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KINSHIP AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF HARMONY AND CHANGE IN MANDE<sup>1</sup>

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*The dichotomy of 'father- and mother-childness' in the Mande world*

In the Mande world political processes of various scale are often conceived in terms of kinship. Notions derived from the relationships between younger and older kin, or half brothers, are of particular importance. The present collection explores the meaning and legitimatory uses of such kinship arguments within the context of pre-colonial history, as well as the politics and artistic production in modern West-African nation states.

The far reaching significance of the rapport between half-siblings for Mande society has been worked out in a well-cited article by Bird and Kendall, titled 'The Mande Hero' (1980, reprint 1987). Their rapport is characterized by the fundamental dichotomy *fadenya-badenya*. *Fadenya* stands for children of the same father but not the same mother, but is also (Bird and Kendall 1987, p. 15):

"(...) associated with centrifugal forces of social disequilibrium: envy, jealousy, competition, self-promotion - anything tending to spin the actor out of his established social force field. (...) *Badenya*, "mother-childness," is associated with centripetal forces of society: submission to authority, stability, cooperation, those qualities which pull the individual back into the social mass."

Bird and Kendall's analysis has given insight to some basic patterns in Mande oral tradition and social action, for instance certain key features of the Sunjata epic. It has become clear that Mande cultures cannot be understood without giving recognition of this descent principle. Bird and Kendall state that (ib. p. 14):

"[T]he Mande peoples recognize a dialectic tension between the individual and the group. This tension should not be understood as a polar opposition, but rather as the intersection of two axes: the axis of individuality, referred to as

*fadenya* 'father-childness', and the axis of group affiliation, referred to as *badenya* 'mother-childness'."

The theory on the axis *fadenya-badenya* has gained widespread acceptance in Mande studies. However, although the destructive force of *fadenya* is recognized all over Mande, there are hardly any ethnographic cases on the destroying power of *fadenya*. Bird and Kendall, too, have not given such data to illustrate their statement.

### *The 'younger brother' and hidden 'badenya' in Mande society*

This volume may provide an answer to the remarkable absence of ethnographical data on the *fadenya-badenya* axis. It proposes that the analysis of a hitherto neglected theme, the relationship of older and younger brothers, can offer a deeper understanding to principles of representation of different forms of power and authority in the Mande world.

Claims to legitimacy have two characteristics. Firstly, they tend to stress a hierarchical relationship. Secondly, legitimacy is most often expressed in terms of older (brother) versus younger (brother), where often the group seeking justification represents itself as the younger (brother). This is remarkable, since the older brother has more rights to inherit the paternal legacy according to rules of succession in Mande societies.

The younger brother figures prominently in the claims to supremacy of the ruling descent groups, as well as the oral traditions concerning the origin of groups of craft-specialists (*nyamakalaw*), particularly those of the *jeliw* ('griots'), the bards of the Mande. In the case of the *jeliw* frequently two wandering brothers are confronted with a life-endangering crisis, in which the younger brother saves the life of his older kin.<sup>2</sup> The age hierarchy governed by seniority is reversed when the older praises the younger brother for his deeds and becomes his bard and client. Similarly in the historical myth concerning the establishment of the leadership of the Keita in the Mande, the latter are identified as descendants of the youngest brother, who, rather than his two older brothers, is chosen as king (see Jansen *infra*, and Zobel *infra*).

It is rather self-evident that social groups in Mande represent themselves as the descendants of a man, since Mande peoples have a patrilineal kinship system and tend to settle patrilocally, and to marry virilocally. This makes society consist of a complex patchwork of patrilineages which derive their descent from famous men; social structure and superstructure evolve along parallel lines.

Although society organizes itself in male terms, this does not undermine the high prestige of women. Especially in their role of mother, women are highly esteemed. A well-known expression is: '*Bee b'i ba bolo*', that 'Everything you have is your

mother' / 'Everything is in the hands of your mother'. In this respect men often have the name of their mother added to their first name. The appreciation for the mother is also visible in the term *badenya*, children of one mother.

The two characteristics stated above - hierarchical relationship and the preferred position of 'the younger brother' - tacitly accept a *badenya* rapport between brothers. Almost all the case material in this book does not mention *fadenya* as a point of discussion within the hierarchical relationship that is brought forward in the search for legitimacy.

Of course, the term *fadenya* was and still is used in Mande both as a concept to discuss rivalry and conflict, and as the kinship term for 'half sibling-ness'. However, the contributions in this book show that these meanings of *fadenya* never coincide: if there is a conflict, it is discussed in terms of older-younger brother, and if there is a kinship *fadenya*, there is no conflict but an a priori social separation. If *fadenya* is mentioned it is only an additional argument (Zobel, *infra*) or an explanation for social divisions that have existed for generations (Jansen, *infra*, Bulman, *infra*).

Moreover, since tension is expressed in terms of age difference and hierarchical relationships, Bird and Kendall's view that there is a structural tension between individual and group in Mande is not mentioned in the ethnographic material in this book. In all the contributions individuals adhere to group stereotypical characteristics in order to represent themselves in a *badenya* relation with opponents.

### *The contributors*

The seven articles represent various interpretations of the 'younger brother phenomenon' in the Mande world. Jansen and Zobel take kinship terms as context dependent concepts whose content is elaborated along recurring principles and stereotypes. To them, kinship terms and oral traditions about ancestors are artificial constructions which must be interpreted as part of a contemporary political discourse on status. Toungara and Hanson offer a counterweight to this approach, by analyzing contemporary tensions in relations between descent groups as primarily the result of historical processes. Bulman and Keita elaborate a synchronic, literary approach by analyzing how the position of the 'younger' is represented in song texts and epical narrative. Finally, Lamp shows that the image of the younger brother is not limited to oral traditions, but is also firmly rooted in material culture.

The articles of this collection have been placed in a logical order. Four (Bulman, Hanson, Jansen, Zobel) of its seven contributors formed a panel at the Third International Conference on Mande Studies, which took place in Leiden, March 20-24, 1995. The panel title was 'The Younger Brother Theme in Mande Oral Tradition'. The other contributions were presented at the same conference, and fit

very well to each other and to the other four, although they were not in the same panel. All authors have slightly adapted their contribution to the conference during the preparation of this reader.

Jansen begins the discussion by arguing that every lineage prefers the position of 'younger brother' in Mande genealogies. He gives an analysis of genealogies of ruling families who claim descent from Sunjata, the legendary founder of Mande society. These genealogies are transformations of the same principle: every ruling group claims to be descendants of a 'younger brother'; other ruling groups are seen as lineages descending from 'older brothers'. By making parallels with material drawn from oral tradition and Maninka social organization, Jansen argues that the position of younger brother is a metaphor for war leadership during temporary cooperation. He shows how claims for war leadership and for inheritable kingship have been fused in a status discourse which focuses on relations between brothers. These stories, he concludes, are almost useless for a factual reconstruction of the past, since they represent contemporary tensions between lineages.

Zobel elaborates the above mentioned case by showing that within the stratified social order of Mande societies, relations between noble freemen and bards are conceived in terms of older and younger brothers. Interpreting this relationship within a general framework of alternative power-sources, he subsequently analyzes claims for superiority among three lineages of rulers who consider themselves to be members of the same patrilineal descent group. Here, although the older brother position is preferred as an argument to legitimacy, the status of middle brother allows the strongest group to simultaneously figure as older and younger. In response to Jansen's logical model, Zobel presents a dialectical one. He argues that the position of the middle brother is a synthesis of two different discourses, an 'Aufhebung' in its classical meaning. According to Zobel the middle brother position is more than a simple intersection of two stereotypical characteristics: the middle brother position mediates war leadership, symbolized by the 'younger brother' with the authority that is attributed to the older brother.

Toungara deals with present day politics in Côte d'Ivoire during the democratic elections of 1990. She shows that in the Odienne region the same lineage relations have remained important from colonial through to post-independence times. The factions struggling for power are two descent groups who trace descent to the same ancestor; it is 'the older brother' versus 'the younger brother'. Toungara refrains from the classification of characteristics put forward by Jansen and Zobel, and describes how at one moment the 'older brother group' acquired a winning position, and how the 'younger brother group' won at another occasion.

Hanson shows that the model of preference for the younger brother position goes beyond Mande, since Fulbe are not considered to belong to Mande culture. Hanson

describes the struggle that took place in the nineteenth century between two biological brothers: Umar Tal's successor Amadu and his younger brother Muntaga. Amadu had appointed Muntaga as his governor in Nioro. Muntaga's disobedience towards his older brother led to punishment by Amadu. Writings by Amadu show his motif: as a Muslim he did not accept that Muntaga broke his oath towards Amadu.

However, present day oral tradition depicts this event as a conflict between two brothers; the Muslim argument has disappeared. It is remarkable that the story of two brothers is told only among the descendants of the younger brother. His descendants venerate him because of his struggle for independence. Hanson illuminates the role that Mande *jeliw* played in the construction and elaboration of oral narratives about the conflict in Nioro. He argues that oral tradition may have kept information which has not been transmitted by written documents. Therefore stories on fraternal conflict may not be only ideological constructs, but may contain information on what happened in the past.

Bulman focuses on themes in the Sunjata epic which treat Sunjata's youth. His article is the only one in which *fadenya* plays a major role. This subscribes to our idea that *fadenya* is mainly found in oral traditions and rather absent in ethnographic studies on lineage politics and processes of legitimization. Bulman's article fits well in this book, as it provides insight in the creative processes of Mande bards. Representing royal families, Mande bards had to be able to respond to claims with counter claims. Bulman gives us insight in the almost infinite variety of narrative strategies of Mande bards. He shows how both positions of being older as well as younger can be portrayed as more prestigious, but also conveys the subtle strategies Mande bards use to avoid definite answers for unanswerable questions.

Keita discusses the opposition older-younger in his study on the famous Malian singer Salif Keita. He describes how Salif Keita attributes certain characteristics to himself as a member of a younger generation, in reaction to his father's generation. This time the older-younger opposition is conceived in terms of difference in generation. Although the author stresses the importance of *fadenya* as 'a pressure within the family to compete for self-fulfillment and success' (Keita, *infra*), his analysis is mainly one of a generation conflict between two individuals, Salif Keita and his father, who each represent a world of their own. As Salif Keita put it in a footnote to a praise song for his father: 'this song is for my father, who is a nineteenth century person [in his values, that is], whereas I am a man of the twentieth century' (Keita, *infra*). Where Salif adheres to change and social mobility, his father is pictured as a man of tradition. Thus, within the debate between generations, age differences are expressed in the same terms as age differences within the same generation, that is in terms of immobility versus mobility (see also Jansen, *infra*). Keita shows that Salif Keita's song *Sina* negotiates this pressure within the family by appropriating a traditional mode of expression, the *fasa*.

Lamp describes a complex cultural process in a non-Mande ethnic group in which the younger generation uses Mande younger brother stereotypes in order to compete with the older generation. The Baga, who live at the coast of Guinée, nowadays form part of the population of the République de Guinée. They have developed the *sibondel*, a headdress in the form of a box with a hare on the front (see front-cover page). Lamp argues that the *sibondel* headdress can be related to the coming of Islam and the formation of the modern state of Guinée. Since Mande culture has been a dominant factor in the state formation of Guinée in the twentieth century, the Baga youth use the hare, a Mande symbol for the clever manipulator and the younger brother, in order to identify themselves with the new order.

All the articles in this book pay much attention to the remarkable achievements accomplished by 'the younger', most of the time symbolized as the younger brother. Given the advantageous position of the elder according to rules for succession, the special position of the Mande younger is a striking phenomenon. The present volume may give some plausible explanations for the dominant presence of the younger brother in the Mande world, and beyond.

#### *Beyond 'Bird and Kendall'*

The importance of Bird and Kendall's article on the Mande hero cannot be overestimated. The article has been a guideline for much research and deepened our understanding of the way Mande peoples conceive tensions in their society.

However, Bird and Kendall may have stressed too much the distorting powers in Mande society. Their model of *fadenya-badenya* does not explain how Mande groups can live peacefully together without being suppressed by violent heroes. From this point of view, Bird and Kendall have not been able to refute the negative idea on Mande society furthered by the French colonial administrators (see Jansen, *infra*); they did not pay attention to the contexts in which particular relations were stressed or were established as artificial kinship relations.

On the other hand, the perception of *fadenya* as a destructive force has obliterated a potential which Bird and Kendall have themselves voiced: the innovative actions of the young hero can lead to a modification of norms within the tradition of a community. Images of younger brothers representing the potential transformations resulting from war leadership, or migrant work, and older brothers associated with the stable realm of the village, reveal that traditional Mande discourse is able to conceive both continuity and change. The prominence of the younger implies that the gerontocratic order represents only one dimension of Mande status models, its overemphasis probably resulting from an authoritarian colonial

‘reinvention of tradition’. Thus a new understanding of the capacity of Mande societies to create their own vision of modernity is gained.

The present book tries to go beyond an implicitly negative appreciation of Mande society. Its contributions give reason to argue that politics, often lineage politics, and legitimacy are searched for in a far more harmonic discourse than the one dominated by the *fadenya-badenya* axis. People who consider themselves as *fadenw* are already beyond the point of cooperation, and that is why no one constructs political arguments with a *fadenya* relationship. No one who wants to persuade an other person or group of his own superiority, will ever identify himself as the *faden* of the other. This would run counter to the idea of society as a unity of complementary forces. The fact that all representations of interior conflicts are incorporated into the ideological bias of complementarity explains why ethnographical data on *fadenya* struggles are absent or at least scarce in literature on Mande studies. On the contrary, there is an abundance of data on younger-older relations between groups combined with an inversion of the hierarchical relationship in another context.

The contributions in this book all remain within lines set out by *badenya*. They may give us insight in the processes of continuity and moderate change in Mande society. Actually, this collection is a first effort to give a more positive analysis of Mande political processes than has usually been done on the basis of the *fadenya-badenya* axis. This dichotomy shows only one side of the picture. In this book we hope to show the other side.

## NOTES

1 We would like to thank David Conrad and Jeanne Toungara for their comments

2 A well-known example of such stories is the episode of the ‘Buffalo of Do’ forming part of the Sunjata epic. Another popular legend depicts a famished brother that without knowing eats the flesh of his kin. After discovering what he has done, he decides to become his savior’s bard. For examples, see Conrad 1985, p. 40.