 1991b: 65). Whereas the masks represent the male power of procreation - indeed the male self-sufficiency in procreation - the menses are a constant reminder of the reality of the female fertile powers; the negation of these by the mask ritual is constantly thwarted by biology. Of course, menstruation is the cessation of actual fertility, and the Dogon are perfectly aware of that, but a menstruating woman is primarily a fertile one, who can (and should) become pregnant. Prolonged menses thus presents a double problem, a negation of both male and female fertile powers. It is

therefore considered an extremely urgent matter to restore normal sequence.

In an indirect way, female clothing underscores this focus a woman's openness to fertility. Under their loin-cloth Dogon women are not allowed to wear anything resembling a skirt. Male reaction - according to men - would be a severe beating, astonishing in itself as this kind of physical violence is extremely rare in Dogon society. The female genitalia should be out of sight, of course, but not shut off from the outer world. The contrast with the traditional male attire is striking: Dogon male trousers vary in length but all are very broad (ten yards) and as closed as possible: just two holes at the ends for the legs in what would otherwise be a large sack. Characteristically, the central symbol for maleness, a cord, in fatherhood is the *ponu sung*, the cord tying the extremities of wide trousers safely around the loins. The length of the *ponu* is an indication of status, the old men wearing the indigo *ponu laga*, down to the ankles, those that are less so the *ponu tubalugu*, just under the knee. The young men have to walk in the knee-long *ponu tubo*, while the youngsters cavort in their white shorts, *ponu petogo*, which are just as wide as any of the larger ones. Anyone who appears at the market in new *ponu* is greeted good-humouredly: 'Greetings, congratulations. May you wear it to shreds'; indeed, like the female loin-cloth the trousers are worn to shreds, and never discarded. Both types of clothing may end up in the bundle of rags used in the carrying cushions for women's heads. On the death of the owner, the clothes are specifically inherited and have to be worn by the inheritor as next of kin, however ragged and ragged the trousers or loin-cloths may be. To refuse to wear these clothes would imply a denial of kinship.

There is one other, direct, way in which menstruation is tied in with fertility. According to Dogon men, the women must have a fertile one *dyugo* (five day week) after the menstruation - at least with a normal period - just after the end of their seclusion; so the women are expected to come straight home to their husband. If a pregnancy follows, the child is considered to be fathered by the first man with whom she had sexual relations after the menses. Women who have moved in with their husband are very careful about their contacts right after men-

struation; if she has slept with a lover first, then he might claim the child after four or five years. The woman's husband in such a case has no claim on the child and cannot dispute his rival. On the other hand, if an in-dwelling wife has intercourse with a lover at a later point in the month, few problems arise; at least no claim on any child can be lodged. Women who have not yet moved in with their husband - Dogon marriage goes through a long transitory period in which the young wife still resides with her parents or a kinswoman - are much freer as the option of marrying their lover is still open. On the whole, problems over claims on children are rare in Dogon society. Of course, the relation between the two rivals will be one of enmity, and will never meet the standards of harmony so important in Dogon social life. But these tensions are rarely permitted to surface; those men will, should, and try to avoid each other. If claims do have to be settled, a massive intervention by the elders of lineages and wards is called for. In one recent case in a village neighbouring the one in which I did fieldwork, the settlement of this kind of dispute has cost a lot of money, much stress and a huge amount of heated debate.

In all this, it is important to note, no brideprice or bridewealth is given. No major financial transactions, of any kind, play any part in the Dogon marriage. Yet, when the woman finally leaves her parents to live with her husband, she usually leaves a weaned child at her parents', as recompense for the loss of her company and to help the older people with all kinds of odd jobs and errands.

### *Pregnancy and Birth*

Conception for the Dogon implies that the man supplies the life to the woman, and she in turn nourishes and shelters it. The infant's body (*goju*) is considered to originate with the progenitor, and the child is thus a member of the patrilineage (*gina*) from very conception. If the mother eventually leaves her husband, the child has to remain at its father's place. From the first visible signs of pregnancy, usually six weeks after the last menses, the foetus is considered a real 'person', *inè*. Evisaged as a small 'homunculus', it is attributed with all essential human characteristics: it has a body, a *hakilè*

('intelligence') and a *kikinè* ('spirit', 'soul'). As a consequence the baby at birth is credited with the age of eight months. Any normal pregnancy is considered to last nine moons, but tales of prolongation of pregnancy hover around the village. One child reportedly stayed for two years in its mother's belly, and was born with its teeth in place, all thirty of them. Anyway, this kind of birth is not considered a problem, just a nuisance.

Pregnancy entails a fair number of proscriptions, and few prescriptions. The Dogon are aware of changed food preferences by pregnant women; she should feed herself well, but will prefer bitter foodstuff occasionally, like wolfing a lot of cola nuts. However, coffee, especially Néscafé, is deemed bad for her. The husband should not marry another wife during these months, since that might derange the pregnant wife, who needs as much attention - including the sexual kind - as she can get. From her side, the pregnant woman has to be careful with her *inè*-to-be-born. Her main worry is that the baby should be 'stolen' or 'exchanged' by one of the many kinds of spirit that inhabit the bush, which as a result is for her even more dangerous than for other people. The four types of bush spirit the Dogon distinguish all imply a specific risk to the pregnancy. It is thought that these spirits are jealous of men and will change the human baby into one of their own, resulting in a baby which is still human but in some distinct and often fatal ways looks like the spirits.

The most active of these spirits, the *atûwunu*, live on the scree slopes, just outside the village proper. They are the most dangerous, as they attack whenever they can, beating people with their sticks. Considered as short, stocky black people, they do steal babies or exchange foetuses. One woman, who had been careless, according to other women, thus gave birth to a very short, blind, hydrocephalic baby; it died within two days.

The spirits from the 'deep bush', *jinu*, are the next most dangerous. Seen as huge spirits, roaming the plains and closely associated with trees, their influence on children is less obvious but just as abominable. A child exchanged by a *jinu* does not sleep at night, always cries and trembles over its whole body. The two other types of spirits are considered

more closely related to the Dogon, and may in fact be regarded as the oldest inhabitants of the escarpment; they share a common ancestry with the 'real people'. Of these the *yebâ* live just outside the village, while the *yènèû* often come inside the village, and may even live under granaries. The first type is responsible for children that are 'mad', while exchange by the second type results in children with wounds all over their bodies. Most of these afflicted children will die, either by reason of their ailments or through parental neglect.

Against this risk a woman has to protect herself by careful conduct. For one thing, she may never sleep outside the village; even when working in the fields, she is not allowed to doze off while resting in the shade. Men may take a nap, but a pregnant woman invites disaster by doing so. Shadows are dangerous anyway, especially dark, cool shadows, which are deemed the spirits' favorite resting-place. Tamarind trees, for instance, are quite risky. The Dogon recognize a special kind of tree, *tiû yèm*, 'initiated trees', which are dangerous for anyone, let alone pregnant women, to sleep under. These trees have a special relationship with spirits, and at night they can move around: they roam the plains and dunes of the bush, to return at dawn to their original places. Scaring for anyone, but doubly so for pregnant women.

This general threat, with its specific application to unborn foetuses, shows itself in other taboos as well. A pregnant woman avoids any kind of deep shade, shunning also caverns, and is careful where she urinates or defecates: inside or just outside the house and covering over her excreta with earth, whereas other people go out far into the fields. When out working in the fields, she sees to it that she is never alone, but always surrounded by kinspeople. Water may be fetched from the wells dug in the vicinity of the village, but she may not go to the distant special water places that are associated with *Nomo*, the water god. No eating taboos apply, save for economizing on salt (a scarce commodity anyway); too much of it would render the child hairless. Beyond that, she has to stick carefully to the totemic food-taboos, both of her own lineage and especially of that of her husband; but neither of these will usually imply any major restriction to her diet.

Thus she may not be allowed to eat, for instance, donkey meat, turtle or chameleon.

On the whole few restrictions are placed on her mobility; she may pass alongside the major sacred places of the village, even using paths forbidden to the recently widowed and to menstruating women; however, for thirty-five days (seven Dogon weeks) after the delivery, she will be regarded as equivalent to those, which concern the approach to altars and other sacred places. In Tireli, for some unclear and unspecified reason, pregnant women are not allowed to cross the valley of Yaye, the second village towards the North-East. But in any case the men do not like their pregnant wives to stray too far from the village.

Birth does not bring about too many rules and regulations, but the few that apply are absolute. First of all, birth is women's business. The husband - or any man - should not be present, not in the woman's hut, nor even in the compound. So, when labour starts, the husband leaves for a friend's house, to wait and listen. Some older women help the mother-to-be, who sits in her hut on a low stool. Co-wives also help, and often her own kinswomen come along, especially her mother. Sisters do not assist in delivery, and brothers are even more taboo than husbands. In-laws, including the women, would invoke the same amount of *dogo*, shame, as men. The presence of any man would cause *dogo*, thus hindering the delivery. After birth, and before doing anything with the baby, the women wait for the placenta; after the thirty-five day period this is buried inside the hut, in a small, well-sealed vessel; the actual place is kept hidden from all men.<sup>1</sup> The same holds, in a minor fashion, for the umbilical cord. Immediately after the baby is washed, the father comes in and, with him, all neighbours and relatives to pay their respects, often bringing some food for the mother, preferably meat.

The first month the mother is expected to spend almost all her time with the baby. Sexual relations are frowned upon during these seven 'weeks', but nowadays men do not adhere to

<sup>1</sup> If she chooses not to bury the placenta, but to keep it above the ground in a sealed pot, she may eat with other people; if not this is taboo.

this taboo. In this period the mother should eat and drink alone, out of sight from anyone else. After the thirty-five days are over, however, the wife is considered to be in the same situation as just after finishing her monthly seclusion, and should have intercourse with her husband.

### *Becoming a Character*

The most important ritual event is the naming. Dogon have many names, and one of those is given at the end of the period immediately following birth. After thirty-five days the mother may leave the compound and eat and drink together with other people; on the fortieth day she takes the baby to the lineage elder. Presenting the baby to the oldest man of the lineage, the one who inhabits the *gina* (which signifies both lineage and lineage-house), she gives the old man a small gift and presents him with the child. Seated next to the altar of the lineage, the old man gives the child its *gina* name and performs one of the many blessings, *Ama duwo*, with which Dogon social life is so full. Invoking the name of Ama, the high god, he calls down on the child and its family peace, another day of life, and obedience to the elders. It is up to him what name he gives, and it often implies some criticism of his younger kinsmen: such names as 'The wealth has not found me', 'Respect is no longer' or 'Forgotten', say nothing about the child, but bring home to the child's parents an indication of the old man's feelings. He then presents the baby with a few coins. If the mother has some meat, she will give it to the elder. Five days later the baby is presented to the father's parents, and receives their name.

This is in fact only one of the many names that the child receives: any close relative will give a name of his or her own choice to the new arrival. The father gives a name, the mother another, as do the grandparents. Besides these, babies do have a generic name, based on order of birth or special circumstances at birth. Order of birth constitutes a clear-cut system of naming (Bouju 1984: 64), where sex and position in the sequence of the parents' children are the main criteria. However, specific family circumstances suggest a special name: for instance twins have their own names, as have

children conceived without menses between them and the preceding sibling (*Yakunyu/Akunyu*), or - more rare still - girls born or conceived during the *sigui* festival (*Yasigui*). The same holds for twins, whose birth and emergence from the house call for specific rituals. Though many are indeed addressed by these 'structural names', many others are not. When older, the person in question can choose a name, which may stick. In the end when the child grows up some consensus may prevail about what their name is, though in many instances people continue to be called different names by different persons. Finally, when reaching the age of marriage, most youngsters choose a *tige*, motto, as an accompaniment to their name, in which they propound their own view of themselves (de Ganay 1941).

Once born and named, the baby is recognized as *inè*, a person, consisting of a body (*goju*), *hakilè* and *kikinè*. The body comes from the father, both other elements of the person coming from *Ama* (God) and the parents. The *hakilè* is the most complex concept. Located in the *kinè*, liver or heart, it may be translated as intelligence, imagination and character. It is the essence of the personality through which one distinguishes oneself from others. All living beings have *hakilè*, though in widely divergent ways. Whereas the body is for work, for performing physical labour, the *hakilè* is for staying alive, keeping people together, and remaining part of a social group. Animals have it, the 'cunning' ones more than the 'stupid': the fox, the black ant (*key*), the rabbit, the pigeon (all animals associated with divination) have plenty, sheep only a little. But anyone who can find his way home has *hakilè*. During pregnancy the child in the womb has the *hakilè* of both parents, and, as any real *inè*, may speak with God. At birth, one of the two *hakilè* is erased and the child takes on the 'character' of one of its parents. Though usually boys have the *hakilè* of their father, and girls the one of their mother, it may cross sexes; *Ama* decides which one it is to be. As the child in the womb may be a boy, any pregnant woman has to pour some water on her belly before drinking from a well outside the village: as men are stronger than women, the *hakilè* of the boy may overrule the mother's; if he is

not respected as a man, drinking first, he may have himself exchanged for a spirit child.

Not only can one *hakilè* be stronger than another, but one person may have more of it than someone else. Whoever has a lot of *hakilè* learns quickly, has a good memory, is able to follow several conversations at the same time, and has a strong sense of fantasy. As social categories, smiths and leatherworkers should be endowed with much *hakilè* but, according to the Dogon, the bards (*goû*) use theirs mainly to trick people; bard status is much lower in Dogon than among the Bambara, Malinke and Soninke. Someone less well endowed has difficulty in remembering and is less coherent in speech. However, ability in speech is not decisive: one deaf-mute in Tireli is generally considered to have plenty of *hakilè*. People may have a considerable amount of it and still have difficulty in speech: their *hakilè* is considered 'short' (*gele*), while someone whose abilities lie mainly in speech has a 'long' (*para*) one.

Other character traits depend on the *hakilè* as well: being gentle, quick to react, patient or jealous; a 'bad' *hakilè* leads to jealousy, a good one to equanimity. A witch's *hakilè* induces them to poison people.

Witches are ascribed another, quite bewildering, trait. Besides administering poison, they roam at night in the bush and leap out on people who inadvertently come their way; most of their victims are thought to be male. Flying through the air with burning sticks in their hands, they land on the victims' heads, sometimes urinating on them, and paralyse them for some hours; but in any event their victims are rendered incapable of speech. After consulting the shamanic priest, a ritual is performed as a remedy, the central part of which is an emetic. The patient is expected to vomit up a hairy worm, after which his tongue will loosen up immediately. Some people are reputed to be stronger than these flying witches and stay on top of them for the whole night. Such a 'strong man' will remain a close friend of that particular woman-witch, though she may pass on his name to her fellow-witches, to 'try him out'.

Male sorcerers, who direct their attentions mostly towards enemies, teach their craft to their sons when very old,

selecting the one who 'knows his words'. Female witchcraft is passed matrilineally, from one *yadugonu* (witch) to her daughter or younger sister. However, this full inheritance of the *hakilè* is believed to happen not at birth, but on the death of the old witch, and may result in an unbroken chain of ten generations of witches. Should a mother wish to abandon witchcraft, her daughters would become infertile. However, even with the *hakilè* of a witch, the assumption of witchcraft is not deemed to be wholly involuntary; witches have to wish to become one. Once they have chosen the 'path of poison' (*dugo* means poison), and once it resides in their granaries, there is no easy way back.

On the positive side and regarding ordinary people, their *hakilè* makes some of them *inè piru* (literary a 'white person'): open, friendly, hospitable, well at ease with everyone - which, according to most of my informants, is an epithet few deserve. Their opposites, *inè ma* ('dry person') are difficult to deal with, individualists who dislike company. Others have a 'white liver' (*kinè piru*) and are generous with goods: they make gifts of food to anyone in need. The essence of *hakilè*, after all is 'keeping people together'.

The notion of *kinè*, meaning 'liver' but often also used for 'heart', is important here. Its general implication is 'inner person' and all qualities are thought to reside in it, emotions and thoughts included. In fact, it is also the locus of the *hakilè* - its point of reference within the body - and often both terms are used interchangeably.

The last part of the *inè* is the *kikinè*, 'spirit'. The term is closely related to *kikinu*, shadow, but their meanings have now become identical. The *kikinè* is added at birth, and the person then becomes complete. The *kikinè* comes from *Ama*, God, who, according to some informants, must have known it in the way that we know a person. It enters the body, takes on the qualities endowed through the *hakilè*, and will leave again at death. Meanwhile, the *kikinè* travels at night, gathering information through dreams (for everybody) or clairvoyancy (in some cases). Though the *kikinè* is normally invisible, some people have the capability of seeing them (*kikinèyèn*).

After death, the *kikinè* can, and will, return for many years, at least till the next mask ritual, settling down finally somewhere near the village. Indeed, the aim of the mask festival is to send the spirits of the dead on their way to the ancestors, to live with the old ones and, eventually, become one of them.

Once established as a person, the *naniyè* of the new baby has to be established, the one whose name is reborn. The newly born baby is considered to be the 'respondent', the representative, of a recently deceased kinsman or kinswoman, usually a grandfather or grandmother. It is the father's sister (*ninu*) who performs divination, asking the cowry shells about the identity of the *naniyè*. Usually, when five or six years old, the child will be given the *duge*, ritual beads of its *naniyè*, to keep, wear at special functions, and use in sacrifice. At least once a year, during the annual sacrificial festival of the *buro*, everyone will perform sacrifices for the *naniyè*, lest his or her name be forgotten. Nevertheless, the dead person is not considered to be actually reborn in the young child, neither is the child usually called after its *naniyè*, though sometimes people may use the kinship term for the older *naniyè* in addressing the younger one. In order to become a fully-fledged person a *naniyè* is essential; but in any case, everybody always does have his or her *naniyè*.

### *Becoming Fully Born: the Sigui*

Once every sixty years, the villages in the central part of the Dogon area celebrate the coming of the *sigui*, an ambulant ritual lasting over five years, in which the lives of the villages are renewed. Each Dogon should at least once in his life have danced or, as they call it, 'seen', the *sigui*. The founding myth starts the story in the village of Yougo, a sacred spot ever since for the Dogon:

Sen Senu, when herding the cattle of his father Sanga Yèngulu and his mother Na Yèngulu, grew tired and thirsty, and climbed a tamarind tree to suck its fruits. The owner came along: 'What are you doing in my tree? Shall I throw my stick at you?' Sen Senu, showing no respect, answered: 'I want to suck them with my mouth, not my anus'. Of course the

owner grew mad and hit him. Limping home, Sen Senu's parents asked why he had been beaten and how he had lost the herd. 'I have been hit by the owner of the tamarind tree!' His father promised to come with Sen Senu next day and kill the owner. In the early morning, the birds awakened Sen Senu and his father, and they walked to the tree. The owner met them. 'Why have you beaten my son?' The owner answered: 'Because he has insulted me' and told how Sen Senu in answer to the question what he was doing in the tree, said that he sucked with his mouth, not his anus. The father asked Sen Senu if the story was true, and his son agreed. 'Please accept my apologies for my son', the father said. The owner, accepting the apologies, told the father: 'Climb the tamarind and take whatever fruits you like, or suck as many as you like now.' The father, with his gun at the foot of the tree, climbed and plucked a number of fruits. From beneath Sen Senu called him: 'Why do you climb the tree, father?' 'The owner has given me fruits for the porridge'. Sen Senu retorted: 'That is not the way, father. First you come to kill him, now you accept his fruits as a gift. If you act like this, I am no longer your herdsman'. 'That's entirely up to you, son'. 'My way', Sen Senu said, 'is the way of the *sigui*, I shall follow the *sigui*'. 'All right, my son, that's entirely up to you!' So Sen Senu set out alone into the bush, and met someone herding chicken. After exchanging greetings, the stranger asked where Sen Senu was heading. 'I am following the road of the *sigui*'. 'That is a hard road, the road of the *sigui*'. 'Still, I want to try it', said Sen Senu. Somewhat further into the bush, in encounters with people herding goats, sheep, horses, donkeys and cattle, the same exchange was held: 'Where are you going?' 'I follow the *sigui oju*'. 'The *sigui oju* is a hard one'. 'I shall try it anyway'. At last Sen Senu encountered an elephant [in some versions a lion]. 'Where are you going?' Sen Senu: 'I follow the road of the *sigui*'. The elephant trumpeted: 'I have the *sigui*'. Sen Senu: 'If you have the *sigui*, then do as you like'. The elephant ate Sen Senu, and for three whole years Sen Senu remained in the elephant's belly. At length the elephant grew thirsty, and set out to drink in a water-hole just outside the village. The animal then defecated, and out came Sen Senu, carrying with him the *dalewa*, forked *sigui* stool, the oblong calabash (*koju pom*) and the horse tail (*sô duro*). Then his sister came along to fetch water. Seeing Sen Senu, she tried to speak to him, but he could not speak. She ran back

into the village, and cried out loudly: 'Sen Senu is at the pool'. Her father thought she was crazy, as Sen Senu had been eaten three years ago, and all mourning had long come to an end. 'Look for yourself' she said, and so he did. At the water-hole, his father asked Sen Senu to come home. Sen Senu started to speak in the language of the *sigui*: 'Go and brew beer, let everyone adorn himself in his finest; if not, I will not be able to return home. So go and receive me' [in fact Sen Senu gives very detailed instructions on how to brew beer, how to grind the millet, how to gather the firewood and to fetch the water, how to make porridge, how to ferment the beer and how to ration it]. When everything had been done as instructed, the elders came to Sen Senu and asked: 'Who shall be in front?' Sen Senu then sang one of the twelve *sigui* songs, 'Please forgive me, elders, you are the oldest, but if you do not know the road of the *sigui*, I am the first, and I will turn to the left.' The elders responded: 'Yes, you know the way. Three years is not three days; you have been inside the elephant, you know more than we do.' Thus Sen Senu came home, and this is the way that the *sigui* came to the villages.

The ritual takes the form of an ambulatory dance, from a specific water-hole in each village - since it was at a water-hole that Sen Senu was found - then into and through the village. Lengthy preparations are made for this central ceremony; for three months, the ritual speakers for the village are initiated by being taught the Dogon traditions regarding the ritual language (*sigui so*), and all men prepare their outfit: long Dogon trousers, the *dalewa* (Y-shaped stick for sitting on), a shirt bedecked with cowries (*goû kai*), pendants in the ears, a special white bonnet (*sigui kukwo*), a horse's tail and an oblong calabash. On their faces the men simulate, with blue paint, women's facial cicatrization.

On the morning before the day of the dance, all men, in strict order of age, walk to one public place of the village, where the representative of one specific clan puts some sesame oil in both his ears, to receive the 'language of *sigui*'. Also present are the pregnant women, whose bellies are touched with a *dalewa* so that the baby in the womb will already have 'seen' the *sigui*. After birth, if the child is a boy, he will have to touch the stool with his hand while, in the event of a girl, the *dalewa* will be thrown away. That night, the

initiated boys leave the caverns, to which they have been confined for three months, and sleep out on the dunes.

On the morning of the day of *sigui*, all the men fully attired throng around the initiates and, whirling their bull-roarers, take them to the water-hole. Some hundred meters before the hole (which nowadays is dry) they release the initiates, who run to the hole, trying to be the first to dip their feet in (which brings riches). Mud from the water-hole will be besmeared on the feet of small boys and the bellies of pregnant women. The men go home, have their hair shaven, take their *sigui* implements, and return to the foot of the scree, at the 'start of the village'; here, the initiates await them with their outfit: bonnet with red agates, rich *goû kai*, a richer decorated kind of *dalewa*, an oblong calabash with decorations of masks. They have just washed themselves, for the first time in three months, but still have not shaved their heads.

At the foot of the scree the *sigui* line is formed, strictly following age, the oldest in front (that is to say, the oldest who have not yet 'seen' the *sigui*) and the younger men behind them. The smallest toddlers who can just walk bring up the rear, if they are not carried on shoulders. Accompanied by the village drums, the initiates then lead the way, sounding iron bells. The tortuous *sigui* route takes the immense line of slowly dancing men and boys through most of the village, passing the major ritual spots, before ending at one of the two main dancing grounds. A long line of beer jars is waiting for the men. The initiates then start reciting the major *sigui* myth (as rendered earlier) in the ritual language, each recounting how he stayed with his companions in the bush for three months. They express thanks for the food and beer, and may add some general admonitions on how to behave towards elders, kinsmen and strangers. Then, with all men sitting on their stools, the oldest initiate (all of them are young boys !) puts his horse's tail into one of the jars of beer, swings it to the four cardinal directions, pours some beer on the floor, then lets all initiates drink first. General drinking follows, from old to young, though both drinking and passing the calabashes is done with the left hand. As the beer at the dancing ground is finished, the men go home and eat and drink the beer their



women have brewed. Throughout, the women, dressed in everyday clothes, have been the main - almost the only - spectators, though they are kept at some distance by the old men who have already seen previous *sigui* and may flank the dancing line. Usually, however, these men are too old for active participation, and just watch and pass comment on the proceedings. The rest of the day is spent eating and drinking at the home of kinsmen, age-mates and friends.

All girls born during the period of the *sigui* (from the start of the initiation till drinking is ended) are called *yasigui* and will perform a special role throughout their life: they are the sisters of the masks. For them the taboo on the masks does not hold; freely mingling with the masked men, they are the ones who fetch them water and bring them food during the days of the *dama* masquerade (van Beek 1991b: 59).

### *Birth and Sigui*

The *sigui* is held every sixty years, a span of time geared to the Dogon expectation of a long and fruitful life.<sup>2</sup> Each man should see the *sigui* at least once in his life; whoever has seen it twice is a special elder, while occasionally someone sees it three times, according to the Dogon (for instance the film 'Anai Dolo' by Rouch). But to see it once is a desirable and a normal expectation. Seeing the *sigui* makes one into a complete Dogon - someone with power, someone with fertility. For one thing, after the *sigui* festival a great number of children are expected to be born: the *sigui* boosts human fertility, in the same way as the *dama* mask festival boosts agricultural fertility. One possible interpretation for both - masks and *sigui* - is that they form a male appropriation of fertility and, in the *sigui* case, this is clearly a female fertility. The outfit of the men is one indication of this, as they imitate women in several ways: their hairstyle is female, their necklaces usually adorn women and their make-believe cicatrices point to their being identified with women. Rich women, certainly,

but women. It is difficult to relate the objects used (stool, calabash and bonnet) to anything but the *sigui* itself, but the general gist is clear: in the *sigui* the men of the village are fruitful in their own right.

The question then arises as to where the men derive their procreative powers from. The answer would be that power stems from the bush; the *sigui* represents the people passing through the bush and returning from it. For the Dogon, the bush, *oru*, as a category contrasts sharply with *ana*, the village. The notion of *oru* carries a very complex set of connotations. On the one hand, the bush is dangerous; no one will ever venture to sleep out in the bush, away from the protection of huts or people. As we have seen, several types of spirits roam the bush and may attack people, or exchange parts of their bodies or babies with them. It is this aspect of the bush that pregnant women fear most. One often-voiced fear is that spirits will exchange eyes with the humans, who are thus rendered blind.

On the other hand, from the *oru* stems all wisdom, knowledge, power and life - the *fons et origo* of everything that makes life possible. For example, the animals of the bush all know the future; they have a perfect awareness of what man is up to, of his intentions, mistakes, transgressions and frailties, and they all know what the future holds in store for humans. So wisdom and knowledge, life and death, stem from the bush. According to the founding myths of the mask-*sigui* complex, these rituals originated with the spirits of the bush and its animals (van Beek 1991b: 66).

One consequence is that hunting is not a technical skill, but a magical one; only those people with potent magic can hope to deceive the animals. When a 'simple person' sets off into the bush with just his bow and arrows, or flintlock gun, all animals in the bush will be perfectly aware of his presence and intentions. Hunting, in Dogon culture, is a bridge between the bush and the village, and the hunter is not fully human: the mask of the hunter vividly expresses this attitude: a fierce countenance, with large protruding teeth and a bulging forehead, reshape the figure into a non-domesticated human (Pern, Alexander & van Beek 1983: 120; Griaule 1938: 318).

<sup>2</sup> The idea that the sixty-year period would depend on astronomical observations or calculations, such as has been reported in some Dogon literature, is not correct (van Beek 1991a: 157).

But wisdom and knowledge apart, even life and death stem from the bush. In the myth we saw that the *sigui*, like the mask-rituals, originated with the animals of the bush. Throughout the myth, the domesticated animals keep repeating that the road of the *sigui* is hard, and it is the elephant or the lion who finally administers the initiation, both being the epitome of the big, wild animal - here, and in folk-tales also. The *sigui* initiates, the ones who are the first-born of the *sigui*, are initiated in their three-month seclusion in a cavern outside the village borders, living as much as possible like animals: without clothing, without speaking, sleeping on the ground, all sexual interaction being taboo. The very word for these initiates, *orubaru*, means 'added to the bush' (Calame-Griaule 1968: 207). 'If they are not like animals, they can never learn wisdom' an informant explained. Even the seemingly most human of all arts, speech, stems from the bush in the form of the secret language, *sigui so*.

Trees and rocks, the other components of the bush, share this aspect of the bush's power and life. 'All trees are medicinal' a healer insisted, 'you only have to know what for and how'. Even the words used in spells, *anga tî*, have to be learned from either the spirits or the trees themselves. A true *jojongunu* (healer), another intermediary between bush and village, speaks with trees at night in order to learn his craft. As we saw, some trees walk at night, and they confer among themselves. A typical story relates how someone who slept under such a tree near a village, on waking up at night found the tree gone, and stuck his knife in the ground. Before sunrise the *jînu* returned and summoned him to take away the knife, or else the tree would kill him. The person took his knife back, but died within a month nevertheless. Folk stories abound with tales of talking and walking trees. Rocks walk too; some rocks, often those close to the cemeteries, are known to roam the scree beyond the village borders. Indeed, anything in the bush moves and changes, in any season. Sand dunes move, gullies retrace their beds, trees and rocks wander. Only the village stays put, as the only fixed point in the Dogon ethno-geography. Inhabited by a series of succeeding populations (Toloy, Tellem, Dogon) the villages are the only places where things remain the same. They are the areas of stability. At

the same time, however, they represent stagnation, the places where the forces of the bush wither away: life and death wisdom and knowledge derived from the bush are applied in the village but, in the process, are used up and worn down. Knowledge dissipates - the people of the past inherently knowing more than those of the present - and power evaporates unless re-invigorated from the bush.

So whereas the masks are the things of the bush that come into the village (van Beek 1991b: 65), the *sigui* represents man who has entered the bush and returns to the village. He is re-born from the bush and enters a new, glorious and super-fertile life in the human settlement. His birth in many ways is an inversion of a normal conception and delivery: he enters the elephant through the mouth, stays three years in the stomach, and leaves through the anus. He is delivered without any help, near the place where a woman would not dream of giving birth to a child, at a water pond. Faeces are his placenta, but he does not come naked; he is fully adorned, carrying his major mark of identity, the stool. This object will remain closely associated with anyone who has seen the *sigui*, throughout his life, during which his *dalewa* will be kept at the lineage shrine. After death, at his *dama*, the *dalewa* is broken and thrown away. So, through this rebirth during the *sigui*, with its thoroughly inverted order, the *sigui* initiate claims to be the new *inè*, with a renewed and augmented *hakilè*, and with new ears with which to hear and understand the language of the bush. Thus, drinking on his stool, he uses just that left hand which the Dogon will under no circumstances use in daily life.

Another crucial inversion is that of respect for age and kinship. The pregnant woman has to exert herself to keep, to a degree bordering on perfection, all the rules and regulations. She does not speak with strangers after delivery, she presents the baby to the *gina* and accepts the name given there. In all aspects of her conduct she is respectful and responsible. In the *sigui* myth, the *sigui* initiate shows a terrible, and for Dogon incomprehensible, lack of respect, behaving like an uneducated nobody, not a responsible person at all, someone who does not 'know the word': he steals fruit (from the tamarind, of all respected trees and coveted fruit !), then answers the

rightful owner's gentle prodding with terrible insolence, and even has the gall to drag his father into it. When his father, as any normal *inè* would, makes excuses for his misbehaving son, the child chides his own father, turns his back on him and leaves. Not all of this is re-enacted in the ritual itself, though age - a crucial factor in Dogon society - is subjected to inversion. The song that Sen Senu sang at the conclusion of the myth recounted earlier, shows clearly the inversion of the gerontocracy that in normal times rules Dogon society; drinking is set in train by the initiated youngsters, and - most important of all - the ritual speech to the assembled community is made by a young, 'new' man.

So, in all relevant aspects, the birth from the bush stems from an inversion and leads towards an inversion of societal values, powers and respect. This last concept, respect (*bawa*), is a key term in Dogon social life. Older people, in-laws and ritual officiators should be respected. Similarly, other living things beyond the human sphere - the bush - should be respected. And it is this respect that is negated in the *sigui*, in which are embodied the very notions that transform a child into a responsible person.

### *The Mirror of Birth and Death*

So the Dogon *persona* in its full embodiment calls for two kinds of birth, the second being the *sigui*, which can be viewed as a negation of the values associated with ordinary childbirth, an inversion of the traditional order as well as a means to a transcendental power. In the *sigui* one is reborn in an inverse way. In order to become a fully mature man, one has to undergo this inverted process at least once during one's life, no matter when. So the power of regeneration and, in a sense, of fertility, stems from the negation of all that is important in Dogon culture. A true initiate does not speak during his initiation, wears no human clothes, shows lack of respect to older men who have previously undergone initiation, and renounces his sexuality. The language learned during *sigui* is not a human one, but one of the spirits. Indeed, the very spirits that pose more of a threat to the pregnant woman than anything else, are the very ones that have taught the

language of *sigui* to men, and have given them the masks; moreover they are a continuing source of power. During pregnancy, the bush is extremely dangerous for pregnant women but, in the rituals of *sigui* and the masks, that very same bush empowers men. What the bush may steal from women, it gives to men.

At birth, the first welcome that the child receives actually comes from its mother's kin, all lineage members being conspicuously absent, the father included. As mentioned, it would be *dogo* for him to assist at parturition. The use of the term *dogo*, shame, here is intriguing, as the same term is used for the taboo on menstruation; the usual term for taboo is *dama*, also used for the mask dance and for food taboos pertinent to clan membership. So *dama* is used for any taboo associated with things of the men, things of the lineage, while for taboos associated with female aspects the term *dogo*, shame, is used. As stated, the father and his lineage members may not be present at birth, in more or less the same way the men should avoid anything related to menstruation. Though this is expressed as shame - as an aspect of a relationship - the central aspect of this type of female fertility, be it in the course of menstruation or of actual birth, is blood. The blood of the wife, of female procreation, is dangerous for men. And the relationship between mother and child also introduces some problems in relation to the masculine sphere. The child is of the father's lineage right from conception, but without a bride-price system to fix paternity claims, fatherhood - and, for that matter, membership in the father's lineage, a crucial feature in the child's identity - remains a question of relative probability. The notion that it is the first intercourse after menses that will, or should, determine the child's paternity, helps a decision to be reached in an impasse. But recognition of the legitimacy of the claims by the progenitor does create a sense of insecurity in the membership of the lineage since it represents a degree of contradiction to the patrilineal ideology. So insecurity regarding the child's group membership, an uncertainty to which the processes of marriage provide no solution, can only be reduced gradually, after birth. When the father comes in, after the baby has been well

cleansed and washed, he starts claiming fatherhood, assisted by his patrilineal kinsmen and kinswomen.

Naming is an important step in this as well, both by the baby's father, his immediate kin, and by the clan elder who gives the most important name. The *tige*, the honorific title, is part of this process too. Any social group in Dogon society has a special title, often derived from some historic exploits or events associated with one of their forebears; sometimes these titles have become incomprehensible, while in other instances they may encapsulate some group stereotype (de Ganay 1941). The larger groupings, such as village or clan, may have a long *tige*, often amounting to several sentences. The same holds for supernatural beings: bush spirits, the water god, the earth god and Ama, the sky god himself, all have their *tige*, as a means to and proof of their individual existences. At some stage in their pre-adult life the Dogon select an additional individual *tige*, picking an expression which in an oblique way characterizes them, so that it is at the same time a reinforcement of social belonging and individuality. Naming the child is an integral part of the child's consecutive definition of its father's group membership, its mother's kin relationship and its own personal existence.

In all this a contradiction surfaces. Our interpretation of the *sigui* (and the *dama* for that matter) leads to a paradox, even an instance of irrationality: the male rituals propound a blatant denial of well known facts of life. However, it is more complex than this. Though the logic of the ritual indicates a male appropriation of female fertility, and suggests male self-sufficiency in creating life, the irrationality of these notions nowhere escapes the Dogon. Sperber, when discussing irrationality of belief, argues that, as observers and analysts, we do not need to evoke a radical relativism in order to explain apparent irrationality (Sperber 1982). The statement of belief analysed - and the one he mentioned was far more blatantly absurd than the one to which the logic of ritual has led us - constitutes as he calls them, representational beliefs of a semi-propositional content (Sperber 1982): their actual truth cannot be tested directly nor can there be any other authority than that of collective agreement. So the denial of an obvious fact is more than a cultural absurdity; somehow it must be part

of the message itself. One solution to this is Sperber's: some absurdities are wonderful to think if one knows how to enjoy them and make them last (Sperber 1982: 62). In a ritual setting, they are marvellous to act out, and to perform in front of the very audience one is negating: the women. But there is more to it, because another paradox is entailed.

The *sigui* is not only a rebirth, it is definitely a part of the mask complex as well. Though in the *sigui* the men don no masks, these two exclusively male endeavours are closely associated. Both stem from the same village, are linked with the bush spirits, addressed with the same ritual language, and use the same songs. In fact the most sacred songs consist of twelve songs associated with the masks, and twelve *sigui* songs, and they are always performed together. However, there are some differences. Geographically, the area of Dogon villages where masks are found extends somewhat beyond the area of the *sigui*.<sup>3</sup> Also, the myth of the masks and that of the *sigui* feature different people and situations and do not refer to each other. But despite their obvious differences, they are very much interlinked, though masks belong to the realm of death.

One of the reasons that masks are *dama* for women is precisely their taint of death. Masks are central in the burials of old men, mask dances (without the costumes) feature in all burial proceedings, and the main mask festivals are to a large extent the closing rituals of the mourning period, the final farewell for the dead (van Beek 1991b: : 64). So the *sigui* is associated, indirectly, with death also. The powers that endow the men with their fertile forces are the same ones that stipulate their mortality. It is in their death rituals, burial and *dama*, that the pattern is enacted in reverse: during the funeral the membership of the village and its groupings are stressed, indeed its continuous membership in the community of the dead. The masks rituals, though very communal and public in their actual performances, do contain some rites in which the individual's existence is ended on this earth;

<sup>3</sup> One may hypothesize that the *sigui* represents a later innovation, originating from the area of ritual masks but not yet having expanded so far

characteristically, the *sigui* stool is central here: the old men in charge of the *dama* smash the *dalewa* of their dead and well-mourned forebears to pieces, and discard the remains in a mountain crevasse. The end of the *sigui* symbol means the end of the individual's life, the end of rebirth implies the end of existence. So it is exactly in this association with death that the paradox referred to earlier can be solved. Even if the *sigui* is the rebirth, through strictly male endeavours, of the human being, that very same male-focused creativity is, at the same time, the negation of that reproduction. While negating in ritual the female monopoly in reproductive fertility, the male powers to create life are its very destroyers. The *sigui* recreates men and stipulates their mortality; their rebirth in this life pre-empt's their transition into the world of the dead. The fact that only men participate in the *sigui* is emblematic. Birth and *sigui* together stress the life and mortality of man, the fleeting male creation by man of himself against the continuing chain of life generated by the women. Living, then, is just the type of paradox that the rituals engage in. Meaningful existence has to be created by ephemeral persons, playing the role of the origin of life, if only once in their lifetime.