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The Guest is a Hot Meal: Questioning Researchers' Identities in Mande Studies

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Introduction

Just before Ry Cooder starts a guitar solo in the song “Diaraby,” Ali Farka Toure says to him “A mine, Kulibali” (Take it, [Mister] Kulibali) A few seconds later, Ali Farka realizes what he just said, and he corrects himself by murmuring Cooder’s real name “Ry Cooderrr”¹

This is one of many examples in which the ascribed Mande patronymic (*jamu*) overruled the visitor’s original name This article aims to explore the consequences of having a *jamu*, in relation to the presentation of the self in the field as well as in relation to the collection of data Thus, it is an attempt to start an inquiry into methodological characteristics which are pertinent to Mande research, at least in Bamako and South of Bamako We will often refer to our own research data, but hope to elaborate lines which are significant, or at least recognizable, for every researcher in Mande

A *jamu* is a necessity for anyone in Mande² who aims to be taken seriously in building up social relations, without a *jamu* one does not have an identity A *jamu* gives a link to the past and to other members of society It is a prerequisite for decent behavior As Lansine Diabate from Kela stated “Anyone who does not have a *jamu*, doesn’t have/know shame” (*Jamu te mogo fen o fen na, o te maloya* [recorded by Kouyate, November 17, 1999])

Many researchers get the name of their first host (*jatigi*). So did we; Brehman Diabate acquired his patronymic from his kora teacher, the famous kora³ player Sidiki Diabate (d. 1996), and Sidiki Kouyate is the name of the father of Badigi Kouyate, a hunter from Kangaba who is often consulted by researchers because of his knowledge of Mande culture.

Others have worked with a *jamu* that sounds like their own family name. An example is the above-mentioned Cooder/Kulibali. We suppose that this was also the case with Charles Bird, who is known in Kela as "Berté." We have the impression that Peace Corps volunteers were often taught to transpose their name according to the similarities in sound. The historian David Conrad is a clear example of this principle, since both his names have been transposed; he calls himself "Daouda Kone."⁴

A transposition of the personal name along lines of similarity in sound does not imply that the researcher's individuality has been saved, and that he thus managed to transgress cultural borders. Everyone who accepts a *jamu* immediately risks falling into the deep waters of Mande culture: "Mande is like the water in a calabash; you see the bottom, but if you step in it, you will drown."⁵ The acceptance of a *jamu* inevitably results in a personal statement on Mande society as well as on the role that has to be played in this society. To a considerable extent people we meet, in public as well as in private meetings, adapt their behavior to the *jamu* with which they are confronted. Therefore, a researcher inevitably looks through glasses that give a specific dimension to the things observed. That is why we have "inverted" our identities when writing this article, thus giving predominance to the identities evoked by the *jamu* we bear, and thus stressing how important our ascribed Mande identity might be.

We all "suffer," in a certain way and to a certain extent, from the issues described by Mamadou Diawara (1985), in his article on doing research in one's own society.⁶ With a *jamu*, we always are part of a family (cf. Diawara 1985, p. 11). Any researcher who does fieldwork in Mande should therefore give account of the following items as an obligatory methodological exercise: 1) Which patronymic was chosen and how was it interpreted by the researcher as well as the informants? According to which lines was this new identity negotiated in the field? How was the patronymic used within the presentation in the field? 2) Which consequences might this have for the data collected, and for the range of interpretations possible?

We aim to explore these two points by paying attention to our own presentation in the field. The main thesis is that a researcher makes a statement on Mande society at the moment of a visit to an informant. Since the informant, who is expected to act like a *jatigi*, is meeting a person with a Mande patronymic, the researcher has already determined to a large extent the "ingredients" of the communication, thus structuring the communication

and even the data yet to be collected. Hence the title of this essay, which refers to the proverb, "The guest is a hot meal, the host has to cool him down."⁷

The dichotomy "hot-cold" is often used in Mande discourse on social change. For instance, society is hot, when it is in process of transformation, such as the period after the death of a prestigious person, when his family has to arrange the succession, or when a new age group is inaugurated, and the other age groups progress to one level higher (Jansen 1998).

Assessing the Patronymic

The idea of this article had its origin when we spent a few days together in the Mande hills, southwest of Bamako. As we were already friends, and each had a bicycle as our means of transport, and as we had to go in the same direction,⁸ we simply decided to travel together, accompanied by our friends/guides/assistants Namagan Keita (from Saguele) and Daouda Diawara (from Siby). Although the trip lasted only two days, we observed so many differences in each other's approaches that it made us examine the ideas presented here.

We both had conducted extensive research among griots—Diabate in Bamako, and Kouyate in Kela—and at that time our patronymic had looked quite self-evident. Of course, we sometimes met *hòrònw* who complained of our *nyamakala* status, but such people were not central to our research. However, when we changed topics, and both became interested in village foundation stories, we were confronted with a different situation. Now we had to work with village chiefs and notables, who were the most obvious informants for the beginning of our research on this topic. Both in Diabate's research area (the Mande hills) and in Kouyate's (the Kangaba region) collaboration with Keita *mansarenw* and other *hòrònw* was now inevitable.

Diabate's Strategy

Diabate often travelled with his kora, an instrument generating considerable interest in the rural setting. Before approaching a village he would set out the research strategy with his assistant Namagan, choosing the host in relationship to the nature of the subject of enquiry, and deciding how specifically to present the questions to be asked.⁹ Upon their arrival, Namagan would introduce himself and Diabate and state the person who had sent them. After having been accommodated they would return to elaborate the reason for their coming (*ka dantigè*). Diabate would give ten kola nuts to Namagan who would pass them on to the host with a short introduction. Afterwards, Diabate himself would often explain that he had

come to ask about the "history" (*tarikw*, *buruju*, *bòkolo*) of his host's family or the foundation story of the village or chiefdom (*dugusigicogo*, *jamanasigicogo*). From the first interviews, conducted together with Namagan, the latter insisted that he not use the term "old things or stories" (*ko kòròw*), but rather identify himself as a *jeli*-apprentice who had been sent by his adopted "father" Sidiki to improve his historical knowledge (*ka tarikw nyinin*). Diabate added to this that Sidiki had told him that the *hòrònw* often knew their history better than the *jeliw*. This strategy expressed the classical Mande learning relationship in which the student is entrusted (*ka kalifa*) to one authority by another authority. It avoided being associated with "whites" in search of secrets related to non-Muslim practices or involved in political intrigue. Diabate linked this to the concept of *tunga*: the adventurous traveling of young men seeking to gain knowledge or material wealth. Furthermore, he explained that he was a student at the university (*lakoliba*) seeking to give white people a better insight into an often-misrepresented Africa.

The assumption of a quasi griot-identity could produce several problems. In a few cases his host actually thought Diabate, equipped with a kora and a fine player of the instrument (according to Kouyate), had come to play and ask for money. Therefore, this host was afraid of expenses. Often the host would make Diabate play the kora for the village in order to postpone having to give answers. In other cases an informant said that he could not help, because he did not know the history of Sunjata's time deemed to be the domain of griots. The local history, on the other hand, was often considered a secret that the *hòrònw* protected from the *nyamakalaw* that did not remain in one place. In these cases Diabate resorted to a strategy which he had previously observed and written about (Zobel 1996; 1997), claiming that he was not a "real" *jeli*, but a "noble" *jeli*, *jeli-hòròn* who did not practice *jeliya* for material benefits, and whose identity was just as much affiliated to the *hòròn*-Traore ancestors as it was to the Diabate *jeliw*.¹⁰ In an analogical sense he compared his function of student/researcher/teacher in his home country with the mediative functions of the *jeli*.¹¹

Though these arguments often convinced the informants, problems could arise from other identity dimensions not directly linked to the *jamu*. Being not only a farmer but also a locally well-known *jèmbe*-drummer, Namagan Keita had an exceptional knowledge of the region, which was essential for the Austrian Diabate. Traveling with him still posed the problem of affiliation with his village Saguele, and thus becoming involved in inter-village rivalry. Often these tensions follow the logic of lineage relationships among the Keita and their allies. On the other hand, the degree of Mande villages' openness to guests/visitors is extremely variable, even among villages with like lineage affiliations. In "rival" territory, the weight of

powerful brokers in negotiating interviews can be considerable. Identifying and winning over these brokers, for example by referring to previous marriage alliances, was an important strategy used by Namagan.

Fortunately, in most instances the respect for the aspiration to knowledge, the morals of hospitality, and the interest to engage in a dialogue pointed beyond the limits of postmodernist skepticism.¹² Making a recording could, however, involve a considerable amount of waiting and negotiating. Spending the night was usually regarded as imperative. Sometimes, complete privacy after everybody had gone to bed was chosen, or Diabate and Keita would have to come back to see their host in the seclusion of his farmstead (*sènèkèbuguda*). Often younger kin of the informant or other people from the village would intervene in their favor. Thus, interviews frequently involved the rephrasing of questions and answers by third persons. This was especially the case in larger assemblies held for the occasion, where the fear of exposure could lead to the 'hot' question being passed from one authority to the next without ever getting answered.

During interviews Diabate would sometimes offer snuff (*siramugu*) to his interlocutor, following the idea that goods rather than money would express the respect (*bònya*) quintessential to the relationship with old people in Mande. Therefore gifts of money were usually given only when the informant was obviously in need of help, or explicitly desired it. If his interlocutor wished, Diabate would submit a copy of the recording to him, or send photos. During his kora performances he frequently was asked to praise certain members of the village community and received small sums of money.

*Kouyate's Strategy*¹³

Kouyate doesn't play an instrument, and is not as fluent in the Bamanakan as Diabate is (which didn't spare him having to recite some praise-poetry learned in Kela when Diabate was playing in Massakoloma). Although he did his presentation and interview on his own a few times, most of the time this was done by Daouda Diawara, a friendly and polite young man who did not have a knowledge of the region comparable to Namagan's.

Kouyate had instructed Diawara to say that he (Kouyate) was sent for a talk (*baro*) about the village foundation (*dugusigicogo*) and the first village chiefs. Diawara was forbidden to use the word *tariku*, since this term would inevitably complicate things, because it means "secret" in certain contexts. Moreover, Diawara had to stress that Kouyate had nothing to do with development. Diawara often said that they had come to know the *togo*

("name," "reputation") of the village; the use of this term in this context was Diawara's own contribution.

Kouyate deliberately followed traditional patterns when giving account (*ka dantigè*) of his visit; he let himself being introduced (cf. Diawara 1985, 9), and he emphasized that he was sent by others, thus using a Mande diplomatic strategy.¹⁴ the most remarkable aspect of Diawara's presentation was that he used a wide range of ever-changing themes when he introduced Kouyate, and often added superfluous information. Diawara's introduction was never the same, and always a bit terrifying for Kouyate, who, however, never corrected Diawara in public.

Moreover, Kouyate had a methodological problem due to the fact that the Keita and Kouyate have a joking relationship with each other. Thus, on his arrival people could react with "jokes" like "Kouyate are killed here" or "Kouyate isn't a *jamu*" or "Kouyate are not welcome here." To this he reacted by replying the standard answer "Keita are not serious people." To this he immediately added that his patronymic was nothing but a surname once given to him by his first host, and, since he did not want to insult/disrespect (*dògòya*) his first host, he stuck with it. This reply was always received with approval, and stopped the joking henceforth. However, this denial of his Kouyate identity was in contrast with his behavior during previous fieldwork among griots.

When Kouyate was confronted with his *nyamakala* status, he replied that he was the son of the legendary griotte Siramori Diabate (d. 1989). He claimed that she was his first host. Since she was married to the 'balafon'¹⁵ player Nankoman Kouyate (d. 1998), he had got the patronymic Kouyate. This explanation was always satisfactory, and turned the *horon*'s "disgust" of the Kouyate's *nyamakala* status into admiration, since Siramori Diabate is a widely appreciated and famous griotte. However, although to many people (even in Kela) it sounds more plausible than the real truth, this story was a construct, because Kouyate's relation with Siramori had become close only during a latter stage of his research. He had been introduced to her by his first host, Badigi Kouyate, who was a "classificatory" younger brother of Siramori's husband, and thus he had the right to call her "my wife." Thus, Siramori was the Dutchman Kouyate's mother only in a classificatory sense.

In general each village chief agreed without hesitation to Kouyate's request to record the village foundation story. Recordings were made often immediately after the arrival. Sometimes, the village chief told the story himself, sometimes he called some members of the village council in order to help him. After the recording, Kouyate donated "kola nut money" (*wòròsongo*) in order to express his respect. Amounts were not substantial, and varied from 500 F CFA or 1,000 F CFA for one person up to 5,000 F

CFA for a group of persons. Moreover, Kouyate made pictures of the village chiefs, and sent these to them afterwards. Often, meals were offered by the village chiefs before the recording or before the departure, and a place to sleep was also easily found at the village chief's compound.

The Confrontation

After having witnessed Diabate's failure in arranging an interview with the village chief of Massakoloma, Daouda Diawara remarked (to Kouyate) that he was so glad that Kouyate did not use kola nuts in his presentation, but did it the modern way, with money. Kola nuts, Diawara argued, only complicate things, since they are the starting point of a serious relationship, and thus they make people fantasize about what they will get from their relationship with the researcher. This point of view came as a shock to Kouyate, who had esteemed Diabate's approach as superior, and had watched Diabate's way of giving account of his "mission" with admiration.

In Massakoloma, Diabate gave a two hour performance on the village square, but this did not result in an interview with the village chief, who was afraid that the white man would misunderstand his words (see note 12). The next day, when Kouyate had left Massakoloma, Diabate discussed the chief's reaction with one of the latter's younger brothers and with his assistant Namagan, and they repeated the village chief's argument.

Diabate reached the conclusion that though the kola nuts and his elaborate self-presentation in Mandinka language gave weight to the encounter—maybe made him a "hot meal" to handle—its underlying interpretation was prefigured by the chief's memories of the colonial situation.

It was clear that Kouyate seemed to be gaining time and producing results with his detached method which involved not talking too much, refraining from asking questions in Maninkakan, also not these questions were inspired by what he understood from the informants' words, keeping a low profile, and predominantly working with village chiefs only. His strategy of "being sent" seems to have been well/positively interpreted by the people he wanted to talk with.

To the contrary, Diabate's engagement in local identitary games, involving his Diabate-*jeli* image and that of his Keita host-assistant, appeared to sometimes slow down or impede the research process. (However, the choice of alternative informants and information gained by conversations while waiting or performing, could also lead to new insights.)¹⁶

Whatever its implications, both of us realized on this occasion that our presentation was a statement on society, yes, even to some extent a

summary of our research in the past years. Diabate had made an extensive study aimed at the deconstruction of griot identities (Zobel 1996a, 1997). He had adopted the segmentary structural relativity of *jeli* self-presentations by making personal use of the concept of *jeli-hòròn*, which plays at the same time on both the ambiguity of the origins of all *jeli*-families other than the Kouyate, and the multiple meaning of *hòròn* as a term for a social group, as well as a complex of values related to honor. Similarly, reference to the figure of the outsider in search for knowledge had emerged within his research on Mande political and religious values (Zobel 1996b).

Kouyate's research, on the other hand, had stressed that both so-called historical traditions and identities are contemporary context-bound constructions that serve to demonstrate the status of a person or a group (cf. Jansen 1996). Now he was executing his own premises by presenting himself as the son of Siramori Diabate, by stressing the superficial character of his Kouyate identity, by saying that he was sent, thereby throwing the final responsibility of his work upon someone else, etc.

Conclusion

A *jamu* is negotiable; it is a context-bound status. The role models necessary to perform successfully a person with a particular *jamu* are open to change and variation, but yet have to deal with images and values that permeate communication in Mande. We think that a foreigner is subject, although to a lesser extent than a researcher born in Mande who is doing research on a spot where people know him (cf. Diawara 1985), to the intricacies of the identities related to *jamu*. As soon he accepts one, it permeates his acts of communication. Yet, as the chief of Massakoloma's reminder of the colonial experience illustrates, the researcher is also confronted with relationships that go beyond the framework of Mande social organization. Colonial or metropolitan associations with the researcher, the heterogeneity of sociopolitical status and individual specificity of villages and informants are important constitutives in the complex reality in which an Africanist is working. This reality may not be accounted for solely by cultural logic; it also contains factors stemming from the singularities of historical conjuncture (Bazin 1996, 408). We argue that, regarding Mande studies, the *jamu*-choice in its context is just such a "singularity of historical conjuncture" which demands serious and systematic investigation.

Nevertheless, the use of the *jamu* generates many questions on research and researchers. In how far is Bird's work "maraboutized" by his Berte identity? Or did he often change *jamu*? Is it a coincidence that Conrad finds so much interesting material on women sorcerers, or is this the result of his

Kone identity, of being an alleged descendant of Sogolon Kejugu Kone, Sunjata's mother? And what about the impact of the *jamu* when you marry someone from Mande and henceforth work under the *jamu* of your partner? And what about all those crypto-Diagate and crypto-Kouyate who are dominating contemporary studies on griotism in Mali? How biased are their views? Must we all henceforth publish under our Mande patronymic—as we did this time—as an ultimate attempt to try to give account of the constructed character of our research data?

Contributions on fieldwork often discuss the dynamics in long-term relationships between researcher and informants. However, it must be clear that, for Mande, the first presentation may have the biggest impact on whatever relation, since the researcher has already his *jamu*. Indeed, Mande researchers are hot meals that are methodologically difficult to cool down. Incorrect performance of a *jamu* may result in shameful situations, according to the Mande people.

Notes

- 1 Alí Farka Toure with Ry Cooder, *Talking Timbuktu* (World Circuit HNCD 1381), at 2'39"
- 2 The area visited in this article is partly in Mali and partly in Guinea
- 3 A kora is a lute/guitar-like instrument, with 20 or so plucked strings
- 4 Personal communication to Kouyate, August 1994
- 5 An expression, part of the praise lines for the Diawara, heard by Kouyate in Kela. On the tape of Kouyate's recording of the Sunjata epic, it sounds like 'Mande is like the water in the palm of your hand ('tegerokonoji' instead of 'dagarokònoji'), etc.' (published as Jansen et al. 1995, p. 171)
- 6 However, of course, a big difference is that foreign researchers do not master languages as well as members of a society, and may not be used to the living conditions in the field (cf. Diawara 1985, p. 7)
- 7 Taken from Jansen et al. 1995, pp. 100, 105, and 108. In Maninkakan: *Lolan siman gwe di, jatigi l'i fela* (In Bamanakan: *Dunan ye siman gwe ye, jatigi b'a fifa*). Translated as 'L'étranger est un plat, l'hôte peut souffler la-dessus'. Lansine Diagate puts this expression in the mouth of Sunjata each time he agrees to the conditions set by the kings he visits during his exile. Note that the best translation of *lolan* is guest or visitor, and not the often-used 'stranger'.
- 8 Diagate and Kouyate left Siby on February 23, 1997. Diagate had to go to Massakoloma and Karanda. Kouyate was heading for the former canton of Bacama, West of Narena. The first night was spent in Saguele, the second night in Massakoloma. All travel was done on bike.
- 9 Research involved gaining the multiple historical perspectives of different lineages and specialist groups.

10. The Buffalo of Do, a famous episode of the Sunjata epic, relates the emergence of Traore and Diabate branches from one family.
11. To Diabate's great surprise Namagan had warned him in a conversation about potential archival storage of recordings in Bamako not to say anything about it to the local population. The argument was that for reasons of rivalry, the farther away the place was that knowledge was put to use, the higher the possibilities would be to obtain information. Therefore Diabate associated the gathering of knowledge with writing and teaching activities in a faraway place in which information would not have local repercussions. Of course, this claim is to a certain extent illusory and leaves ethical problems of anthropological representation to be solved.
12. Frequently working with informants who had experienced colonial rule, Diabate's presence was sometimes interpreted within the context of colonial or neo-colonial relationships. This could lead to being accused of being an agent charged with compiling a 'dossier' to be politically used against their interests. Consequently his tape recorder was called 'politiki radiyo' on one occasion. When Diabate and Kouyate encountered the village chief of Massakoloma, he refused to give information or accept the kola nuts Diabate had offered. He explained his behavior by relating the following episode:
13. 'Upon their arrival on the African coast the 'whites' asked a man sitting under a ntômi tree for the name of the place they were in. The man thought they were asking for the name of the tree's fruits and said they were called 'dakaro.' Ever since the whites have been calling the place Dakar.' Therefore it would not make sense to tell Diabate anything, because he would just misunderstand it and maybe even use it against him.
14. This paradigmatic situation of cross-cultural non-understanding centers around a story, which is an example of numerous historical myths about white people that Diabate heard in Mande. Michel Leiris's account (1996 [1934]) of the hostilities encountered by Griaule and his team during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition produced a scandal. Even though times have changed, situations where 'rien ne va plus' are still an embarrassment to anthropologists. The Massakoloma episode touches upon postmodernist debates (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Obeyesekere 1992 vs. Sahlins 1995) on the status of anthropological knowledge: to what extent is intercultural understanding/translation possible? Is this process not structured by the diverging interests of the researcher and informants, and the symmetries of power in the global order? Although very interesting and relevant to anthropological fieldwork, these topics are different from those discussed in this article in which we focus on Mande prerequisites and role models for decent communication that are relevant for any visitor whatever his ethnic or historical background.

- 15 Until 1999 my Mande 'identity' had been a griot, called Sidiki Kouyate. During my 1999 fieldwork, I worked 'under the cover of' a different patronymic. Malian friends of noble origin had advised me to work as Sidiki Kante—a blacksmith patronymic—in the Sobara region, in order to facilitate information exchange about Komo, a cult from which griots are excluded. I had not expected problems in adapting my role model, since both Kouyate and Kante lean on a artisan's identity and a joking relationship with the Keita, the alleged descendants of Sunjata. However, it soon appeared I had been completely miseducated in the period 1988–1999 for a successful performance as a blacksmith, even the (performance of the) obligatory jokes with the Keita were different in form and content. Suddenly I found myself in a different universe. This was much to the amusement of Daouda Diawara from Siby, whom I had known since 1996, and who accompanied me on my first trip in the Sobara region.
- 16 In October 1994, after having conducted extensive fieldwork, on the day of his departure from Kela, a friend of Kouyate had told him confidentially that he (Kouyate) 'had always done it wrong' by saying that he had come himself, on his own responsibility. He was supposed, in any circumstance, to present himself as someone being sent by others (see also chapter 2 in Jansen 2000).
- 17 A balafon is a type of marimba, with wooden keys and resonating calabash gourds beneath the keys.
- 18 The degree of Diabate's and Kouyate's different approaches was also reflected in their assistants' identities. Kouyate's assistant Daouda lived in a regional center where French was spoken, and he had modern entrepreneurial aspirations, while Diabate's assistant Namagan hardly spoke French, was a local musician besides being a farmer, and used his research travels with Diabate for a parallel quest of magical knowledge.

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