

POLITIES AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE: WAS MANDE ALREADY A SEGMENTARY SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES?

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Stephan Bühnen has applied some of my ideas to a wider region than southwestern Mali, and shown that the principles of Mandé status discourse make possible new interpretations on sources and political processes in the entire West African Sudan. Inspired by Bühnen's analysis, I am convinced that the principles of Mandé status discourse may shed light on various processes, varying from political struggles between families to the construction of contemporary ethnic identities. I hope that this reply will not be the end of the discussion on West African genealogies, and that others will join us.

Although Bühnen ideas are fruitful, there are also points to contest. Lack of space forces me to focus on three points of Bühnen's critique: the way I elaborate the term "segmentary;" his remarks that I overlook a "bulk of testimony recorded in medieval Arabic sources;" and his complaint of my "inadequate understanding of historical polities."

Since Bühnen accepts my analysis of the Mandé genealogies and their relation to nineteenth-century society, I will take this as my point of departure. I will argue that we cannot deduce the "historical reality of polities" for the available material without being misled by our own prejudices and fallacies. The 'old' sources are not as one-dimensional as Bühnen thinks: a status claim does not necessarily represent an irreversible hierarchy in a relationship. Bühnen ignores the context, overlooks the dynamics of Mandé status discourse, and presupposes his model of chiefdoms.

I admit that I am vague about the way I operationalize the term "segmentary," but a definition of "segmentary" is not necessary to my argument since I focus on a discourse which shows that any relation in Mandé is hierarchical as well as based on a dichotomy—for instance, 'older-younger' or 'founder-stranger.' However, when discussing typologies—Mali as a segmentary society? Mandé as an empire?—it may be necessary to elaborate the term "segmentary," and I accept Bühnen's definition/description:

On the level of the society the term 'segmentary' designates the fragmentation into structurally equivalent descent groups. Although this type of segmentation does not preclude political inequality, the term has unfortunately come to be employed as a synonym for 'politically uncentralized,' and more particularly for societies with a unitary genealogy and an "equilibrium" of lineages.

When I write "segmentary society" then, I refer to a society with structurally equivalent (descent) groups, without precluding political inequality.

A status claim cannot be taken as evidence for a long-lasting relationship. According to Bühnen I “neglect” the bulk of testimony. I disagree, but suppose that any testimony on relationships in Mande is problematical as a historical source, since the context and the informant are unknown. Any outsider who nowadays visits Mande is often welcomed with words like “an bè kelen” (“we are one”) and “fa kelen, ba kelen” (“[we have] the same father and the same mother”). The outsider traveling from town to town will find peace and unity along the way. Mande has been a relatively peaceful place to travel for individuals for ages; travelers like Park and Caillié and Vallière never had major problems in Mande, even though they were told stories of conflicts, and sometimes witnessed war.¹

Once acquainted with local conditions and traditions, the traveler will acquire more and more data about tensions between social groups, but will not see the ‘logic’ of these tensions. Although the griots have applied this ‘logic’ for a long time, generations of scholars have overlooked it, probably because of their obsession with the image of an empire.

Early travelers who visited Mande were merchants who traveled as individuals: both the Arabs and the early Europeans were most interested in trade. Of course they experienced effective control, but this says nothing about the nature of rule, except that society provided such effective control during these periods. It is a fallacy, however, to suppose that effective control is possible only in combination with centralized authority. The Arabs were not able to understand the nature of Mande society, because, as Bühnen notes, they were “members of a despotic society.” Neither the Arabs nor the French understood the dynamics of social action in Mande, and their observations must be analyzed with caution.

As a result, our image of a disintegrating Mali empire is merely the product of the kinds of data available. Only after the collection of many data was Mande considered to be the remnants of an empire. In short, I argue that Bühnen’s description of “a historical shift from the imperial area to a situation of constant rivalry” is unproven.

The problem is not only that Mande is relatively peaceful, and that superficial contact with the people leads to the impression that the Mande people are one great family. Also problematic for our interpretation is the fact that in Mande power is represented in claims giving authority to the older, in combination with a possible inversion of role and perspective.

Bühnen himself illustrates the problem. Discussing the relationship between Jalomansa and Mandimansa, he presupposes a provenance for his information in order to make an interpretation of various sources. In doing so he ignores the dynamics of a relationship between an older and younger brother: the older can accept the leadership by the younger because both know the temporary character of this leadership: both the two descent groups/persons involved will state that the younger brother acts on the orders of the older brother, and thus Jalomansa’s *keletigi* status does not necessarily signal subordination.

The younger brother's status of leader is precisely the guarantee and the condition for political hierarchy within a society with structurally equivalent descent groups. Every social action is the result of a contextualized interpretation of a hierarchical relationship. Mande society thus seems ambiguous on a textual level, and traditions will never provide ultimate answers. Mande is a whirlpool of status claims, in which power is established by attributing authority to others in order to continue both hierarchies and segments.

Let me illustrate inversion of the representation of social relations from the Haut-Niger.² In Kangaba the Keita are rulers, and the Traore, together with the Camara, the founders. These Traore are politically unimportant; Leynaud and Cisse complain that this group does even not know its own genealogy. In Balanzan, a town 18 kilometers from Kangaba and less powerful than Kangaba, the rulers are Traore, who claim to have arrived after the Keita, in order to help Sunjata. Giving this contradiction on a textual level, Leynaud and Cisse conclude that there must be two Traore groups: a minor group descending from the original population of the Haut-Niger, and an important group descending from immigrants "after Sunjata."

Such a 'historical' reconstruction is a mistake; these stories have nothing to do with migrations. They merely show the principles of Mande status discourse: recent arrival is claimed within the limits of the sphere of influence of the Balanzan Traore. However, in relation to the Keita of Kangaba the Traore accept the inverted position. Leynaud and Cisse took the claim by the Balanzan Traore at face value because they spent most of their time in Kenyegue, a village "controlled" by Balanzan. Had they worked in Kangaba, they would have written a different history.

This case may illustrate the importance of the Sunjata epic in Mande society. Descent groups with the same patronymic represent their relation in genealogies, and prestigious descent groups of different patronymics represent their relation by focusing on the sequence of arrival or other traditions about cooperation such as the Sunjata epic. For the Haut-Niger version of the Sunjata epic—the Kela version—I elaborated this idea by pointing to the anomalous position of the ancestors of the Diabate, Kouyate, and Diawara when compared other versions of the epic.³ The Sunjata epic is a contemporary status discourse, and the stability of the tradition in the Haut-Niger is evidence for stability in society. Bühnen remarks that "the Sunjata epic retains in its narrative the perspective of an empire." I would put it much stronger: the Sunjata epic establishes unity and hierarchy between structurally equivalent descent groups by providing the image of an empire.

If positions in status claims invert so vividly, we need a great number of such stories to reconstruct relationships among descent groups. We do not know the exact place of origin of the written sources on which medieval and post-medieval West African history has been based. Consequently, we cannot take any of our sources on relations between rulers as evidence for the actual relations between regions: that would be far too speculative.

Given this context dependence of any source in Mandé, and if one accepts my analysis of nineteenth-century Mandé and of modern oral tradition, one cannot transform the principles of a “Mandé status discourse” into a historical scenario of territorially-based polities whose kings represented themselves as younger brothers in relation to rivals and as older brothers in relation to subordinates. Therefore, Bühnen’s mechanical interpretation of genealogies is unacceptable.⁴ I do not ignore the Arab sources, as Bühnen says, but think that it is impossible to use them as evidence for the existence of polities as defined by Bühnen.

In mentioning territorially-based polities I come to a major point of critique in Bühnen’s analysis. He wrongly presupposes that in West Africa control was over land. In fact, control was over people, and therefore in terms of relationships. There were ideas about land and fertility, but land was not a medium to control in general. In answer to Bühnen’s critique of my alleged “inadequate understanding of historical polities,” I will work out this idea.

Bühnen’s evidence for control over land is too meager: it comes from a few data collected by Dieterlen and from data from other parts of Africa. I agree with Bühnen that through a cult of the ancestors (kinsmen!!) a descent group “maintains the bond with...the land, providing fertility and prosperity for the descent group.” However, there is no reason to think that this has something to do with control over land, even when the descent group is powerful. Leynaud and Cisse state that every lineage in the Haut-Niger held fields since ancient times, and celebrated ceremonies on it to obtain a good harvest. There was no tradition of control over land in the Haut-Niger, and this may be precisely the reason why the French had so many difficulties when they tried to rule *cantons* as territorial units.⁵

There is no evidence that ceremonial practices of fertility or ancestors existed on a ‘chiefdom’ level. Although spheres of influence existed from the perspective of any descent group, there was no control over land. Mandé did not have a tradition of territorial rule, only of rule by tribute, that is, recognition of a hierarchical relationship. The existence of earth priests (*dugukolotigiw*) is no argument for the existence of any kind of control over land. Bühnen leaves open the possibility that the village earth priests may have been the former village owners, since they are represented as the descendants of the founder. As I have argued elsewhere, the status of founder is largely a representation of inferiority in relation to the village chief in the context of inter-village politics.⁶ Within the village the position of earth priest as descendant of the founder is a guarantee to limit the leadership of the village chief, a descendant of the family who arrived as ‘the last,’ the ‘younger brother.’

Much speculation on the territorial dimension of rulership is inspired by a ‘mysterious’ septennial ceremony in the Kamabolon, the sacred hut in Kangaba. It is necessary to elaborate on this idea, lest others argue that I have overlooked this evidence. Due to Dieterlen’s work this ceremony is often considered to be evidence for the link between earth ownership and the power of the ‘mansa.’ Although this image of the Kamabolon is widely accepted, it

is in fact nonsense. In the Kamabolon the Sunjata epic—clearly a political story on relationships—is told, and not some kind of creation myth.⁷

We have no idea just how Dieterlen collected her fieldwork data.⁸ I think, though, that she confused two themes in the Mande world: fertility and politics. She was a pioneer in Mande research and we are much indebted much to her work. Just the same, it is odd that so many scholars still accept the opinion that creation myths are told inside the Kamabolon, even while no researcher has ever been allowed to attend the ceremonies in the hut.

Bühnen uses too limited an interpretation of “lineage.” Thus he states that the king secured his hold over his territory by perpetuating numerical supremacy through making many women pregnant. This ignores not only processes of adoption, but also the political and ideological dimension of any descent group in Mande: unity within a descent group is not perpetuated by numerical majority, but by the belief in common descent within a group. Status is represented in terms of kinship, and therefore kinship constructions are often artificial when compared to biological kinship.

Those in power represented themselves as members of one and the same descent group in relation to others, and a certain image of hereditary kingship was attributed to those ‘rulers’ within a certain region. Those who accepted these rulers did not care how those rulers chose a successor within their descent group, because that was not their business. Therefore the one who finally became the new mansa would certainly have argued—at least within his ‘descent group’—that he is the oldest, and thus the legitimate successor.⁹

Kinship terminology was both the condition and the result of any relationship. Still, nowadays in the Haut-Niger economically flourishing lineages attract presumed ‘members’ from far away: kinship terminology is a solid ground for the construction of continuity in a lineage. Moreover, researchers, and other outsiders, can do fieldwork only if they accept a Mande patronymic, thereby opening the possibility for kinship relations.

Bühnen ignores the omnipresence of kinship in West Africa, and wrongly states that “in a mainly pedestrian society communication maintaining kin sentiments and kin control is spatially restricted.” On the contrary, I would argue that society was represented in terms of kinship: relationships were expressed in terms of “kin sentiments.” This was not “spatially restricted:” they have always been produced in the Sudan any moment that people cooperated or conflicted. The idea that chiefdoms do not exceed fifty kilometers is therefore merely a product of Bühnen’s model; *kinship sentiments are where relations are, and hierarchy is where kinship is.*

The non-existence of an earth cult—as a sign of attachment to a territory or rule over a territory—and the omnipresence of kinship terminology undermine the crux of Bühnen’s historical scenario for the evolution in which—as Bühnen writes—“the notion of pyramidal structures overcomes the concept of a direct step from ‘segmentary society’ to the ‘state’ through an intentional process of ‘state building’.” The latter concept ignores the basic module in the construction of larger polities: the chiefdom.” Bühnen’s chiefdom has never existed in Mande, nor are there convincing data to accept his model as an ideal

type. Relations were constructed and reproduced in relation to ever-changing sociohistorical and political contexts, and thus status representations needed to be open to inversion in perspective. A single source is not sufficient to use as evidence for any relationship whatsoever in Mande.

In Mande power and authority are defined in terms of relationships. This is why the older sources and oral traditions deal with ambassadors and with tribute regulations between villages, towns, and leading families. However, there is no example of processes of total subjection, nor examples of total autonomy. Bühnen writes that I am analyzing only "special relationships." True enough, but only because other kinds of relations cannot exist in Mande: "total mutual independence" and "lasting subjection" are sociological categories which are empty regarding relations between families in Mande, or maybe even regarding any individual or group in the entire Sudan.

The sources on Mande history refer to a political discourse, and not necessarily to the evolution of polities. Since status claims are expressed in terms of relations and relations in terms of status claims, one cannot automatically interpret a story on a 'division' or 'conflict' as evidence for a momentum in the evolution of a type of society, because conflict and harmony are characteristics of the same relation between 'brothers.' Discussing the divisions in the Mali empire, as described in the *Ta'rikh as-Sudan*, Bühnen writes: "These were uneasy times." Why? Society was represented in terms of hierarchical kinship relations, and thus in terms of rivalry, but this does not prove uneasy times. The evidence for the alleged uneasy times in the alleged polities actually consists of the products of a political discourse on status within hierarchical relationships.

Mande polities cannot be defined as territorial units, and Bühnen's historical scenario for the evolution of polities must be seriously doubted by lack of evidence. Control is not over land, but over people, which is why those in power represent themselves in terms of hierarchical relations. Different contexts may demand different orientations in relation to the same group. Relations are in terms of kinship, and thus any relation is both a model for harmony and a model for rivalry and conflict. That is the main principle in the political discourse on status. The nineteenth-century history of the Haut-Niger proved that alleged conflict between 'older' and 'younger' was actually often the basis for solid cooperation.¹⁰

Mande was a "segmentary society" in Bühnen's definition, since any descent group was represented as structurally equivalent, by attributing seniority to the temporary inferior. This representation of a relationship was the only way to interfere with other people's business or, conversely, to cooperate.

For the period before 1800 those in power along the Niger represented themselves in terms of kinship relations and in positions in genealogies. The complexity of such a discourse in nineteenth-century Mande misled both French administrators and many historians, although there was effective rule by Kangaba, and its status was widely acknowledged. Therefore I argued that in the study of the history of West African society the pre-1800 sources must be

treated with caution. These refer to a status discourse in Mande politics, and not necessarily to real relationships in which the oldest represented legitimate right to succession of power.

Every relation is a story and that story is valid only in a certain context. Because Mande was more effectively organized in the nineteenth century than has been thought until recently, and because orally transmitted genealogies appear to be more tricky than has been thought until recently, the historical shift from the alleged Mali empire to Mande segmentary society may be no more than a barrier created by scholars.

Buhnen stated: "No, the Mali empire did not exist in the nineteenth century." I agree with this statement, but on different grounds entirely. Given the amount of contemporary sources compared to the relatively scarce testimonies from the preceding period, given the nature of these sources as part of a political discourse, and given Person's statement that 'the past' can be analyzed only by means of oral tradition when the 'present' is taken as a point of departure, I conclude with a question which is a transformation of the earlier title.¹¹ Although this question may challenge many of the categories of conventional wisdom on West African history, this formulation is methodologically the only correct question: "Was Mande already a segmentary society in the Middle Ages?"

Notes

1 C Lloyd, *The Search for the Niger* (Newton Abbot, 1974), Jansen "Draaiende put," chapter 3 Cailhié did not proceed from Kankan to Kangaba, because he heard that there was a war going on there

2 For a more elaborate description see *ibid*, chapter 4 See also Leynaud/Cisse, *Paysans Malinke*, 148-50

3 Jansen "Draaiende put," chapter 4

4 Buhnen is right that my comparison with Segu is not clear I made this comparison because the Kangaba material and the Segu material seem to confirm each other In Segu warfare was important, and the rulers represented themselves as bachelors vs unarmed female kings Such characteristics fit Mande status discourse closely, in which those in power represent themselves as 'young' and 'recent' (for instance, a 'bachelor') vs the older brother who sits 'home' next to his mother Those in power both in Segu and Kangaba represented themselves along the same principles, and neither aimed to control territory, hence my use of "state" was inappropriate

5 For these difficulties see Leynaud/ Cisse, *Paysans Malinke*, chapter 3

6 In a paper presented at the Third International Conference on Mande Studies A shortened version of this paper will appear as "The Younger Brother and the Stranger in Mande Status Discourse," in *The Younger Brother and the Stranger Kinship and Politics in West-Africa*, ed J Jansen and C Zobel (Leiden, 1996)

7 My conclusion is based on my attending several training sessions for the ceremony See my "An Ethnography of the Sunjata Epic in Kela" in *In Search of Sunjata the Mande Epic as History, Literature and Performance*, ed R A Austen (Bloomington, forthcoming) See also Jansen "Draaiende put," chapter 7

Another reason to consider the Kamabolon ceremony as a political event is that the Kamabolon sanctuary is considered to be a 'recent' construction in relation to other Kamabolon-like sanctuaries (E.g., Leynaud/Cisse, *Paysans Malinke*, 25, 148) The claim for being recent coincides with political power, so the setting of the stories about the Kamabolon in combination with the training sessions indicates that the Kamabolon ceremony celebrates

prestige, but has nothing to do with creation, control over territory, or fertility

8 For this topic, see the critical article by Walter E A van Beek "Dogon Restudied A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology*, 32 (1991), 139-65

9 Although, within the same generation, age is the most important argument, other arguments do exist—for instance, 'difference in generation' or 'being a bastard' See, e.g., C Zobel, "The Noble Griot the Construction of Mande *Jeliw*-Identities and Political Leadership as Interplay of Alternate Values," in *Younger Brother*

10 See Jansen/Zobel, "Kinship as Political Discourse the Representation of Harmony and Change in Mande," in *ibid*

11 Y Person, "Nyaani Mansa Mamadu "