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"You Eat Beans!": Kin-based Joking Relationships, Obligations, and Identity in Urban Mali

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“YOU EAT BEANS!”:

**KIN-BASED JOKING RELATIONSHIPS, OBLIGATIONS, AND
IDENTITY IN URBAN MALI**

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Anthropology Department

Macalester College

April 30, 2007

Rachel Jones ©

ABSTRACT

For people in urban environments, practices and beliefs allowing creation of supportive social relationships are important for dealing with economic and other insecurities. This paper examines roles of sinankuɲa, a kin-based joking relationship, in Bamako, Mali. I argue that people in Bamako use and negotiate practices and beliefs associated with sinankuɲa for practical purposes. Participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and historical research were used to examine ways that Malians use this joking relationship to promote social cohesion, circumvent the power of the state, provide opportunities for economic gain, and preserve cultural histories and identities in a rapidly changing urban environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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MAPS

Figure 1 – Political Map of Mali (Bingen, Robinson, and Staatz 2000:ii)

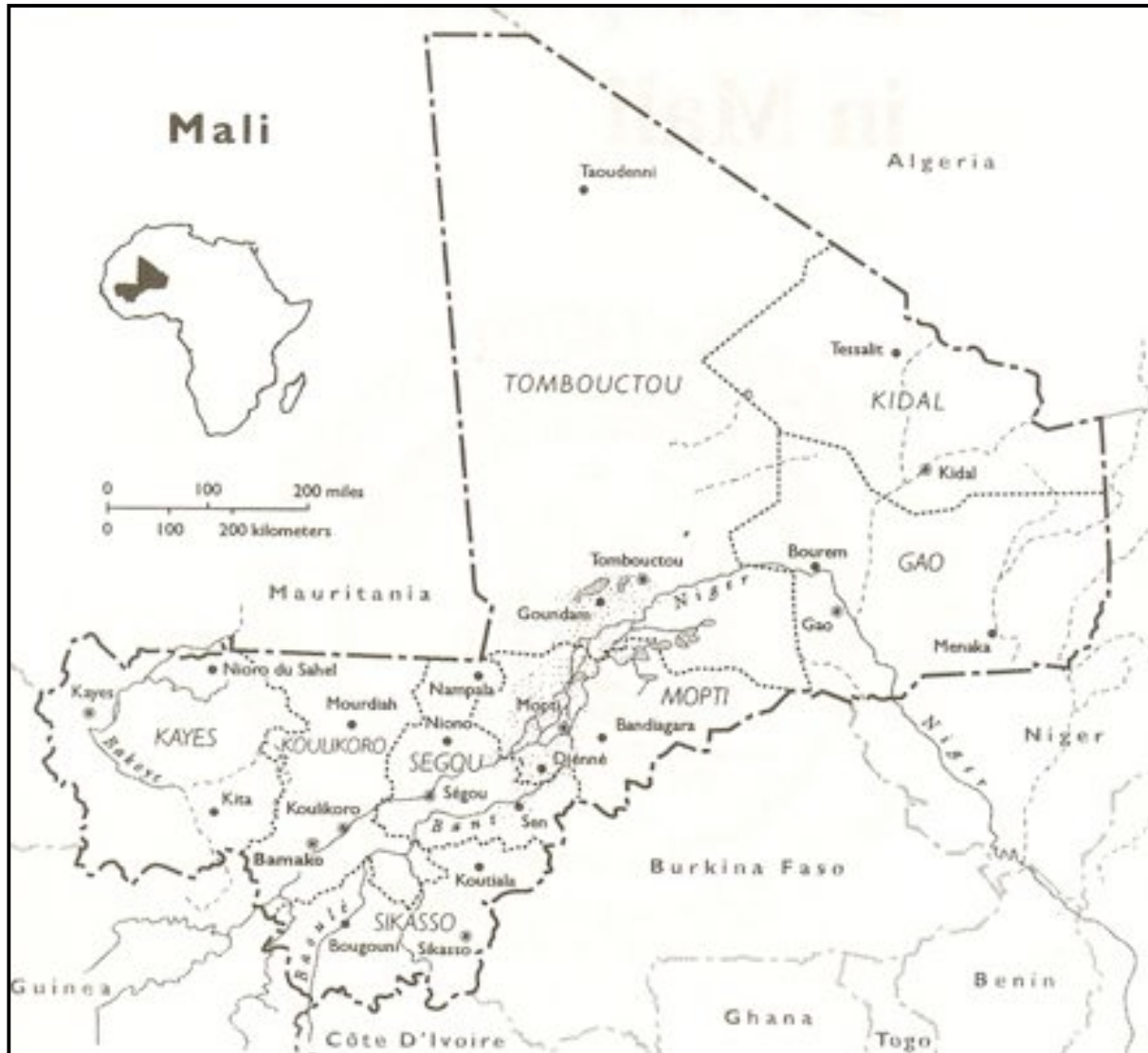


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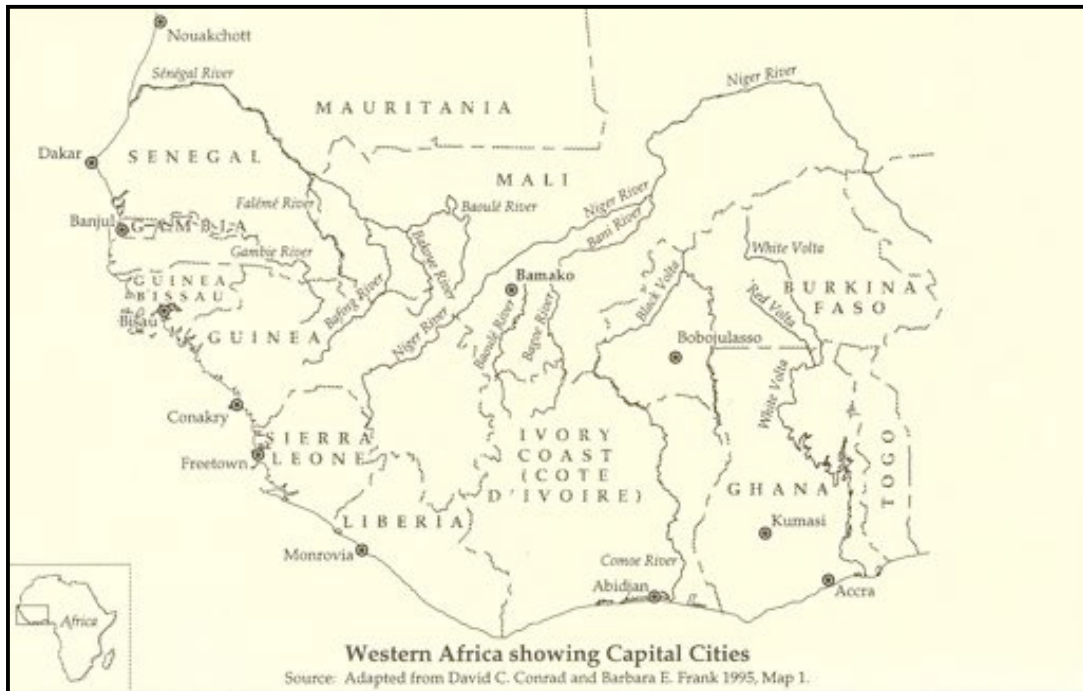
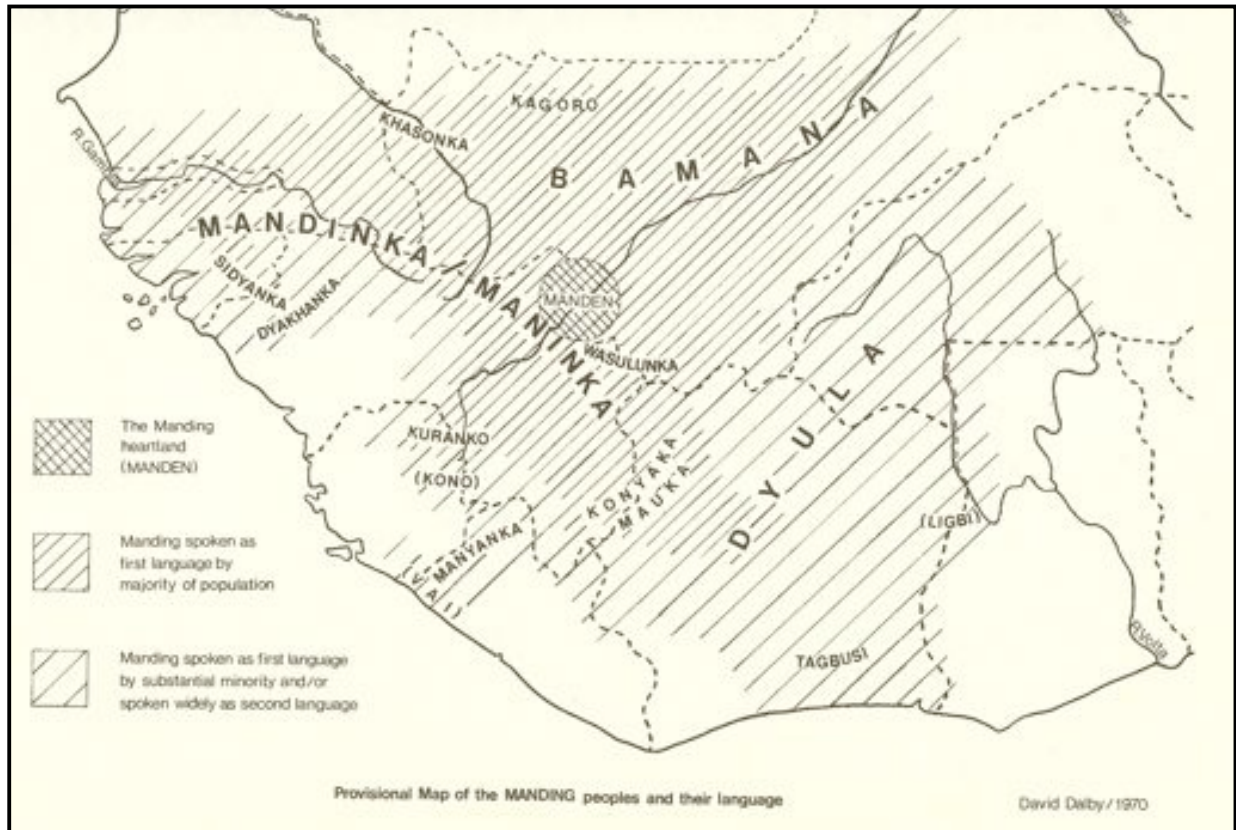


Figure 3 – Map of Dispersion of Mande People (Dalby 1971:9)



NOTE ON LANGUAGE

I have chosen to use the Bamana alphabet, a recently created writing system, for phrases and nouns, with the exception of last names. Because of this, the spellings of many words within this paper differ from commonly used spellings. For example, “Jula” is the Bamana spelling for an ethnic group, while “Dioula” is the spelling used regularly in French and English texts. I have chosen to use the Bamana alphabet because it more closely resembles actual speech. *Sinankuɲa*, the joking relationship that is the focus of this paper, has been spelled in various ways; the most common are “senankuya” and “senenkunya.” The word Mande, the predominant ethnic group in Mali, can be written as Mandé, Manding, Mandingo, Mandingue, or Manden.

However, when writing patronyms, or last names, I have chosen to retain the French spelling. Because patronyms, or *jamuw*, have been written using French spellings for over a century, they are more recognizable spelled the French way than with the Bamana alphabet.

After much deliberation, I decided to use the actual patronyms of informants, rather than giving them pseudonyms. While this does take out a layer of anonymity which is normally imposed by anthropologists, it seemed that in changing the names, I would distort the experiences and stories of the informants because *sinankuɲa* and the manner in which it is practiced is based upon specific patronyms. Additionally, large numbers of people in Mali have the same last name, assuring some degree of anonymity. I will refer to informants by their actual *jamu*, using the French “M.” for monsieur (meaning this person is a man), and the French “Mme” for madame (meaning this person is a married woman). Married women’s names will be written in this format: “Mme (father’s *jamu*) (husband’s *jamu*).” Women in Mali generally retain their family’s *jamu* after marriage, and use it as secondary to their husband’s *jamu*. For example, women are commonly addressed by their husband’s *jamu* (Mme Coulibaly), but when writing out their name or upon being asked, they will identify using both *jamuw* (Mme Koné Coulibaly).

BAMANA ALPHABET

The majority of letters in the Bamana alphabet (*bamana sigini*) are similar to those used in English, and I have included explanations of letters only when they differ from English. Furthermore, the majority of the consonants and all of the vowels can be nasalized, and all of the vowels can become long vowels. For example, *uburu* is a different word than *ubuuru*. Nouns become plural by adding /w/ to the end of the word.

<u>Bamana Letters</u>	<u>English Pronunciation</u>	<u>English Approximate</u>
<i>Consonants</i>		
b		
c	ch	change
d		
f		
g		
h		
j		
k		
l		
m		
n		
ŋ	gne	annual
ɲ	ng	sing
p		
r		
s		
ʃ	sh	shoe
t		
w		
t		
z		
<i>Vowels</i>		
a		father
e		bate
ɛ		bet
i		seat
o		boat
ɔ		bought
u		book

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

“Sinankuɲa est la vie quotidienne.”

Joking in Mali is ubiquitous. On one of my first afternoons in Bamako as a study abroad student in 2006, I was riding with a group of Americans and Malians and we got pulled over by the police for having too many people in the car. M. Coulibaly, who was driving at the time, got out of the car and talked with the police officer. In just a few minutes, M. Coulibaly returned and said he did not get a ticket because the officer was his *cousin*. From this explanation, I assumed that the policeman was part of his family, a consanguineally linked cousin. It made sense that a police officer would not give a ticket to a family member. However, I was soon to find out that the link between M. Coulibaly and the police officer was not one of consanguineal or affinal kinship. Rather, the two were linked by a kin-based joking relationship called *sinankuɲa*.

This paper examines the role of *sinankuɲa* in present day Bamako, the capital city of Mali. Often described as a “contract” or “pact,” *sinankuɲa* is a joking relationship that is based on shared cultural histories and links people from specific families, ethnic groups, and castes. People recognize *sinanku*, or joking partners, by their last names. From a brief joke with a new acquaintance to a lengthy joking session with an old friend, *sinankuɲa* provides people with a way to make and strengthen relationships.

Yet *sinankuɲa* is more than just jokes. It can be the basis for avoiding conflict in a tense situation or for improving one’s social or economic situation. Individuals must constantly choose to enact and utilize *sinankuɲa*, and they do so in different ways depending upon the people involved and the situation. In this paper, I will argue that *sinankuɲa* is a cultural practice that people negotiate and use for practical reasons. Whether

sinankuɲa is invoked in order to bargain down a price in the market, have a laugh with friends, or ameliorate a difficult situation, it allows people to negotiate relationships. *Sinankuɲa*'s ability to drastically change situations takes on a different significance in an urban environment, especially in the way it allows strangers to establish a bond instantly. This paper will therefore look at the quotidian practice of *sinankuɲa* within the urban environment of Bamako, arguing that it is a joking relationship that people negotiate and use for practical purposes.

Sinankuɲa is referred to in French as *cousinage à plaisanterie*, and the people who joke are called *cousins/cousines* in French and *sinankuw* in Bamanankan. In academic literature, *sinankuɲa* has been referred to by numerous names. Presently most scholars classify it as a "joking relationship," but it has also been referred to as a "joking alliance." Some have referred to it as "joking kinship," or "parenté à plaisanterie" in French, because of its similarity to other kinship-based joking relationships, such as those between grandparents and grandchildren. In this paper, I have chosen to describe *sinankuɲa* as a joking relationship, primarily using the Bamanankan word *sinankuɲa* itself instead of attempting an English translation.

FIELD SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

During the spring of 2006, I studied abroad with the School for International Training in Mali. I lived with a homestay family in Bamako during my first months in the country, while attending classes. During the last month of the program, we had the option of staying in Bamako or leaving the city to live elsewhere while we researched and wrote our independent study projects. Partly because of advice from professors and friends that

sinankuɲa works the same everywhere in Mali, and partly because I felt at home in the city, I decided to stay in Bamako.

Yet life in Bamako is not the antithesis of rural life. People frequently move between rural and urban areas. Within a *quartier* – or neighborhood – in Bamako, everyone seems to know everyone else, and there is a small community feel. Greetings ring in the air as you walk down the streets. Family members greet family members, friends say hello to friends, and strangers make new acquaintances. In fact, it was this environment that prompted my interest in *sinankuɲa*. As a part of the study abroad program, homestay families gave the students Malian names, and I was named Habibata Traoré. Habibata is the name of an older sister in the family, and Traoré is the last name, or *jamu*, of the family with whom I lived. In Malian society, an individual's patronym conveys important aspects of his or her identity, locating them socially, geographically, and historically. Upon being given a new Malian identity, I began to learn how to greet people in Bamanankan. Greeting another person can take anywhere from a minute to upwards of ten minutes, and it was during this process of learning how to greet that I first observed the centrality of *sinankuɲa* to everyday life in Bamako. Being a Traoré, I was often the butt of many jokes by Diarras, Konés, and Coulibalys. Thus, my curiosity in *sinankuɲa* was partially influenced by a desire to be able to participate more fully in the joking myself. Through countless introductions, conversations, and yelled greetings in the streets, I began to learn how *sinankuɲa* is a part of “la vie quotidienne.”

Much of the research I conducted was through participant observation, watching people joke and joking myself. Even before beginning to explicitly research *sinankuɲa*, I spent over two months living in a household where people – myself included – regularly

joked with visitors and neighbors. During the month I spent researching the joking relationship, I did systematic observations in several locations around Bamako, such as in the market, near the large mosque downtown, and in a couple *quartiers*. I also spoke with Malian scholars and academics about *sinankuɲa*, and their gracious remarks helped steer me in interesting directions. I conducted eight ethnographic interviews, and it was during this process that I learned about the ways *sinankuɲa* functions outside of joking. People told me stories of *sinankuɲa* diffusing conflict and forming social and economic obligations between people. Many of these interviews were with elderly inhabitants of Bamako because of their generally greater knowledge on the particulars and history of *sinankuɲa*. I also purposely chose *sinankuw*, or joking partners, who were married to each other because of an interest in how gender and marriage affect *sinankuɲa*. See Appendix 1 for more details on methodology. Following the completion of my initial independent study project on *sinankuɲa*, I returned to my studies at Macalester College, where I continued researching *sinankuɲa*, focusing on scholarly work on the topic.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PAPER

As with any academic undertaking, this paper has limitations. The most central limitation of my research is that of language. I conducted all ethnographic interviews in French, which is a second language for both me and my informants. In attempting to circumvent this issue as much as possible, I often asked people how they would say things in Bamanankan, instead of having them translate everything into French. However, my language skills in Bamanankan are quite limited, and it is by working with Malian instructors and friends that many of the quotes contained within this paper were translated.

This paper is also limited in its scope and scale. Because I was unfamiliar with the scholarly work on joking relationships prior to returning to Macalester College, I was unaware that many of my observations had been previously discussed in anthropological literature. Thus, this paper became more focused on how people actually enact *sinankuɲa*, rather than other aspects of the practice, such as the history and structure of the relationship. Additionally, as is the case in all fieldwork, the time I had to actually conduct interviews and participant observation was limited.

Furthermore, my position as a *tubabu*, or white, American woman undeniably affected the information people chose to share with me and the way in which they presented it. *Sinankuɲa* is often publicly constructed as a “cultural” practice of which people should be proud. Many politicians, historians, griots, and others emphasize the good and beneficial aspects of *sinankuɲa*. In contrast, other “cultural” practices, such as excision and the role of women, are frequently deemed bad or not modern, and people often attempt to defend or downplay the role of these “traditional” practices in current Malian society. Thus, because of my position as a western researcher interested in “traditional” beliefs and practices, people were more willing to speak to me about a cultural practice that they knew was readily approved by Westerners. This allowed me to talk more freely and openly with people upon first acquaintance. Many of the people with whom I spoke did not hesitate to explain to me that I should return to the United States and tell everyone the benefits of *sinankuɲa*. Much of the interview information contained in this paper, particularly quotes, is thus largely a product of how people want *sinankuɲa* to be viewed by a Western audience. This may have resulted in an idealized picture of *sinankuɲa*. I do hope that I have done my informants

justice and that I have been able to describe the complexity of *sinankuɲa* within the context of their daily lives.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper is to explore how people use and negotiate the social practice of *sinankuɲa* within the urban environment of Bamako. Following the introduction, the second chapter deals with the theoretical approaches that have been applied to kinship in general and joking relationships in particular. Through applying Bourdieu's (1990, 2006a, 2006b) critiques of the conceptualization of kinship in anthropology to joking relationships, I argue for interpreting *sinankuɲa* as a joking relationship that is practical. I will assert that individuals shape the nature of the practice, in contrast to other interpretations of joking relationships that have focused on how perceived social rules determine such practices. Individuals have the option of ignoring a *sinanku* relationship, paying it a quick lip service during a greeting, participating in extended joking, calling upon obligations from *sinanku*, or even invoking *sinankuɲa* in a tense situation to avoid conflict. Yet these are all choices that people make. The structure of *sinankuɲa* never predetermines how people will act in a situation; it only provides a framework for possible engagement.

The third chapter focuses on the background of *sinankuɲa* through examining the history of the *Mande* area. The fourth chapter describes the cultural setting within which *sinankuɲa* is located, focusing on ethnic identity, patronyms, the caste system, religion, and other joking relationships besides *sinankuɲa* in *Mande* society. Chapter five describes Bamako, the setting of this paper, looking at the history of the city as well as its current state. The sixth chapter focuses on the nuts and bolts of *sinankuɲa*, including definitions of the practice, the various kinds of *sinankuɲa*, and the origins of the practice. Chapter seven looks

at *sinankuṇa* in practice, describing the jokes that people use, the ways in which age and gender affect *sinankuṇa*, and the obligations that can come as a result of the relationship. The eighth and final chapter analyzes *sinankuṇa*, arguing it is a ritualized practice enacted within a liminal space, about which people have differing amounts of knowledge, and concluding that people use *sinankuṇa* for practical purposes.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL APPROACH

“...the genealogical relationship never completely predetermines the relationship between the individuals it unites.”
– Pierre Bourdieu 1990:170

Sinankuṇa is a social practice that individuals invoke and utilize on a daily basis and is an example of the larger cultural phenomenon of “joking relationships.” Through situating an analysis of *sinankuṇa* within scholarly work on joking relationships in particular and kinship in general, this chapter examines past interpretations of joking relationships and lays out the theoretical framework used in this paper.

KINSHIP AND JOKING RELATIONSHIPS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Historically, kinship has been central to the development of the discipline of anthropology. Ideas on joking relationships, especially joking kinship, were developed parallel to those about kinship and thus are closely linked to the development of theory within the study of kinship. Anthropologists’ desire to find universal theories during the mid-twentieth century greatly influenced the way in which kinship and joking were conceptualized. They sought to see how joking relationships were situated within the larger social structure, rather than focusing on actual joking behavior (Apte 1985:34). This resulted in interpretations of kinship and joking that were highly formalistic and structured, leaving little role for agency of individuals.

According to Mahadev Apte (1985), scholars have used more than fifty different phrases and terms to describe various aspects of joking relationships (1985:268, n. 7). Indeed, the diversity and complexity of joking relationships have been a challenge for anthropologists, particularly for those who hoped to put forward universal theories. These were largely developed within functionalist or structuralist frameworks.

Functionalism and Structuralism in Joking Relationships

Joking relationships were initially conceptualized as a type of alliance. Emile Durkheim was the first to write on the theoretical aspects of alliances, but it was his nephew, Marcel Mauss (1928), who really developed the alliance theory (Buchler and Selby 1968:16). In his article on “Parentés à Plaisanterie” (Joking Kinship), Mauss used the examples of Melanesia and North American Plains Indians. He described joking relationships among the Crow between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, as well as between other kin outside of the nuclear family. Mauss contended that these relationships have a psychological and material function. For him, exchange was a uniting factor among many types of social activities, including not only joking kinship but also potlatch. He proposed that there was an innate force within the object of exchange itself that sought symmetry and reciprocity (1928:6-10). Robert Lowie (1947[1920]) was also one of the early writers on joking relationships, and he too discussed the practice in functional terms, describing joking relationships among the Crow and Hidatsa as “privileged familiarity” (1947[1920]:100-101).

It was Claude Lévi-Strauss who pushed the concept of exchange still further, arguing that the act of exchange itself has a positive value, regardless of the object that is being exchanged (Buchler and Selby 1968:16). Lévi-Strauss contended that exchange is a “universal means of ensuring interlocking of [society’s] constituent parts” (Buchler and Selby 1968:106). Lévi-Strauss’s choice of words demonstrates an inherent assumption of these alliance theories: specifically, that a universal theory of alliances is possible, and generally, that a universal theory of any kind is possible. Buchler and Selby point out that alliance theory is a convenient antidote to British social structuralism (1968:129).

British anthropologists have been central to the historical development of theories on joking relationships. One such theorist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949, 1950), focused on standardized or formalized jokes in preliterate societies. For him, the fundamental social structure is kinship, and he looked for common elements in joking relationships in different societies. In his view, joking is a way of upholding social order and is embedded in teleological and psychological explanations (Apte 1985:56-58). Radcliffe-Brown argued that joking can be interpreted as “the means of establishing and maintaining social equilibrium” (1949:135). He differentiated between two kinds of joking relationships: symmetrical and asymmetrical. In the first kind, both people involved can mock and tease the other; in the latter, only one person is allowed to joke. In his eyes, joking relationships are a “peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism” in which there is a charade of hostility and rivalry veiling a real friendliness between the two (1940:195-196).

While British anthropologists were focusing on the social structure of societies, French anthropologists were also interested in structuralism, but in significantly different ways. While Radcliffe-Brown was a materialist who saw social structure not as a model based upon reality, but as an objective reality itself, French structuralists, such as Lévi-Strauss, were idealists, who believed their models of society were just that, models. Styling his research after Ferdinand de Saussure’s research in linguistics, Lévi-Strauss’ aim was to understand the structure of one society, and then apply it to other societies, ultimately finding the structure behind all human behavior. In contrast, British structural functionalists, such as Radcliffe-Brown, were more interested in how social structure operated to meet human needs. Neither of these groups of theorists was interested in the meaning behind social practices, but instead attempted to develop universal theories.

Another French structuralist, Marcel Griaule (1948), responded to Radcliffe-Brown's comments on joking relationships by proposing the notion of "alliance cathartique," which for him is a more general term than "joking relationships." Griaule argued that these relationships are more complicated than just jokes, and maintained that the bond of *mangou* (the Dogon word for joking relationships) between the Bozo and Dogon ethnic groups is founded on religious and metaphysical principles. Griaule shifted emphasis from the function of joking to its mythic origins (Hagberg 2006:863). Radcliffe-Brown rejected Griaule's concept of "alliance." Instead, Radcliffe-Brown saw such joking as a relationship of "friendship." He contrasts this friendship relation to other relations of "solidarity." The difference between the two kinds of relations for Radcliffe-Brown is kinship; relations of solidarity are created by kinship or by being a member of a group, such as a clan or lineage. Friendship relations, on the other hand, are between people or groups that continually exchange goods or services, creating obligations between people not linked by kinship (1949:135-138). Elsewhere, Radcliffe-Brown focused on joking relationships within families, and argued for a comparative, cross-cultural study of joking relationships (1949:138; 1950:57; 1977:249).

During this same period, another group of scholars was also debating joking relationships. This debate occurred among anthropologists in the academic journal *Man* between 1944-1958, sparked by an article by R.E. Moreau (1944). He described a joking relationship called *utani* that existed both among and between various ethnic groups in the south of Tanganyika Territory (now Tanzania), which originated from an antagonism between two groups. Moreau goes on to describe other aspects of joking within the *utani* practice, yet it is on the topic of the origin of joking relationships that the debate began

(1944:386-388). Monica Wilson (1957) and Philip H. Gulliver (1957, 1958) both responded to Moreau seven years later, supporting his contention that the practice of *utani* is based upon antagonism between two groups. Wilson, speaking about the Nyakyusa, and Gulliver, about the Songea Ngoni, both of Tanganyika, agreed that *utani* is a relatively new phenomenon that developed following colonialism. They both contend that *utani* was created between groups that formerly fought with each other, yet respected one another as warriors, noting the similarities between *utani* and the previously present joking relationship between cross-cousins. Gulliver also added that *utani* was created following migration of Ngoni, where they came into contact with new groups of people (1957:176). C. M. N. White (1957) responded to these articles later that year, arguing that the Luvala of Central Africa did not practice any formalized joking, except in urban areas where other groups joked with them (1957:187). In 1958, Vernon Reynolds also questioned the arguments of Wilson and Gulliver, contending that there was an intertribal *utani* relationship further north in Tanganyika before large groups of people began migrating. Reynolds based this argument on evidence from the joking relationship between the Saramo-Nyamwezi (1958:29-30). Gulliver then responded that intratribal joking relationships undoubtedly existed prior to colonialism, but intertribal *utani* was a different matter. Gulliver did note that large scale migrations occurred very early in the twentieth century, meaning that intertribal *utani*, while comparatively new, was actually well established at the time they were writing (1958:145).

This discussion, while interesting ethnographically, is very location specific. All of the groups discussed in the debate are from East Central Africa. Yet, as a result of functionalists' and structuralists' desire for a universal theory of joking, the findings in this

debate have been applied outside of this context, often making for uninformed, ahistorical, and unsubstantiated comparisons (see O'Bannon 2005).

Different Kinds of Joking Relationships

Other scholars in the late 1960s and 1970s discussed joking relationships following the functionalist approach to the practice. Generally theorists during this time differentiated between different types of joking relationships (Apte 1985:63). For example, Mary Douglas (1968) differentiated between different kinds of jokes based upon whether they are spontaneous or symbolic, standardized rites. Spontaneous rites express what is actually occurring and are generally morally neutral. In contrast, standard rites are symbolic acts for Douglas that describe what ought to happen. Standard rites find their meaning from a group of standard symbols (1968:368-369). Jim Freedman (1977) also differentiated between different kinds of jokes, shifting the focus to the kind of relationship rather than the kind of joke. For him, joking relationships that occur in social settings where relations are not highly determined are inherently different from those that occur within highly determined social relations, and theories based upon one type cannot be applied to relationships of the second type. Freedman, in contrast to Radcliffe-Brown, did not call for a universal theory of joking, but rather theories that vary cross-culturally. As Freedman pointed out, "joking in traditional societies differs from joking in office buildings" (1977:156). Indeed, an important aspect of Freedman's analysis is his differentiation between joking relationships in traditional, homogenous societies where relationships are highly determined, and industrial, heterogeneous societies where relationships are highly variable.

Apte also differentiated between different kinds of joking relationships, making a distinction between kin-based and non-kin relationships. Kin-based joking relationships

include those between nuclear family members, extended kin groups, and interclan and intertribal joking relationships. Apte described these kin-based relationships as being structured, institutionalized, and formalized around kinship. In contrast, non-kin joking relationships are person oriented instead of kinship oriented. They are also usually voluntary, in contrast to kin-based relationships that are usually compulsory. These relationships are found both in “preliterate” societies and “industrial” societies (1985:31, 37).

While Apte’s distinction between different kinds of relationships is useful, his analysis is based primarily upon the previously mentioned *utani* debate over joking in East and Central African societies (1985:269, n. 11). This orientation skews his conclusions, and many of his generalizations do not apply outside of this context. He adopted Wilson’s explanation that intertribal and interclan joking relationships are a relatively new practice (Apte 1985:47-49). Apte’s analysis, as well as those previously discussed, draws upon a few ethnographic examples to create a universal, or near universal, theory.

Kinship Critiques and Revival

Attempts at universalism were at the core of the critiques within anthropological discourse on kinship during the second half of the twentieth century. During this time, kinship lost its central position within the discipline, and according to Linda Stone (2001), this was largely due to two themes within anthropology at the time. First, many critiqued kinship theories as being founded on an unjustifiable assumption that all people base kinship systems on the “natural facts” of biological reproduction. While ethnographic literature up to that point did reveal variations in terminology, systems of descent, and marriage patterns, all were assumed to be founded upon universals based on biological procreation. These views were largely derived from David Schneider’s (1984) critique of kinship, as well as the belief

that the way kinship systems had been conceptualized up to that point was based upon Western and particularly American culture (Stone 2001:1). Second, Stone argues that in the latter half of the twentieth century there was increasing concern that kinship analyses within anthropology had provided part of the basis for the separation between “modern” and “advanced” European and American societies and “exotic” and “primitive” Others. Thus, Stone contends: “...anthropological kinship became tainted by the analytical and judgmental Eurocentrism that the field of anthropology has been seeking for decades to transcend” (2001:1).

Another central reason for the move away from kinship within anthropology was the larger trend of leaving behind formulaic, inflexible models, such as those used in kinship analyses, because it was seen as “tedious and boring” (Stone 2001:2). Furthermore, these approaches have led to examinations of kinship in isolation, as an “unchanging grid,” that does not consider larger social processes (Ganesh and Risseuw 1998:12).

During this period of waning interest in kinship, joking relationships also seem to have been less studied by anthropologists. Those scholars who did publish on the topic, such as Douglas and Freedman, seem to have continued in a structuralist framework. The exception during this time appears to be Enid Schildkrout’s (1975) work among urban immigrants in Kumasi, Ghana. She focused on how kinship is used as a traditional ideology in urban environments to link people who are not biologically related. Interestingly, Schildkrout dismissed the use of the term “fictive” for these kinship ties because it is too general a word:

...what is significant is not a distinction between “fictive” and “real” kinship – categories by no means always clearly distinguishable, but rather the relationship between the kinship categories of descent and affinity on the one hand, and ethnicity on the other. (1975:246)

In her analysis, Schildkrout focused on ways in which people use the idiom of consanguineal kinship to create bonds of solidarity and reciprocity, even when no actual genealogical links can be made between families. She saw interethnic joking as “a symbolic comment on the simultaneous disappearance of cultural boundaries and the persistence of structural ones, symbolized by ethnic categorization” (1975:256). Schildkrout, unlike others writing on joking relationships at the time, did not attempt to differentiate between joking relationships in industrial societies and in preliterate societies. Instead, she demonstrated that people renegotiate social practices according to their needs.

This focus on the practical uses and applications of kinship has been central to a recent resurgence of interest in the topic within the field of anthropology. In its renewed form it has, following larger anthropological trends, focused much less on formalism and more on other elements of kinship. According to Stone, these elements include: historical context; power inequities and resistance strategies; multiple voices in ethnography; human agency; authority of state policies and transnational influences; connections between gender, class and ethnicity; inclusion of feminist points of view; and new ideas on the connection between cultural and biological approaches to behavior (2001:2).

Carla Russeeuw and Rajni Palriwala (1996) also note that the revival of kinship redefined the limits of the subject. They argue that the notion of “family” is too general to be helpful in understanding the holistic picture of support relationships between people, calling for more emphasis on the “shifting relationships of care, responsibility, and security embedded in...kinship systems,” including examining how these systems are located within communities and state structures (1996:39). Russeeuw and Palriwala go on to note that global economic structures are currently changing, and that they are linked to the formation

of state systems and ideas of citizenship that began with colonialism. Current economic systems promote individual ownership as well as new employment opportunities that can lead to social mobility. These processes often produce more inequalities, including class exploitation, increasing insecurity, and gender oppression. According to Russeeuw and Palriwala, access to these new opportunities varies by class and kinship group, as well as one's place within a family or kinship network. These opportunities are often more open to elders or those in superior social positions. Within this context of insecurity and change, the disparity between the community ideals of security and stability and the extent to which they can be fulfilled become larger (1996:40).

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's critiques of structuralism shifted the focus of kinship studies to how people utilize social practices. He criticized the study of kinship for the lack of agency it gives individuals, choosing instead to emphasize the ways in which people negotiate social practices and beliefs. Through his concept of *habitus*, or "systems of durable, transposable dispositions," he argued that social and individual practices were informed by this embodied history (1990:53). When applied to kinship, Bourdieu's ideas shift the focus away from social rules toward how individual agents navigate social practices.

Continuing its parallel relationship with kinship, joking relationships have also recently experienced a resurgence of scholarly interest. Besides individual journal articles and chapters, two books have recently been published that focus exclusively on the topic. Siriman Kouyaté (2003) has written a book specifically on joking relationships in Guinea, and Alain Sissao (2002) has done the same for Burkina Faso. There has also been a recent issue of the academic journal *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* devoted entirely to West African joking relationships. However, many of these newer works on joking relationships maintain

certain aspects of functionalism in their arguments. For example, political scientists and others have focused on the function of joking relationships in resolving and avoiding conflict. In a 2005 presentation, Brett O'Bannon, a political scientist, uses a "classical model" of joking relationships to argue that current Senegalese joking relationships have diminished in efficacy. His construction of a "classical model" is ahistorical and is largely based upon the East African practice of *utani*. Other scholars have also focused on how joking relationships can be used as a means of conflict mediation (Davidheiser 2006). According to a recent analysis by Marie-Aude Fouéré (2006), many African scholars have also adopted this functionalist paradigm [Badini (1996), Sissao (2002), Konaté (1999)]. She argues that for these authors joking relationships are a way of regulating ethnic conflicts. Indeed, Doulaye Konaté's (1999) article was written on behalf of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the topic of indigenous ways of "keeping the peace" (Fouéré 2006:994). Similarly, in a United Nations document by Raphaël N'Diaye (2002), joking relationships are suggested as a way of promoting nonviolence, and teaching the relationships in school is suggested as a way of continuing the practice. Fouéré critiques this method of interpreting joking relationships in West Africa because it, by necessity, essentializes it into a "custom" or a "tradition" that is unchanging (2006:989).

Another recent focus of scholars writing on joking relationships has been its use by politicians and the written press (Hagberg 2006; Douyon 2006). Others have examined how joking relationships allow a way for people to construct identities. For Etienne Smith (2004, 2006), joking relationships in West Africa illustrate a tension between tolerance of "others" and ethnocentrism, in which people verbally state differences, at once mocking and including each other (2004). Youssouf Diallo (2006), Cécile Canut (2002, 2006), and Claude Fay

(1995, 2006) all focus on identity within joking relationships. However interesting these studies in identity might be, they avoid the issue of practical application. While it is necessary for individuals to think of themselves as Dogon in order to joke with a Bozo, and while these identities are somewhat negotiable, the differing degrees to which individuals joke in a particular situation are not explained in discussions on identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In agreement with Schildkrout, I do not believe that it is helpful to look at some kin as ‘fictive’ and other as ‘real.’ Instead, I intend to look at how people use and apply all kinds of kin relations in practical ways. In a recent article, Robert Launay (2006) also argued for looking at kinship as practical. While I agree with Launay that joking relationships are certain behaviors that are initiated by one person and responded to by another, in other words that individuals enact joking, I disagree with his opinion on alliances. He argues that joking cannot constitute an alliance because “alliances can only be formed between groups or individuals, not between names,” contending that joking relationships exist between patronyms not people (2006:798). In this argument, Launay contradicts himself through maintaining that it is necessary for individuals to practice joking behavior and that the relationship does not exist without this enacting, while at the same time arguing that it does not constitute an alliance because only groups or individuals can create alliances. Yet these are exactly the actors who do enact joking, and thus create alliances. His contention about alliance is thus untenable.

I do agree with Launay that, “joking relationships...exist largely in their instantiation” (2006:804). Instead of defining joking relationships by their rules, as was the case with functionalist and structuralist theories, Launay argues: “...it is the joking itself that

creates, or at least reframes, a particular relationship” (2006:805). Indeed, he contends that earlier scholars “tended to put the cart before the horse” in focusing on joking relationships rather than joking behavior (2006:805).

What Launay hints at, and what I would like to pursue, is Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about kinship applied to *sinankuna*. In his discussion of parallel patrilineal cousin marriage, he critiques the past use of rules within kinship theories. Unlike earlier discussions on kinship, Bourdieu differentiates between genealogical kin and practical kin. Genealogical kin are those represented in an “official representation of social structure,” such as would be found in a traditional anthropologic kinship chart. Yet the function of these genealogical kin are largely reserved for official occasions (1990:166-167). Conversely, practical kin are those relationships that are “kept in working order” (1990:168). Bourdieu’s focus is on how people use relationships:

To point out that kin relationships are something that people make, and with which they do something, is not simply to substitute a ‘functionalist’ interpretation for a ‘structuralist’ one, as the prevailing taxonomies might suggest. It is radically to question the implicit theory of practice which leads the anthropological tradition to see kin relationships ‘in the form of an object of an intuition’, as Marx puts it, rather than in the form of the practices that produce, reproduce or use them by reference to practical functions. (1990:167)

From this point of view, kin relationships are produced by agents, enacted by individuals.

Yet Bourdieu goes on to stress that people do not enact these relationships haphazardly: “...the fact remains that one cannot call on absolutely *anyone* for *any* occasion, nor can one offer one’s services to *anyone* for *any* purpose” (1990:168). Therefore, he argues that people maintain a “privileged network of practical relationships” that includes people who are useful because of both proximity and social influence. These practical relationships

include both genealogical relationships that are regularly enacted and non-genealogical relationships.

Building upon these ideas, I argue for interpreting *sinankuɲa* as a joking relationship that is practical. People can decide to ignore a *sinankuɲa* relationship, exchange brief jokes with *sinankuw*, build social capital through demonstrating joking skills, call upon obligations from *sinankuw*, or even invoke *sinankuɲa* in a tense situation to avoid conflict. Individuals decide how to practice *sinankuɲa* depending upon the situation and people involved. The structure of *sinankuɲa* never predetermines how people will act in a situation; it only provides a way in which to do so. According to Bourdieu, people negotiate their actions within a framework of socially recognized options, the ideal genealogical kinship structure; yet kinship is something that one applies and practices, the practical implementation of kinship (1990:170).

In this paper, I will look at the *sinankuɲa* joking relationship as a social practice that people use and negotiate. I will focus on what people actually do and say when they joke, as well as how *sinankuɲa* can take on a different importance in an urban environment than it does in a rural setting. Very little has been written on joking relationships in urban environments in West Africa. While Denis Douyon's recent work mentions how *sinankuɲa* functions in Bamako, he reserves his discussion to its use in political discourse (2006:900). This paper will therefore look at the quotidian practice of *sinankuɲa* within the urban environment of Bamako and how people use and negotiate this social practice.

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY

“Yesterday and today are blended together.”

– *Adame Ba Konaré 2000:16*

The history of Mali is surely one of the richest and most intriguing of all the present-day countries of West Africa. From the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the Mali Empire encompassed much of West Africa, including contemporary Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, and the Gambia. Because of the empire’s widespread control, many aspects of Mande life were diffused throughout the area (Robinson 2000:9). This historical overview of the area that now forms the nation of Mali will illuminate how *sinankuɲa* spread. In fact, because the joking relationship allows strangers to interact and form connections immediately, the practice probably facilitated migrations, allowing people to move around the area more freely.

MALI EMPIRE

From the ninth century to the twelfth century, prior to the beginnings of the Mali Empire, the region was under the control of the Ghana Empire (Imperato 1977:3). In 1180, the Soso, a Malinké blacksmith clan, came into power in the area.¹ They remained in power until 1230 when the Mande people, under the leadership of Sunjata (Sundiata) Keïta, defeated the Soso army. Sunjata is a well-known hero, and his life story is an epic told by griots² all over West Africa.

After conquering the Soso, Sunjata called a great assembly to organize his empire at Kurukan Fuga, outside of the town of Kangaba in present-day Mali (see Figure 4). Some scholars believe that it was here that Sunjata created the Charter of Kurukan Fuga (Niane

¹ The Soso are now included as one of the main Mande groups.

² Griots or bards, known as *jeliw* in Bamanankan, are oral historians and praise singers. See Chapter 4 for more about *jeliw*.

1984:130-135). According to Mangoné Niang (2006), however, the charter was created after Sunjata established the empire, among groups who united following a bloody war. The charter organized the empire politically, socially, and economically, and institutionalized many social practices that continue today, such as the caste system, family structures, and joking relationships, including *sinankuɲa*. It is an oral text that has been transmitted through the centuries by *jeliw*, or griots.³

Figure 4 – Map of Mali Empire (Niane 1984:153)



Having established and organized his empire, Sunjata and his armies conquered a large part of West Africa. His successors continued to expand the empire, some even making the pilgrimage to Mecca. During the reign of Mansa Musa I from 1307-1337 the Mali Empire reached its height of power and influence (Niane 1984:150-151). Trade in gold, copper, salt, and kola nuts flourished in the region during the Mali Empire and continued to do so even after its decline that began in the later half of the fourteenth century (Niane 1984:170-171).

³ Recently, some groups have created written versions of the Charter. See Niang 2006 for the Sahel and West Africa Club’s version of the Kurukan Fuga Charter, which is based upon information collected from traditionalists in Guinea.

During this time, Mande groups such as the Wangara, Jula, and others, migrated south into areas of present-day Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Guinea (Ly-Tall 184: 174-186). With these movements of people and goods, Mande practices, such as *sinankuŋa*, were disseminated throughout West Africa. Indeed, the Mali Empire and its conquests left an enduring legacy throughout the region, changing it linguistically and culturally (Silla 1998:44).

AFTER SUNJATA

Following the decline of the Mali Empire, other groups took control over different sections of the area. The Songhay Empire of Gao lasted from roughly 1335 to 1600 and covered much of present day Mali and part of Niger (see Figure 5) (Imperato 1977:3). Despite the strength of the Songhay, trading towns, including Timbuktu and Djenné (Jenne), were autonomous to a certain extent and became cosmopolitan urban centers. In the markets of these towns, people traded local goods and produce for items brought by the trans-Saharan trade from North Africa and even as far as Mediterranean Europe (Cissoko 1984:199-207).

Figure 5 – West Africa in the Sixteenth Century (Fage 1958: plate 20)



The period between 1600 and 1800 has been called a “time of troubles” because of the political instability, extensive dislocation of people, and chronic famine that continued to plague the region (Willis 1976:512). The Moroccan invasion of 1591 increased the economic and political decline of the area, ending the series of large states (Silla 1998: 44). Despite this instability, smaller states ruled by powerful families, such as the Bamana states of Segou and Kaarta, were formed during this time (see Figure 6). For example, the Coulibalys controlled Segou, and Biton Mamary Coulibaly greatly expanded the state in the mid-eighteenth century. Soon after Mamari’s death in 1755, the Diarra family took control of Segou and remained in power until the late eighteenth century (Willis 1976:523-535).

Figure 6 – Major states of the seventeenth century (Fage 1969:43)



Between the beginning of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, socio-political instability, proselytizing, and religious revivalism characterized the entire region. During this time period, Islam continued to spread throughout the region. Much of this occurred through the movements of Muslim traders and religious confraternities who

focused on conversion (Willis 1976:539). Jihads were carried out in the area during the eighteenth century, particularly against the Bamana states of Segu and Kaarta and the Fulani (Fulbé or Peul) region of Massina (Last 1974:1-29).

THE COLONIAL ERA AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Tukolor Empire, led by Al-Haii Umar Tall, began gaining power in the region in the mid 1800s. Soon after this, in 1864, French officials arrived in Segu, but it was not until 1883 that they established a post in Bamako. The French used the spreading influence of the Tukolor to their advantage, persuading Bamana leaders that they had the common objective of ending the Tukolor Empire. In 1889, the French began their campaign against the Tukolor, causing many groups to unite against the colonial power. Ali Bouri of Jolof, Abdul Bubakar of Futa, and Samory Touré, a Jula king of the Wasulu Empire united with the Tukolor army (see Figure 7). Despite their efforts, the French forced the Tukolor from the region in the early 1890s. Yet, instead of handing over the land gained from the Tukolor to the Bamana leaders, the French wanted rule to the area themselves. This caused the Bamana to join forces with the Tukolor and other groups against the French. But the French won out; Massina was lost in 1893, and Timbuktu in 1894, thus establishing colonialism throughout the area that the French referred to as Haut-Sénégal-Niger, the Western Sudan, and French Sudan (Oloruntimehin 1974: 347-379).

After gaining control of the area, the French soon recognized that the region would not fulfill their economic expectations. The trans-Saharan trade was losing importance, as regions along the coast of West Africa grew in significance. Thus, long after the French occupied the area, they continued to control it administratively, but did not invest a great deal of resources.

Figure 7 – States of West Africa in the Nineteenth Century (Fage 1958: plate 41)



By the 1950s, many of the French administrators had left the area. During the transition to independence, Mali and Senegal united to create the Mali Federation. However, relations between the two countries deteriorated, nearly leading to a war in 1960. The situation ended peacefully, and Mali and Senegal declared themselves independent of each other (Clark 2000:255). The first election in Mali occurred in the fall of 1960, and Modibo Keita was elected president. Keita instituted a policy of state socialism, establishing a centralized economy and a one-party system. He received aid and loans from China, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. The economy declined and dissent grew among Malians (Clark 2000: 256).

Through a coup d'état on November 19, 1968, Gen. Moussa Traoré gained power over the Keita government. Under Gen. Traoré, the economy changed, and relationships improved with neighboring countries. Yet the government was run militarily and life for

most Malians did not improve. Traoré suppressed his opponents, many of whom were intellectuals living abroad. Worker and student strikes, corruption, famine, drought, and extreme poverty characterized this period. Yet because of Traoré's control of the military, he retained power (Clark 2000:256-257). During this time, the government worked with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in hopes of ameliorating the economic situation of the country, instituting a structural adjustment program (Diarrah 2000:369). In late March 1991, riots and demonstrations broke out across the country, particularly in Bamako, with people demanding Traoré's resignation, and on March 26, 1991 a *coup d'état* overthrew Traoré's government (Clark 2000: 257-259).

After a period of transition, Mali adopted a new constitution and held presidential elections in 1992 in which Alpha Oumar Konaré was elected president. Many reforms and changes were issued, including the formation of multiple political parties and liberalization of the press. Since this time, the country has continued to be one of the poorest in the world. Decentralization has been instituted throughout the country, and many politicians and scholars highlight the decentralized nature of Mali's past when arguing for its current use, asserting that stability can be achieved through empowering local areas (Rawson 2000:266-268). Decentralization efforts continue today under President Amadou Toumani Touré, who was elected in June 2002.

While the efficacy of decentralization is yet to be seen, it is apparent that past histories are central to Malian political and social life. Facilitated by the Mali Empire, *sinankuɲa* was spread across much of West Africa as a result of Mandé migrations and trade relationships. As a social practice that daily invokes aspects of history, *sinankuɲa* is grounded in these past interactions between groups of people.

CHAPTER FOUR: CULTURAL SETTING

“Sinankuṇa arranges all the little histories...it arranges everything.”

Embedded within *sinankuṇa* are cultural beliefs and ideals that are central to social life in Mali, including ethnic identity, social position, ideas about interpersonal interactions and hierarchies. This chapter seeks to situate *sinankuṇa* within the larger context of Mali, focusing on ethnicity, religion, social interactions, the caste system, and other joking relationships. Because it is based upon deeply rooted cultural themes and shared histories, *sinankuṇa* serves as an ideal way of understanding Malian life.

MALI

Mali is a landlocked country in West Africa, bordered by Senegal to the west, Mauritania and Algeria to the north, Niger to the east, and Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Guinea-Conakry to the south. It is a large country, approximately twice the size of Texas, and about two-thirds of Mali is desert. South of the Sahara Desert is the semiarid Sahelian zone and a cultivated Sudanese zone, where nearly 90 percent of the population lives (Library of Congress 2005:5; Ember 2001). With a population of 13.9 million, Mali is growing quickly at an annual rate of 2.9 percent (UNFPA 2006:99). While the majority of the population is rural, about 30 percent of the Malians live in urban areas, and the urban growth rate is 4.1 percent (UNFPA 2006:99).

Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2005, the per capita income was US \$250 (USAID 2005:3). The United Nations human development index ranked Mali as 175th out of 177 countries, making it more “developed” than only two countries in the world – Niger and Sierra Leone. This scale is based on life expectancy, education (adult literacy and school enrollment), and standard of living (UNDP 2006:286). According to the UN, only 26 percent of males and 17 percent of females were enrolled in secondary education from

1999-2005.⁴ In general, most Malians who do have some secondary education are not fluent in French, the official language of the country. The most commonly spoken language is Bamanankan, although it is the mother tongue of just 38 percent of the population (Ember 2001). This widespread usage is largely because Bamanankan, often referred to as Bambara, was used by the French colonial administration (Imperato 1983:15). Life expectancy for Malian females is 49.3 years and 48 years for males. The current fertility rate in Mali is 6.69 children per woman, and the under-5 mortality rate is 20.9 percent for males and 20.3 percent for females (UNFPA 2006:95, 99).

ETHNICITY

While Mali is an ethnically diverse nation, its more than twenty ethnic groups share many cultural and linguistic attributes. For example, all but a few groups practice patrilineal descent, and many groups practice polygyny. The largest ethnic group in Mali is the Bamana (Bambara), who are part of the Mande group of people. The Bamana, along with the Jula (Dioula or Dyula), Malinké (Maninka) and other ethnic groups, are Mande people, and they speak mutually intelligible languages. Mande refers to a geographical region that that includes much of West Africa, including large parts of Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and the Gambia. The area shares a common history dating back to the medieval Mali Empire. Its boundaries are fluid, and Mande people often live among people of non-Mande ethnic groups (Koné 1997:2, Imperato 1996:161).

The second largest ethnic group in Mali after the Bamana is the Fulani (Fula or Fulbé), commonly called Peul in Mali. They are often described as cattle herders and

⁴ These statistics only include students in the "appropriate age group," and do not include older students. Therefore not accounting for interruptions in schooling or repeating grades (UNFPA 2006). Both of these are common occurrences in Malian secondary education (conversation with author, M. Traoré, May 5, 2006).

contrasted with agricultural groups such as the Bamana. In fact, people from both groups often practice agriculture and pastoralism to some extent (Imperato 1996:16-17, 184).

The Dogon are a small but well-known ethnic group who live on the Bandiagara plateau and cliffs in the eastern part of Mali. Their complex cosmology and art have become tourist attractions (Imperato 1996:46, 90). The Soninké or Sarakole are an ethnic group that mostly lives in the northwest part of Mali. They are mainly traders and are descendents of the Ghana Empire, and many Soninké have immigrated to other African countries, as well as Europe. The Bozo, a smaller ethnic group, are believed to be descendants of the Soninké. The Bozo now generally live along the Niger River and subsist on fishing. The Somono are another group of people that fish in the Niger. However, they are not generally conceptualized as an ethnic group, but rather as a caste of the Bamana (Imperato 1996:197, 55, 205).

Other ethnic groups in Mali include the Songhay, Senufo, Minianka, Bobo, and Mossi, as well as a number of smaller groups including the Diwara, Khassonké, Tukulor, Wolof, and Wasslunke (Ouassoulouké). The Tuareg and Maure (Moor) ethnic groups live in the northern part of the country in the Sahara Desert. Both groups are classified as Berber nomads, and the Tuareg, unlike other groups in Mali, practice matrilineal descent. Relations between the Malian government and the Tuaregs have been tense in recent decades, with the Tuaregs revolting a number of times in reaction to government actions (Imperato 1996:16, 234).

Descriptions of ethnic groups such as those above can be found throughout ethnographical literature of the past century on West Africa. However, more recently a few anthropologists have questioned the origins and the historical construction of these

ethnicities. Indeed, the distinctiveness of one ethnicity from another can become fuzzy, particularly in urban environments. In Bamako, people from many different ethnicities live near each other, and ethnic groups are not distinct entities, clearly discernible from one another. Rather, ethnicity is just one part of an individual's background and identity. The most frequent occasion for mentioning ethnicity was while practicing the *sinankuna* joking relationship.

While my informants included people who identified with the ethnic groups of Malinké and Soninké, the majority of people that I spoke with were Bamana, a Mande ethnic group. Jean-Loup Amselle (1990, 1996, 1998), a French anthropologist, takes a closer look at this particular ethnic group, arguing that the terms Bamana and Bambara have had various meanings over time, including negative ones. According to him, "Bambara" is a French term of Fulani (Peul) and Arabic origin that was never used by the people it was meant to describe, who instead use "banmana" (1990:79). While this continues to be true linguistically among people who speak Bamanankan, today the word "Bambara" is used frequently in official ways. For example, any sort of governmental written work uses "Bambara" instead of Bamana, especially when giving the name of the language. Furthermore, Malians will usually use the term "Bambara" when describing the language or culture to a foreigner. Yet, whenever people are speaking in Bamanankan, they will use the term Bamana.

Historically, Bamana was used to distinguish between farmers and the wealthy Muslims and merchants from towns such as Djenné and Timbuktu. Used in this way, Bamana came to mean a fragmented society that was nominally Islamic, subsisting mainly on agriculture. Indeed, for some people the terms Bamana and Bambara imply being pagan, or non-Muslim. Applied in another way, Bamana distinguished people from dominant classes of

the area. For the Islamic Soninké, Bamana was a synonym for being a slave. Additionally, for Amselle, Bamana signifies autochthones, or first-comers. This usage distinguishes people who derive descent from the founders of Sunjata's Mali Empire and the city dwellers or Muslims that conquered the area afterwards (Amselle 1990:80).

Amselle goes on to argue that "Bambara" people are actually a conglomeration of various elements that were united into one ethnicity during colonialism. Many ethnographers, from Delafosse, Monteil, and Dieterlen, to Bokar N'Diayé (a Malian musician who wrote in the 1970s on ethnicity and caste in Mali), have given "Bambara" a semi-official status in West Africa. Amselle argues that this invented ethnicity was reified through codifying the language with a dictionary, creating a written alphabet for Bambara, and collecting proverbs, myths, and legends in printed volumes. He maintains that because of its use on Malian radio and television, Bamanankan has become the second official language of Mali. Amselle also argues that the Malian government values Bamana and Malinké ethnicity and history more than those of other ethnic groups. From this point of view, ethnicity becomes a study in politics. Indeed, Amselle sees the Bamana language as a "dominant" force and an "imposition" on speakers of other languages in Mali (1990:82, 86).

Currently, most radio stations and television shows in Mali are in Bamanankan if they are not in French (Ly 2006:96). However, I did not encounter an attitude of resentment among people in Bamako toward the use of Bamanankan, perhaps because I stayed with a Bamana family. Yet people generally do not seem to discuss ethnicity often, except when joking with *sinankuw*.⁵ While there is no doubt that ethnic identities are shaped by political processes, Amselle's discussion of Bamana identity does not seem to fully make the case that

⁵ An obvious exception is the continuing tension between parts of the Tuareg community in the north, near Timbuktu, and the Malian government.

it was wholly invented by the colonial administration. While it is clear that written accounts of the histories of ethnic groups in Mali were constructed under and influenced by colonial powers, Malians continue to identify as Bambara. Indeed, there is little doubt that all ethnicities are invented in some sense. The question then becomes who defines the groups.

RELIGION

While the term “Bamana” has connotations of being non-Muslim for some, most people who today identify as Bamana are in fact Muslim. Indeed, 80-90 percent of Malians practice Islam. The remaining population is classified as practicing either indigenous religions or Christianity. The small Christian minority (estimated at 1 percent in 2001) is growing, with both Catholic and Protestant churches in nearly all larger towns (Ember 2001).

While Islam is currently the most widely practiced religion in Mali, it was only during the twentieth century that the majority of the area became Muslim. Prior to colonialism, religious beliefs and practices were tied to hereditary lineages. According to Soares, certain lineages were known to be Muslim, and they controlled Islamic education, religious knowledge, and scholarship. Often these same families were important in trans-Saharan trade networks and were merchants. In the pre-colonial period Muslims were the dominant majority in some towns, such as Timbuktu and Djenné (Soares 2005:26-28). However, Muslims remained the minority in Mali until the 1940s (Schulz 2006:212). When Bamana people converted to Islam, they often changed ethnicity, becoming Soninké or Jula, both groups that largely converted to Islam earlier than the Bamana. When slaves and *ɲamankala*, or people of caste, converted to Islam they often changed their patronym, indicating the change in their social and economic activities as well as religious beliefs. Over the past twenty years Islam has taken a more central role in Malian society, with more

proselytizing efforts and increased numbers of religious leaders in the media (Schulz 2006:27, 210).

Many of the ethnographers of the Mandé area included extensive descriptions of indigenous religious beliefs.⁶ Currently, these practices continue in certain forms, including the practice of visiting *féticheurs* and practitioners of traditional medicines. People consult *féticheurs* about the future and ask for advice on what is happening in their lives. Many Malians use traditional medicine, citing its low cost and effectiveness. There is a market in Bamako specifically for traditional medicine, and practitioners are highly respected.

In Bamana religion, a person is seen as a microcosm of the universe. Duality is also a central belief, present in their creation myth in the separation of the sexes, as well as between the soul and its double. In the Bamana creation myth, Mousso Koroni, the original woman, symbolizes the earth. It is she who instituted circumcision and excision. She represents the *wanzo*, or evil force, that resides in the foreskin and the clitoris. Circumcised males were historically initiated into six initiation societies, which varied by location (Imperato 1977:41-47). Excision is currently an issue of debate in Mali. Many non-governmental organizations, both national and international, are working to end the practice. In 2001, 91.6 percent of women ages 15-49 were excised in Mali, according to the Demographic Survey of Health in Mali, conducted by the Ministry of Health (Touré 2003). Interestingly, excision is often explained through Islamic practices in popular culture. However, many academics and others familiar with the history of the region and indigenous beliefs do note the pre-Islamic origins.

Religious beliefs in Mali are more diverse than is suggested by the statistic that almost 90 percent of the population is Muslim. Christianity continues to spread throughout

⁶ See Pacques 1954, Dieterlen 1988 [1951], Dieterlen 1957, Zahan 1974, Delafosse 1972 [1922], Tauxier 1942.

the country. More importantly for this discussion, however, is the strength that indigenous beliefs continue to hold in current society.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND AMBIGUITIES

Social relationships in Mali are often ambiguous, varying by the people involved and the situation, as evidenced by the way people negotiate *sinankuɲa*. In order to elucidate Mande social relations, Saskia Brand (2001) inferred three principles that form the basis of social interactions focusing specifically on Bamako. The first principle is hierarchy. According to Brand, all relationships are hierarchical, and total equality is not ideal. If a relationship becomes too equal, people use a social belief or practice to establish hierarchy. Age is the principal mechanism used to establish inequality, and gender, kinship, and social position or caste are also invoked. The individuals involved negotiate these hierarchies (Brand 2001:21).

The second principle of Mande social interactions is complementarity. While relationships are hierarchical, those involved are also mutually dependent. This aspect of social life is especially apparent within the caste system, yet it is also evident in the way that people think about marriage. Adults are not thought to be complete as individuals. Only through marriage with the opposite sex will they become full persons (Brand 2001:21). Complementarity can also be seen in the way that people use *sinankuɲa* to establish mutual obligations.

Brand's final principle of social relations is flexibility or reversibility of hierarchies. As noted above, people chose which social practices to invoke in a particular context. Thus, a relationship between the same two individuals can differ depending upon the situation (Brand 2001:22). This reversibility occurs between people who are unequal because of age, gender,

and caste. When people chose to invoke *sinankuya* in a particular situation, they often reverse one of these inequalities.

Caste System

Brand's ideas on social interactions invoke the social position, or caste, of individuals. The majority of ethnic groups in Mali differentiate among different social categories of people. Throughout much of anthropological literature these groups are referred to as "castes." However, some more recent writers have criticized the use of the term, preferring "class" or "social category." In Barbara Hoffman's (2000) discussion of the term caste, she argues that caste "is an apt label for the bounded relationships between members of different social categories in Mandé societies, for it connotes the social realities of those relationships as they are lived by Mandé people" (2000:234). She argues that many recent ethnologists have misunderstood the term "caste." For Hoffman, "caste" does not necessarily imply that there is a part of society that is despised or outcast; rather, it is a way of identifying people and dividing them into separate groups. She goes on to stress that the Mande caste structure is a way of "marking sameness and eliciting unity not only within these groups, but also as a whole community whose unique identity is distinguished from that of other cultures" (2000:241). Brand also notes that scholars have looked at Mande social categories as rigidly hierarchically organized. She argues that this ignores the flexibility of social reality (2001:15).

In view of these arguments, I will use "caste" to describe the social structure of Mali. Yet it is important to note that it is only a descriptive term used by scholars. None of my informants used the term, instead referring to groups by the specific caste name. The terms used in this discussion are in Bamanankan. Other ethnic groups in Mali, such as the Malinké,

Soninké, Fulani, Tukolor, Tuareg, Sénoufo, and Songhoy, have social categories similar to those described below (Béridogo 2002).

Caste identity is ascribed at birth, through the family’s patrilineage. The three main castes among the Bamana are *hɔrɔn*, *ɲamakala*, and *ɲɔn* (see Figure 8). Historically, castes were endogamous and determined one’s profession. During Sunjata’s reign in the thirteenth century, caste was institutionalized in the Charter of Kurukan Fuga (Niang 2006). While the caste structure is still important in Malian society, especially in terms of *sinankuɲa*, the extent to which the lineage into which one is born influences one’s profession is less strong than in the past and marriage restrictions have become less stringent in many cases.

Figure 8 – Kinds of Bamana People

Kinds of Bamana people	Hɔrɔn	
	ɲamakala	Numu
		Lawbé and Kulé
		Garanké
		Maabo and Maabuube
		Jeli
		Fune
	ɲɔn	ɲɔn
		Woloso
		Tɔn-ɲɔn
		San-ɲɔn

The great majority of people belong to the *hɔrɔn* caste. Described by scholars as free nobility, most *hɔrɔnya* practice agriculture, and some people focus more on herding, hunting, or seasonal fishing. Historically, *hɔrɔn* were divided into different groups according to their social positions and were recognized by their patronym, or *jamu*. Various authors organize these groups slightly differently (see Hoffman 2000; B. N’Diaye 1995; Koné 1997). According to the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, sixteen *hɔrɔn* clans were known as “quiver

carriers”,⁷ and soldiers were recruited from this group. Clans in this group include: Traoré, Condé, Camara, Kourouma, Kamissoko, Magassouba, Diawara, Sako, Fofana, Koïta, Dansouba, Diaby, Diallo, Diakité, Sidibé and Sangaré. There were also four princely *hɔɔɔn* clans: Keïta, Koulibaly (Coulibaly), Douno/Soumano/Danhon/Somono, and Konaté. The Keïta were designated as the reigning clan of the Empire. Also included as *hɔɔɔnya* were five clans of marabouts who were charged with being educators and masters of teaching the new religion of Islam. These clans include: Cissé, Béréké, Touré, Diané, and Sylla, as well as some Koma (Niang 2006:9).

The second kind of caste in Mandé society is that of hereditary professional groups, known as *ɲamakalaw*. This caste includes blacksmiths and potters, leatherworkers, griots, and others. Usually these artisans and the crafts they produce have religious and economic significance. In Bamana religion, working with wood, leather, iron, or speech without special abilities can endanger the life of that person as well as their descendants. To be able to do this kind of work, people must have *ɲama*, or “secret means to face the harmful or deadly danger” (Koné 1997:3-4). *ɲama* is a force or energy that is emitted by the soul. All the materials used by the *ɲamakalaw* – wood, metal, leather, and speech – have souls. Thus, working with them requires mastery over *ɲama*, which only the *ɲamakalaw* possess (Koné 1997:3-4).

The *numuw*, or blacksmiths, forge iron tools and weapons, and the women of these families often make pottery.⁸ The *numuw* are also seen as “religious specialists and sorcerers, respected and feared for their knowledge of the occult” (Conrad and Frank 1995:1). This

⁷ According to Niane, the bow and quiver are symbols of freedmen. Only people of this group were allowed to bear arms (1984:134).

⁸ For an extended discussion of this caste see: Frank, Barbara. 1998. *Mande Potters and Leatherworkers: Art and Heritage in West Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

group includes the clans Kanté, Camara, and Kourouma (Niang 2006). The *lawbé* and the *kuléw* are woodworkers, and the *garankéw* are leatherworkers. The *maabo* or *maabuube* are weavers (Conrad and Frank 1995:65-74).

Bards and griots are also classified as part of the *ɲamakalaw*. Their names vary widely depending upon the ethnic group. *Jeli*, also written *jali*, is the name of the griot caste in Bamana, Malinké, and Kassonké.⁹ *Jeli* are seen as the depositories of traditions, and masters of the word, who formerly held a great deal of power because of their role as advisors to rulers. According to the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, *jeli* clans initially included the Kouyaté, and Diabaté. Presently, however, there are more clans classified *jeli*, including the Keïta, Condé, Kanté, Kourouma, Koïta, Touré, Diawara, and others (Niang 2006).

Another *ɲamakala* group is the *funɛ* (*fina* or *fine*), who are “talkers” not accompanied by a musical instrument (in contrast to the classical idea of a griot). They are often strongly connected with Islam, and recount poems praising the Prophet, among other things (Conrad and Frank 1995:69). The patronym Camara is associated with this group (Niang 2006).

Jɔnw, or slaves, make up the third caste of Mandé people. Anyone in Mandé society could own a slave, including the *jɔn*. Hoffman differentiates between four different kinds of slaves: *jɔn*, *woloso*, *tɔn-jɔn*, and *san-jɔn*. The *jɔn* were free people, captured and enslaved during war, and could be bought by others. *Woloso*, slaves who were “born in the house” were the offspring of the *jɔn*, and could not be sold. Their masters could either retain their services or free them. The *tɔn-jɔn* were soldiers, such as the followers of Biton Mamari Kulubali, and the *san-jɔn* were purchased slaves. Slaves could fulfill many roles in society,

⁹ See Conrad and Frank 1995:73 or Bérédogo 2002:20 for more on griots in other ethnic groups.

including cultivating, dancing, praising, cutting hair, preparing bodies for funerals, cooking, and killing animals, among other household duties (Hoffman 2000:244-245; Niang 2006).

Slavery was abolished during colonialism, and this group of people, while important historically play a less central role in modern Bamako. Links between slave and *horon* families still exist, and slaves play an important ritual role in weddings (Brand 2001:15). Historically, slaves generally adopted the patronym of their master (Niang 2006). Furthermore, slaves in West Africa were generally allowed to marry, farm for themselves, and were sometimes able to buy their freedom (Brand 2001:15).¹⁰

Outside of this lineage-based social system, there is another important Mande group: hunters. An individual is called to be a hunter; it is not a hereditary position. Thus, hunters operate outside of the caste system and have their own songs, traditions, myths, and practices. They are organized into associations that cut across divisions of lineage, status, and ethnicity to form a group. Rankings within a group are based upon seniority, not social status. Hunters' music is presently becoming more popular among the Malian public (Belcher 2003:130, 132).

Endogamy within castes generally continues to be practiced, even in urban Bamako. Families often look into a potential fiancé's family background before accepting a marriage proposal. Marriage is allowed between individuals whose families are of the same caste, even if they are from different ethnic groups, the only exception being if there is a marriage prohibition between two specific ethnic groups. Currently, marriages between castes are becoming more common (conversation with author, Prof. Moussa Touré, May 5, 2006).

Other than endogamy, castes were not segregated socially from each other and did not avoid one another. Over time, people of the *namakala* caste have taken on jobs outside of

¹⁰ For more on slavery, see Meillassoux 1991; Klein 1998, 1993, 1983; and Conrad 1981.

their given profession, sometimes putting them in a position of authority over *hɔrɔn* colleagues. In fact, people of *hɔrɔn* families have been known to take up some of the professions traditionally restricted to *ɲamakalaw* that have become profitable, such as jewelry making and woodcarving (Tamari 1991:231-232). Hoffman notes that people of *ɲamakala* families have become very wealthy from business endeavors, yet none have reached the very highest political positions. Although caste identity is hereditary, practicing the profession of one's caste is now largely a question of individual ability and desire (Hoffman 2000:245-246).

Therefore, caste is no longer a fully practiced social system in Mali. Rather, it is part of the way people identify themselves and how they think about history. During my formal and informal interviews, the majority of these definitions and groupings listed here were only hinted at. While it seems that people know about the groups of artisans and griots, the specific amount of knowledge they have about the caste system seems to vary greatly by individual.

In particular, no one I met identified as a *ɲɔn* or slave, and no one called another person *ɲɔn* outside of *sinankuɲa*. However, people did identify as being from a *hɔrɔn* or *ɲamakala* family (people from *ɲamakala* families usually associated themselves with a specific group, such as *numu* or blacksmith, instead of *ɲamakalaw* at large). This avoidance of mentioning a slave past is likely the result of a combination of factors. Because the majority of Bamako's population has lived in the city for only one or two generations, it seems probable that people would not necessarily know of others' slave pasts. Furthermore, slaves often adopted the patronym of their master, and unlike the *ɲamakalaya* or *hɔrɔnya*, slaves cannot be identified by their last name. While the history of slavery in the area is

clearly present, it seems to be deeply submerged. Jokes during *sinankuɲa* appear to be one of the very few regular references to slavery in Bamako today.

Other Joking Relationships

As mentioned earlier, the Charter of Kurukan Fuga not only institutionalized the caste system in the Mali Empire, it also codified social relationships, including joking relationships. Besides *sinankuɲa*, it recognized two other joking relationships: between grandparents and grandchildren and between brothers- and sisters-in-law. Some authors also recognize joking relationships between cross cousins and age groups. All of these relationships, with the exception of age groups, exist between family members, and are thus referred to as joking kinship or “parenté à plaisanterie.”

The first joking relationship, *mɔdentulon (mòdenya)*,¹¹ is between grandchildren and grandparents (Niang 2006:6). Grandchildren can verbally fight with their grandparents in ways that the parental generation cannot. If an elder is punishing his son, a grandchild of the elder can ask him to leave his father or uncle alone (Kouyaté 2003:49-50). Grandparents can also defend their grandchildren from punishment by their parents (Doumbia 2002:29). Furthermore, grandchildren and grandparents are considered to a sort of spousal relationships: grandsons are a kind of husband to their grandmothers; granddaughters are a kind of wife to their grandfathers (Kouyaté 2003:49-50). Brand notes that grandmothers joke with their grown granddaughters by giving them specific gifts at naming ceremonies for babies. While other women commonly give cloth, grandmothers give soap, in order to wash the baby correctly, or a bit of old cloth, for the baby to pee on (2001:181).

¹¹ The initial spellings of these joking kinships are taken from Doumbia 2002, and the spellings in parentheses are taken from Brand 2001.

The second joking relationship included in the Charter is between brothers- and sisters-in law. Referred to as *nimɔgɔnintulon* (*nimògòya*), it allows the siblings of one spouse to act as mediators in the life of a married couple. Because of this relationship, they can intervene in ways that others cannot if the marriage is having problems. According to Kouyaté (2003), if a husband is abusive, a brother- or sister-in-law can say to him: “You have the shame to beat your wife everyday? It’s true that you can only hit her; your friends make you flee with their blows!” The brother- or sister-in-law can say this without fearing revenge from the husband, while the wife herself could not say this to her husband (Kouyaté 2003:29-50). While Niang, in his version of the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, defines this relationship to be between all brothers- and sisters-in-law, both Doumbia (2002) and Kouyaté restrict the role to younger siblings of the spouse.

Doumbia goes on to describe a third joking relationship, not noted among the Mandé by other writers: *kanimetulon*. This relationship is between cross cousins, and allows them to joke with each other (2002:29).

Kouyaté also notes a fourth type of joking relationships that has much in common with *sinankuɲa*: joking between members of the same age class. According to the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, people born within three consecutive years are in the same age class, and form relationships founded on respect, tolerance, and mutual aid, without considering the sex of the age mate. Kouyaté goes on to note that men and women who were initiated at the same time or those assumed to be the same age can form these relationships. Furthermore, Kouyaté argues that this kind of relationships goes beyond formal age groups, extending it to relationships between people who entered school together or who went through difficult ordeals together, such as being in the hospital, prison, or army. Once bound by these joking

relationships, they do not worry about scruples and social rules when addressing each other, thus circumventing differences in social conditions and caste (Kouyaté 2003:55-56). This type of informal age groups, commonly referred to as a *grin* in Bamako, are often made of young men who *causer*, or hang out drinking tea, chatting, and joking with each other daily.

Thus *sinankuɲa* is not the only instance of formalized joking in the Mandé world. Rather, it is part of a system of standardized joking. But *sinankuɲa* is the most widespread and frequently practiced of all the joking relationships. Indeed, as Mme Koné Coulibaly put it: “It’s the *sinankuɲa* that reigns.”¹² Embedded in cultural ideas and histories, *sinankuɲa* acts as an organizer of Mandé beliefs. *Sinankuɲa* continues to retain its importance within the urban environment of Bamako, through its basis in the caste system, ethnic identity, and ideas about Mandé social interactions.

¹² “C’est la *sinankuɲa* qui prime.”

CHAPTER FIVE: FIELD SETTING

“Even though [Bamako] is still Mande-dominated, it is also a crossroad of national and international cultures.”
– Saskia Brand 2001:301

Bamako is a fast-paced urban environment that is home to the majority of Mali’s formal sector jobs, educational opportunities, and government offices. Yet many people, including both inhabitants of the city and tourist guides, often refer to Bamako as a big village rather than a city. Due to its colonial history, economic situation, and household structure, Bamako has become a sprawling expanse with few buildings over two stories tall. Yet it has a population of well over one million, creating an environment in which any sort of link to strangers, such as *sinankuna*, becomes increasingly important.

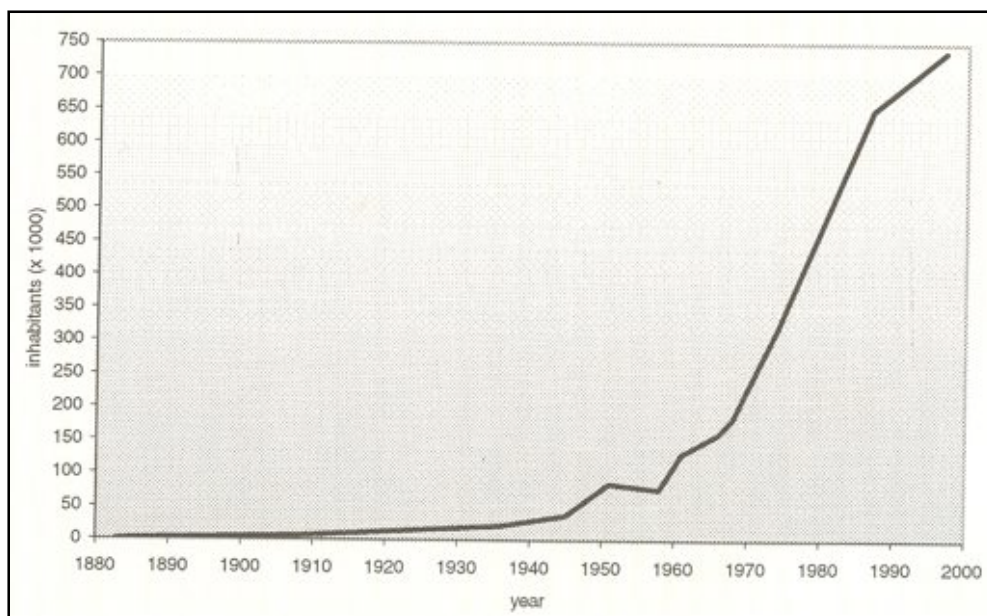
HISTORY OF BAMAKO

Prior to French conquest in the 1880s, Bamako was the capital of a Bamana chiefdom with a population of roughly 5000 (see Figure 9). It was an important market town, largely because of its location on the Niger River. A few families controlled much of Bamako: the Twati (later Touré), the Dravé, and the Niaré. Much of their influence came from their control of markets held within the city walls, selling cattle and salt from the north for ivory, slaves, gold, and kola nuts, as well as European goods including firearms, sugar, and cloth (Meillassoux 1965:125-126; Brand 2001:36).

The French were attracted to Bamako because of its strategic position, between the area around the Senegal River and the interior of West Africa. Yet at the time the French arrived, the population of Bamako had dwindled to under a thousand as a result of wars with neighboring groups and internal problems. During the initial years of French occupation, Bamako was mostly used as a military base for launching wars against other groups. Once

French colonialism was established, the administration began investing in the town, building a railroad linking the city to Saint Louis in Senegal in 1904. Bamako was also linked to Gao, located northeast on the Niger River, via steamship. Bamako became the official capital of the colonial French administration in 1908, and the city began drawing more Europeans. Electricity and water began to be supplied a few years later, and many western style buildings were erected, including a hospital, government, and commercial buildings. Yet Bamako was still smaller than Segu and Sikasso at this time, with a population of 7000 in 1907 (Meillassoux 1965:126-127; Brand 2001:36-37).

Figure 9 – Growth of the population of Bamako (Brand 2001:41)



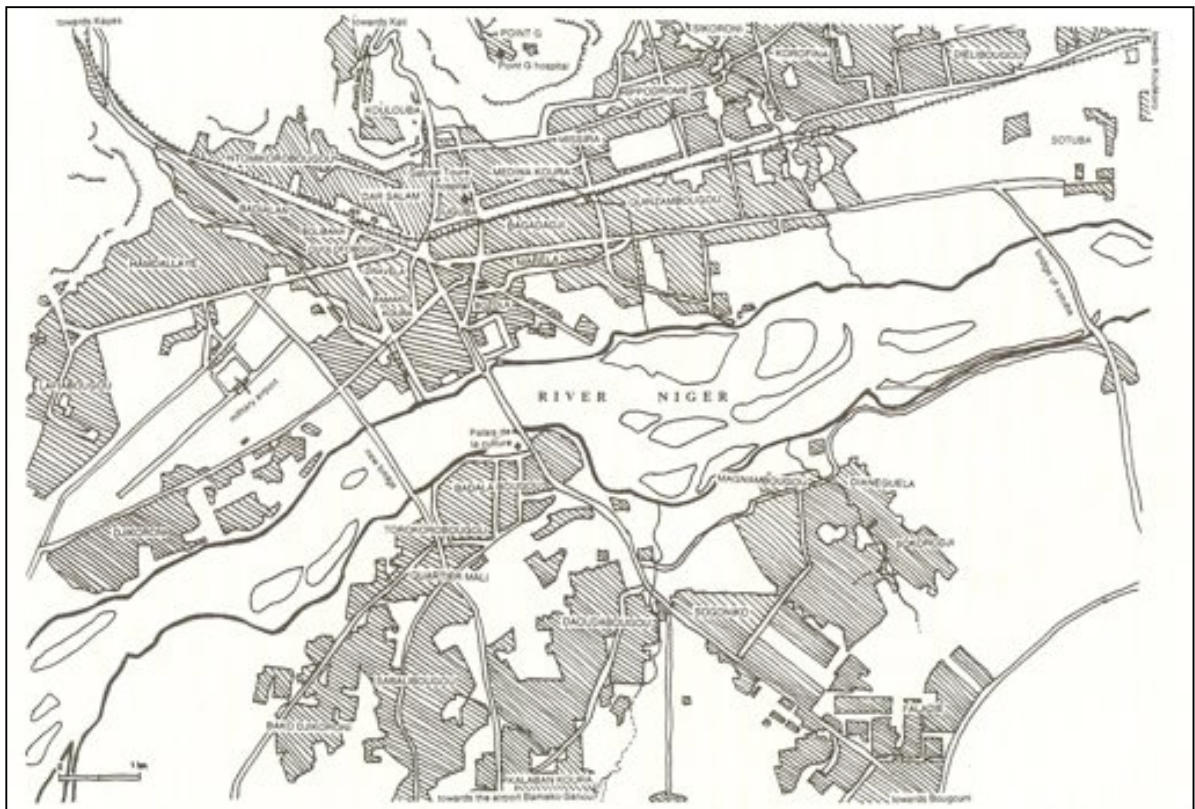
Following the First World War, the colonial administration reorganized the layout of Bamako, moving Africans to areas on the edge of town to make room for new buildings. Much of the original town was torn down between the years of 1917 and 1919. During the 1920s, large avenues were laid out and landscaped and a large market was formed at the center of town, aspects of the city that survive to the present day. The population in 1920 was roughly 15,000, and people from rural areas moved to the city because of the greater

opportunities to participate in the market economy available there. During this time, the colonial government used a system of forced labor to create public works, bringing more workers to the city. Traders soon followed, causing an increase in population that led to the formation of new *quartiers*, or neighborhoods, often organized by ethnic origin. However, the 1930s were characterized by an economic decline that lasted until the mid-1940s, and the conditions of local people in Bamako got worse. During this time, Islam increased in importance among the African population of Bamako, and continued to do so during the following decades (Meillassoux 1965:127-129; Brand 2001:37-38).

The entire population of Bamako was 37,000 in 1942, and the European population in the city more than doubled between 1940 and 1948, increasing from 1,100 to 2,800. By this time people of many ethnicities lived in Bamako. According to the 1948 census, 47.5 percent of the African population was “Bambara”, followed by Jula, Malinké, Moors, Fulani, Sarakolé, Bozo-Somono, Wolof, and other ethnic groups. New *quartiers* were formed to accommodate the increase in population, and they were no longer arranged by ethnicity. Instead, the new *quartiers* included people of diverse backgrounds. In 1946, forced labor was ended, local inhabitants became citizens rather than subjects following the end of the *régime de l'indigénat*, and new development projects were started. Many new buildings were constructed, including secondary schools, hospitals, and hotels. Roads within and leading out of Bamako were paved, and a bridge over the Niger River was finished in 1957. During this time, Bamako became one of the main markets in West Africa, particularly for kola nuts. Urban life flourished as the push for independence stimulated political life (Brand 2001:38-39). Indeed, Bamako in the 1950s was thought of as a “laboratory for urbanization” (Meillassoux 1968:13).

The city grew quickly during the years of the transition from colonialism to the Mali Federation. Malians working abroad in Senegal returned to Bamako when the Federation disbanded, and one of the largest *quartiers* in Bamako, Lafiabougou, was established to accommodate this increase in population (see Figure 10) (Brand 2001:39). By 1960 the population of the city had reached 130,000 people. Bamana people made up 25.5 percent of city inhabitants, followed by Malinké, Fula, Sarakolé, and other ethnic groups. Rural-to-urban migration increased greatly during this time, and in 1960 only 25 percent of the total population of Bamako had been born in the city, and 12 percent of households were composed of spouses who had both been born in Bamako. According to Meillassoux's analysis of the 1960 census, men would marry soon after moving to the city, frequently to a girl from a rural area (1965:127-129).

Figure 10 – Map of Bamako 1993 (Brand 2001:xiii)



Following independence in 1960, Bamako continued to be the capital of the newly formed Republic of Mali. However, after the Mali Federation dissolved in 1960, Bamako lost its role as a main distribution center in West Africa. Much of the economic trade moved east to Mopti (Meillassoux 1965:130-131). During Moussa Traoré's military rule from 1968 to 1991, Bamako continued to expand. Droughts during the 1970s and 1980s acted as a push factor, driving people from rural areas to the city. Unlike Keïta, his socialist predecessor, Traoré created conditions that favored the expansion of private businesses. These opportunities pulled people from rural areas into the city. Consequently, the population of Bamako almost doubled during the first years after the 1968 coup. However, in the ensuing decades, economic decline continued to plague the country, causing fewer opportunities for employment in the city. During the 1980s, rural conditions improved because of increased rainfall. This, along with the implementation of structural adjustment programs, caused a decline in rural-to-urban migration (Brand 2001:39-40).

URBAN BAMAKO

Currently Bamako is a bustling city whose population has increased tenfold since independence in 1960. The official population is 1,000,000, but many estimate that the actual number is much larger. A higher proportion of the population in Bamako speaks French than is the case for populations outside of the city, and more adolescents in Bamako have some form of secondary education than elsewhere in Mali. The University of Mali is located in Bamako, and many young people from all over the country come to Bamako to continue their education, staying with family or friends.

Bamako is located on both sides of the Niger River, connected by two bridges. The city is subdivided into *quartiers*, or neighborhoods. Most *quartiers* are a mix of residential

and commercial buildings, and there is usually at least one market in a *quartier* where people buy food and other basic supplies daily. While there are more formal businesses in Bamako than elsewhere in the country, the vast majority of commerce is informal. Women play a central role in the informal economy, and nearly all women in Bamako sell something. Some have a stall in a nearby market; others walk around markets selling produce or goods as they go. Some women do not work in markets, but instead sell water, frozen drinks, or other goods out of their compounds. Besides a market, most *quartiers* have schools, a few cyber cafés, a boutique or two (where processed food and goods are sold), and various other businesses. Only the main streets are paved; the majority are dirt roads. Scattered among the dirt roads are soccer (football) fields where youth of the *quartier* often play.

Many government offices and other official buildings are located in *dugukɔnɔ*, or Centre Ville (City Center), where the Grand Marché (Large Market) is also located. While other towns in Mali are known for their market days (Djenné is particularly well known as one of the most colorful markets in West Africa), almost anything for sale in Mali can seemingly be found in the Grand Marché. Everything from textiles, shoes, meat, and charcoal, to car parts, electronic parts, western style clothing, and jewelry are available for sale here. Despite the lively market and other business ventures in Mali, unemployment continues to be very high, particularly among young men in Bamako.

People get around the city in *soutramas*, large green vans with the seats removed from the back section. These vans are privately owned and follow specific routes around the city. When leaving Bamako, people often take buses for long distances and *soutramas* for closer destinations. There is a railroad linking Bamako to Dakar, and travel along the Niger River is also possible.

Following Independence, Bamako's population has steadily increased. As Marcoux notes (Diarra et al. 1994), urban households have increased in size in recent decades, from 4.9 persons in 1960, to 5.5 in 1976, to 6 in 1987. Despite the increase in household size, the number of dwellings also increased during the same time period, resulting in urban sprawl. The increase in population is largely due to natural growth, with migration playing a secondary role (Diarra et al. 1994:236, 243).

While Bamako is a heterogeneous place, with people from all over the country as well as significant Lebanese and French populations, there are two main styles of dwellings in the city: compounds and "villas." Most people live in compounds, which are made of separate rooms that open into a central courtyard. While the organization of households varies from family to family, most households are patrilocal, and are often made of extended, multi-generational families. Compounds generally consist of a male head of household and his wife or wives and children, and may include his brother(s) with their spouses and children, a divorced or widowed sister and her children, and his parents. Adolescent boys often share a room together, while girls generally remain in their mother's room until they marry and leave the household. Cousins are usually referred to as brothers or sisters, and aunts and uncles are commonly called parents. Visitors from rural areas frequently stay with family or friends in Bamako, often coming for medical treatment or other services more readily available in Bamako. Some visitors only stay a few nights, while others may reside in the compound for years. Young girls often come to Bamako from rural areas to work in households as *domestiques* or *bonnes* in order to make enough money to establish a household and get married (Brand 2001:43, 60).

If there is an uninhabited room in the compound, it is common to rent it out to unrelated tenants. Young men sometimes rent these rooms, while continuing to eat meals at their father's house, especially when households become overpopulated. When there is no room for a newly married couple to move into the husband's compound, they often opt for neo-local settlement. In this situation, the couple may eat at the husband's compound, with the wife taking turns cooking for the extended family (Brand 2001:60-61).

The second style of dwelling in Bamako is the newer "villa." Similar to European houses, villas are enclosed houses with a small yard surrounded by a wall. Unlike compounds that can be expanded room by room as the household increases, villas must be built at one time. This means that building a villa requires a larger amount of capital than building a compound. Villas generally have fewer household members than compounds, and it is not uncommon for only nuclear families to inhabit a compound (Brand 2001:61). Villas are more common on the far side of the Niger River, where newer *quartiers* are being developed.

While the majority of people in Mali practice patrilineal descent as well as patrilocality, ties among maternal kin remain strong. Family members, particularly youth and elderly people, are usually free to visit and stay with both paternal and maternal kin. Interestingly, Brand notes that a growing number of migrants in Bamako are elderly people whose adult children live in the city; they often move from one child's household to another's (Brand 2001:43-47).

Historically, males have been the heads of households in Malian society. While this continues to be largely true, it has become increasingly difficult for heads of household to provide for their families. Wages in both the formal and informal sector are generally not enough to support a large group of people. This is exacerbated by the current trend of

children remaining as dependents in their parent's household longer, because of lack of economic opportunities for young people. According to Brand, most families in Bamako rely on individual members to generate an income and then give it over to the family head. However, this obligation does not go unchallenged, and many youth keep part of their income for themselves (Brand 2001:45).

Additionally, marriage patterns in urban areas in Mali have changed drastically since Independence. The age of both men and women at first marriage has risen markedly since the 1960s. This change is the result of multiple factors, including longer time spent in school or apprenticeship, high rates of unemployment, and economic insecurity, which often means that young people have to pay for their own marriages when their parents are unable to (Brand 2001:47).

Bamako is a complex urban environment where people are on the move – between *quartiers* and between rural villages and the city. *Sinankuɲa* gives people a way to instantly relate to some of these strangers. Furthermore, Bamako is home to people from a variety of backgrounds. This heterogeneity is one of the reasons why *sinankuɲa* can be a useful way to connect with others. People negotiate the relationship of *sinankuɲa* within a culturally recognized framework, often creating obligations or opportunities to increase their social capital.

CHAPTER SIX: *SINANKUŊA* STRUCTURE

“It is necessary to know that it’s because of a pact that I did this.”

Sinankuŋa jokes taken out of context do not make sense, and language and actions that are allowed between *sinankuw* would be inappropriate and often rude in a different situation. People utilize these special behaviors, which are based upon historical and cultural beliefs, differently depending upon the circumstances. Yet this negotiation is done within a shared framework of expected behaviors. This chapter examines the structure within which *sinankuŋa* is negotiated, by looking at current and historical definitions of *sinankuŋa*, the different kinds of *sinankuŋa*, and the origins of the relationship.

DEFINITIONS OF *SINANKUŊA*

Sinankuŋa is a relationship between specific families, ethnic groups, or castes. M. Simaga defined *sinankuŋa* as a “contract” or “pact” that binds together ethnic groups or families. People’s definitions of *sinankuŋa* do not vary greatly, and because of this uniformity, I have inferred three main ideological principles upon which *sinankuŋa* is based. First, *sinankuw* are not allowed to take offense at anything their fellow *sinanku* says. Second, *sinankuw* can never harm their fellow *sinankuw* in any way. In Mme Koné Coulibaly’s words, “One must never vex [a *sinanku*].” Third, a *sinanku* cannot refuse anything to their fellow *sinankuw*. As M. Sissoko said, “When your *sinanku* asks for something that you can do, you must [do it]. If you do not, it isn’t good for yourself.” This highlights an important aspect of *sinankuŋa*: people believe that if the principles of *sinankuŋa* are not followed, harm will come to that person or their descendants. Together, these three ideological principles form the foundation of a relationship that individuals negotiate and use according to the situations and people involved.

Early ethnographers and colonial officials often included short descriptions of *sinankupa* in their writings on the people of the region. Maurice Delafosse (1972[1922]), a colonial administrator, linguist, and ethnographer, described “*sénékoun*” or “*sinankou*” as members of different clans that are joined by a kind of alliance, and he gives the example that a “*sénékoun*” could never say anything negative about their fellow “*sénékoun*” in court (1972 [1922]: v. 3 106). Henri Labouret (1934), a linguist and anthropologist, used a similar description, but noted that this joking relationship exists throughout West Africa under different names: “*sananku-ya*” in Malinké, “*sinanku-ya*” or “*senanku-ya*” in Bamana and Jula, “*gamu*” in Wolof, “*basey*” in Sonray, and “*dendiragal*” among the Fulani (1934:100). Another colonial official, Charles Monteil (1929), defined “*sanakou*” as families linked by memorable circumstances, including families rendering services to one another and families pledging oaths towards each other, frequently sharing blood or flesh (1929:26-27). The majority of these definitions fit the present day situation, and while they are brief and superficial, they demonstrate the centrality of *sinankupa* in everyday life throughout the past century.

Marcel Griaule (1948) and Denise Paulme (1939, 1940) were both ethnographers who wrote on the Dogon, an ethnic group that lives on the cliffs of Bandiagara in Mali. The Dogon are well known for their indigenous religious beliefs as well as other unique social and cultural characteristics. Paulme compares the Dogon relationship of *mangu* with the “Manding” (Mande) relationship of “*sananku ya,*” concluding that they are both based upon alliances that allow jokers to insult each other without serious consequences. For her, the difference between the two is that *mangu* relationships are always based upon a service rendered by one entire community or group to another entire community or group, while

“*sananku ya*,” is based upon personal alliances (1939). This interpretation of *sinankuḡa* does not reflect its origins, but rather seems to be based upon the brief descriptions of early writers such as Delafosse, Labouret, and Monteil.

Marcel Griaule was one of the earliest ethnographers to situate joking relationships in what was then the Western Sudan, within other scholarly work on joking. While Griaule’s work focuses on the Dogon practice of *mangou*, his observations are often applied to non-Dogon joking relationships. Throughout his analysis, Griaule focused on the ways in which *mangou* can act as purifiers and the other obligations that are demanded by the relationship besides joking, and suggests that the *mangou* relationship among the Dogon be referred to as an “alliance cathartique” or cathartic alliance as opposed to “parenté à plaisanterie” or joking kinship. Through this change in terminology, Griaule was attempting to broaden the way researchers think of joking relationships (1948:242, 258).

Germaine Dieterlen (1987[1951]), unlike other writers on the topic, described a “*senanku*” as a kind of a twin: each “*senanku*” has a piece of their joking partner in them and vice versa (1987 [1951]:103-104). In a much more recent interpretation of joking relationships in West Africa, Etienne Kaboré (2002) describes joking relationships in Burkina Faso as a social game of reception of the other, or a kind of mechanism in which thinking of the other as a threat is prohibited. Yet not all contemporary writers include ideas of otherness. Doumbia focuses on the social cohesion brought about through *sinankuḡa* (2002:30).

The majority of contemporary work on joking relationships in West Africa focuses on how identity is constructed using the practice or on how it acts as a mediation tool for ethnic conflicts. While these are important aspects of *sinankuḡa*, I argue that emphasizing only

these characteristics of the practice ignores the many other ways that people utilize *sinankuɲa*.

KINDS OF *SINANKUɲA*

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed three main kinds of *sinankuɲa* relationships: between specific families within the same ethnic group, between two particular ethnic groups, and between an entire ethnic group and a certain caste. Other scholars differentiate among more types of *sinankuɲa* (see Doumbia 2002), but I decided to focus on these three because these are the ones that I encountered in my interviews and daily interactions in Bamako. Most of the people with whom I spoke did not differentiate between kinds of *sinanku*, but rather saw all these relationships as being the same thing practiced between specific groups. Additionally, not everyone was aware of all the *sinankuw* a particular group has. As seen in Figure 11, some of the people with whom I spoke only joked with a limited number of groups, while others were aware of numerous relationships. The number of *sinankuw* my informants joked with ranged from three to twenty-three *jamuw*.

The great majority of older work on joking relationships in West Africa does not make a clear distinction between these different kinds of relationships. Griaule's writings on the Dogon are an exception, as he distinguished between intratribal and intertribal relations. One of his informants told him that all *mangou* relationships within Dogon society imitate the *mangou* relationship between the Dogon and Bozo ethnic groups, and that intratribal relationships are less powerful than intertribal ones (1948:255). The relationship between the Bozo and Dogon ethnic groups continues to be one of the "strongest" forms of joking relationships today, and members of the two groups strictly adhere to prohibitions, including avoiding marriage between the two groups. Overall, it seems that Griaule's observations hold

Figure 11 – Chart of sinankuw as provided by informants

Jamu	Sinankuw
Coulibaly	Cissé Keïta Konaté Sissoko Touré <i>Samaké</i> ¹³ <i>Mariko</i> <i>Sogoba</i> <i>Camara</i> <i>Guindo</i> <i>Maïga</i> <i>Sanago</i> <i>Dumbia</i> <i>Toukara</i> <i>Sacko</i> <i>Bamba</i> <i>Bagayoko</i> <i>Berthe</i> <i>Ouattara</i> <i>Kouyaté</i> <i>Diabaté</i> <i>Traoré</i> <i>Haïdara</i>
Kanté	Fulani : Diallo, Cissé, Dicko, Diakité, Sidibé, Sangaré, Bâ Keïta Tangara Maïga Touré
Keïta	Coulibaly Samaké Kouyaté
Koné	Dambele Diabaté Traoré
Simaga	Diawara Sanogo
Sissoko	Cissé Coulibaly Keïta Konaté Sako Samaké
Traoré	Coulibaly Diarra Koné

¹³ Names in italics were given by at least one of the people interviewed but not all. Names in normal font were given by all interviewees of that jamu.

true for *sinankuɲa*: rules and prohibitions are more strictly adhered to when practiced between ethnic groups than when they are between families in the same ethnic group. More recent writers, such as Cécile Canut (2002, 2006), also make a distinction between different kinds of group relationships, but in a different way than I observed. Canut describes joking relationships between families in the same ethnic group as “parenté à plaisanterie” or joking kinship, and those between ethnic groups as “cousinage à plaisanterie” or joking relationship (2002:187). This differentiation in terminology is not helpful in understanding people’s reality. People generally do not make a distinction between these groups linguistically: all three kinds are called *sinankuɲa*. Furthermore, the term joking kinship is often used to describe other joking relationships between consanguineal or affinal kin. Conflating these categories is confusing for the researcher and meaningless for the people it describes.

Perhaps the most common type of *sinankuɲa* bond is between two specific patronyms, or *jamuw*. For example, people with the *jamu* Sissoko have a *sinankuɲa* relationship with everyone who has the *jamu* Cissé. However, these kinds of bonds can also be between groups of patronyms. For instance, Traorés, Dambélés, and Diabatés are considered brothers, and all three are the *sinankuw* of another set of brothers: the Konés, Diarras, Kantés, and Condés (Doumbia 2002:33). While not everyone I talked to was aware of these “brotherhoods,” some informants did know of their existence and the history behind these relationships. Mme Koné Coulibaly recounted the story of why Koné and Diarra are the same thing:

There was a great Diarra chief who wanted his son to become invincible in order to be a great soldier. In order to make his son become invulnerable, the chief washed him in medicine late one night. However, the medicine was applied on a roof, and the water with the medicine went through the roof and fell upon his son’s friend who was sleeping underneath the roof. When the son of the chief and his friend (who had also received the medicine) went to the

front lines, it was his friend that was victorious, not the son of the chief. In honor of his bravado, they called him Koné, which means to have the head of a soldier.

Therefore, as Mme Koné Coulibaly put it, “Koné and Diarra are the same thing,” and if a person with the *jamu* of Diarra does something especially courageous, they can be called a Koné.

The *sinankuɲa* relationships between particular ethnic groups are practiced in the same way as those between patronyms in the same ethnic group, but with stronger adherence to the three ideological principles and stricter avoidance of prohibitions, especially marriage. Undoubtedly the most frequently mentioned example of this was the relationship between the Bozo and the Dogon ethnic groups, a bond that is considered to be very strong. No one, in any way, is supposed to breach the relationship. Less often mentioned relationships also exist between the Soninké and the Malinké, as well as the Fulani and Bobo (Doumbia 2002:35).

Sinankuɲa is also practised between specific castes and ethnic groups. Caste systems exist in the majority of ethnic groups in Mali, and they generally differentiate among nobles, slaves, and endogamous professional groups. Bonds of *sinankuɲa* exist between a specific endogamous professional caste and an entire ethnic group. The most commonly named example of this is the relationship between the Fulani and the caste of blacksmiths, known as *numuw* in Bamanankan and forgerons in French. Blacksmith castes exist in many ethnic groups in Mali, and all blacksmiths are *sinankuw* with all Fulani.

Centrality and Variability of Patronyms

As is evident from the above description, patronyms, or *jamuw* in Bamanankan, play a central role in the practice of *sinankuɲa*. When people meet for the first time, a long greeting is exchanged, including the exchange of first names (*togo*) and last names (*jamu*). If

the new acquaintances are *sinankuw*, people begin joking immediately upon hearing the other's last name. Yet *jamuw* are important outside of the context of *sinankupa* as well. According to Brand, patronyms are the most important way through which individuals are connected to the community. *Jamuw*, which are passed through the patrilineage, signify what social position or caste a family belongs to (*hɔrɔn*, *namakala*, or *jɔn*), and indicate how others should relate to them. *Jamuw* also invoke families' historical roots, serving as what Gregory Mann calls an "identity marker" (2002:311). *Jamuw* and *togow* are given to children during a naming ceremony eight days after the child is born. Names identify people not only in relation to their immediate relatives, but also to their ancestors and family members yet to be born. Significantly, illegitimate children often are not given the *jamu* of their father (Brand 2001:17).

Additionally, some *jamuw* have feminine equivalents. For example, the feminine form of Traoré or Dambélé is Dansira. Sissoko's feminine counterpart is Sakiliba or Taliba, and Doumbia's equivalent is Danba. Keïta corresponds to the female Sacko (Doumbia 2002:33). Monteil noted these feminine patronyms in the 1920s (1929:27). Currently, this type of knowledge is highly specific and most of informants did not mention it. Furthermore, the practice of women taking these names has greatly decreased over the years because of governmental pressure to have a single name for all children in the same family (conversation with author, Prof. Drissa Diakité, April 13, 2006).

Jamuw can also vary according to region or nation. For example, Malians who bear the *jamu* of Sissoko are part of the same family as Guineans named Doumbia and Senegalese named Gueye. Furthermore, *jamuw* can change between ethnic groups. For instance, the Bamana *jamu* of Samaké changes to Sogoba for the Minianka, and to Touré for the Songhay

(conversation with author, Prof. Moussa Touré, April 27, 2006). Because these *jamuw* all denote the same family, they share *sinankuw*.¹⁴ Mann argues that people have used *jamuw* correspondence for purposes of social mobility, particularly during the past half of a century. He notes changes in *jamuw* occurred frequently among soldiers in the colonial army, particularly between World War I and World War II. Some soldiers purposefully enlisted under false names in order to hide a criminal past, while military recruiters changed others' *jamuw* (Mann 2002:312). No one with whom I spoke mentioned changing *jamuw*, except when traveling or moving to a new region.

Furthermore, one *jamu* can belong to people from different ethnic groups or different positions in the caste system. For example, M. Kanté explained that he is the *sinanku* of people who bear the *jamu* Touré, but not Tourés who are marabouts, or Islamic educators. When meeting someone for the first time, people can ask about these family-specific details.

Totems or tana prohibitions

This type of variability within *jamuw* is also seen in the case of totems, or *tanaw*. As Mme Koné Coulibaly explained, it is necessary to also know the *tana* of the individual family when establishing a *sinankuɲa* relationship. Her family's *tana* is the lion, but there are other Konés with the *tana* of a big lizard and a monkey. The relationship of *sinankuɲa* exists only between the *numuw* (blacksmith caste) and the Konés with the *tana* of the lion, not with the other Konés. Because of this relationship, marriage is prohibited between these certain Konés and *numuw*. However, marriage is permissible between other types of Konés and blacksmiths.

¹⁴ See A. R. N'Diaye (1992) for a detailed description of how patronyms change across regions and ethnic groups.

Delafosse notes the existence of *tana*, using the term taboo to describe the phenomenon. According to his informants, when a member of a clan (differentiated by *jamu*) dies, his or her soul can pass into the body of the animal totem or *tana* of that particular clan. Conversely, if an animal dies, its soul can pass into the body of a child of the clan who has the *tana* of that species, if the child is born at the same moment the animal dies or if the child is still in its mother's womb. Delafosse goes on to define *tana* as all that is sacred or forbidden from a magico-religious point of view involving a prohibition of some kind, thus including other kinds of taboos under the term *tana* that have nothing to do with clans (1972 [1922]: vol. 3 107-108). Similar to what Mme Koné Coulibaly said about different *tana* for people with the same *jamu* ("*diamou*" in Delafosse), he claims that different parts of the same clan can have different *tanaw*. However, he differentiates between a primary *tana* that is common to all members of a clan, and secondary *tana*, which can vary within one clan. Delafosse concludes by noting that people must follow prohibitions not only towards their own *tana*, but also the *tana* of their "*senekoun*" (1972 [1922]: vol. 3 180). Interestingly, Delafosse's list of *tana* for particular *jamu*w includes only two *tana* for the *jamu* Koné: the lion and the panther. Mme Koné Coulibaly notes that her *tana* is the lion, but that other Konés have the *tana* of a big lizard or monkey. This variation in *tana* is indicative of the ways in which historical and cultural knowledge can differ greatly depending upon location and even upon individual.

Other writers, including Labouret, Griaule, and Dieterlen also note the existence of *tana*, apparently assuming that knowledge of *tanaw* is widespread. Perhaps at the time of their research it was common knowledge. Currently, however, it seems that only a select

number of people know about and use *tanaw*, meaning that only this small group of people can recognize bonds of *sinankuɲa* established in this way.

Creating Relationships

When people are not linked by *sinankuɲa*, they can try to establish a bond in different ways. This particularly occurs when people are in a situation that could be improved by invoking the joking relationship. For example, if two people are not *sinankuw*, one person could ask what the *jamu* of the other's mother is, and if a *sinankuɲa* link can be found, joking can also occur. Furthermore, Mme Keïta Coulibaly also noted that one could use the idea of *sinankuɲa* even if those involved are not your *sinanku*. For instance, if she sees a child in the street who she does not know and the child is in the midst of doing something wrong, she can call out, "Ah! There's a little Coulibaly!" Even though the child is probably not a Coulibaly, the child will understand, upon being called one, that it is a reprimand for their bad behavior. While *sinankuɲa* relationships are therefore enacted within a historically and culturally contextualized framework, they are negotiated by the individuals who invoke them.

ORIGINS OF *SINANKUɲA*

Stories on the origin of *sinankuɲa* are quite numerous throughout West Africa, and they can vary by geographic region and ethnic group. In Burkina Faso alone, André Nyame counts over 120 histories behind joking alliances and kinship (Kaboré 2002:33-34). Initially, because of what people told me, I was under the impression that *sinankuɲa* was begun by Sunjata Keïta when he organized his empire in the thirteenth century. This is indeed the overarching cultural story that people are familiar with. The powerful epic of Sunjata acts as an organizing force throughout Mande culture, and while *sinankuɲa* was institutionalized

through the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, this is not the only story of origin for the joking practice. Individuals, particularly elderly people, know more particular histories of how *sinankuɲa* was established between particular patronyms and groups, thus complicating the picture. Canut notes these differing amounts of knowledge that people have on the historical origins of *sinankuɲa*, writing that they are often forgotten, especially in cities (2002:181). However, each relationship, whether between families, ethnic groups, or castes has a specific story of origin. Some *sinankuw* are linked by blood pacts, some by a common heritage, and others by past events.

Common Heritage

Some *sinankuɲa* relationships, particularly those between families in the same ethnic group, are based on a common history. Sunjata Keïta, the great emperor of the Mali Empire, institutionalized the pre-existing cultural practice. Kouyaté (2003), in his book on joking relationships in Guinea, formerly part of the Mali Empire, describes how this came about, and the following summary is largely based on his work.

After the historical battle of Kirina between the armies of Sunjata Keïta and the sorcerer king Soumaoro Kanté, Mande representatives and their allies met in 1236 near the town of Kangaba in a clearing called Kurukan Fuga. Here they decided upon the laws and principles that would govern people's lives in the Mali Empire. After twelve days, under the auspices of Sunjata and the presence of Samadi Bobo, king of the Bobos, the assembly discussed and adopted the empire's constitution, a charter of 44 articles called the Charter of Kurukan Fuga. The charter covered all aspects of life: social organization, family, the division of work, the status of women, the management of strangers, the duty of tolerance, protection of the environment, the management of conflicts, the conservation and

transmission of traditions, etc. At that time the Mali Empire encompassed the modern nation states of Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Large groups of people migrated throughout this area, causing the diffusion of many practices, including *sinankuɲa*. Article 6 of the Charter instituted the joking relationship “*sanakouya*” (Kouyaté’s spelling), “*tanamanyôya*,” a form of totemism, and other joking relationships. *Sinankuɲa* was then established among thirty subdivisions of Mande society: sixteen “bearers of quivers,” four princely tribes, five classes of marabouts, four trade classes, and one class of slaves. Kouyaté then goes on to assert that if this is the origin of *sinankuɲa*, the alliances created by the charter were quickly extended to corresponding patronyms, or *jamuw* (2003:15-19). D. T. Niane’s version of the Sunjata epic, originally published in 1960, is written according to a Guinean griot, Djeliva Koro. In this version, certain *sinankuɲa* relationships are listed explicitly: “The Tounkaras and the Cissé became ‘banter-brothers’ of the Keïtas” (Niane 2001:78). Kouyaté includes another example of *sinankuɲa* based on a common heritage. According to him, other forms of *sinankuɲa* originated through affinity or pacts, which were often created by groups living near each other to insure peaceful cohabitations (Kouyaté 2003:26).

Past Events

While the majority of people link *sinankuɲa* to Sunjata, many are aware that some bonds predate his rule, even if they do not know the specific stories. Past events, such as rendering a service to a family or group and forming an alliance, can also form *sinankuɲa* bonds. An example of this kind of origin is found in the relationship between the Koné and the Traoré, which occurred prior to Sunjata’s assembly at Kurukan Fuga (Doumbia 2002: 28). Labouret credits the relationship between some Kondé and some Traoré to being based

on a marriage alliance (1934:101). However, this is a different interpretation of the story linking Kondé and Traoré than the one that Kouyaté describes. In his version, the Kondé are linked to the Traoré through past events.

In fact, Kouyaté asserts that the majority of Mande traditionalists unanimously agree that joking relationships were practiced for the first time in the Kondé/Condé village of Dafolo, the capital of the principality of Do in the Middle Ages. The following story is part of the beginning of Sunjata's epic, and it sets the stage for his future reign.

After their victory over the famous buffalo of Do, two Mande brothers Damansa Oulani and Damansa Oulamba Traoré were offered the most beautiful girl in the village as a reward for their bravery. The king Do Nyèma Diarra Kondé/Condé brought together all the girls of his territory in a public place, and asked the hunters to make their choice. Without waiting, the two vanquishers of the buffalo walked around all of the girls twice without making a choice. To everyone's amazement, the two hunters split through the crowd and moved toward a tower, which was apart from the center of the ceremony. They took the hand of a young girl seated there. This girl was ugly, quite ugly. She was small, jet-black, had bad skin, and was uneven and deformed. When the young hunters showed the king the girl of their choice, the assembly of people burst out laughing, calling them all kinds of names, making fun of the Traorés, saying they were the people who have eyes that do not see. The Traorés also politely made fun of their hosts, the Kondé/Condé, saying to them that the significance of their choice was above their intelligence. Indeed, the young Mande hunters were respecting the secret pact they had made a few days earlier with Do Kamissa Kondé/Condé, the buffalo woman who had been voluntarily offered to them, in exchange for a young girl that she had described to them. This young girl, it was Sogolon Kondé/Condé or Sogolon Kédjougou, "Sogolon the ugly," the one who would give birth to Sunjata Keïta. Since this time, Kondé/Condé and Traoré have been *sinankuw*. (Kouyaté 2003:24-25)

Kouyaté's summary of the story ends here. In the complete epic as recorded by Niane, the two Traoré hunters and Sogolon make their way to the court of King Nare Fa Maghan or Maghan Kon Fatta, Sunjata's father. Here they give Sogolon to the king for marriage, thus uniting the parents of the future Sunjata (Niane 2001:4-10).

Other origins of *sinankuɲa*, according to Kouyaté, are bonds of mutual support made between ancestors during important past events. Some *sinankuɲa* bonds were made between soldiers during the heat of battle under Sunjata's reign. During battle, people observed some of the combatants showing weakness and acts of cowardice. Those guilty of cowardice did not want the people of their village to know about these acts because they were afraid of being ridiculed. Therefore, some soldiers decided to end their lives. Balla Fassèkè Kouyaté informed Sunjata of their plans and suggested a plan to which that Sunjata agreed: they would publicly display any act that could embarrass the person who did it. Thus, it was then requested that all soldiers systematically denounce all the weaknesses they noted among their colleagues in different battlefields. In the following days of the battles of Nèguèboria, Kankignè, and Kirina, the soldiers who were sympathetic towards each other mutually criticized each other, even inventing weaknesses. These criticisms allowed soldiers to relax and play down the importance of the war. People laughed in response to these accusations, and obligatory relationships were created and maintained by reciprocity. Thus, through systematically denouncing the real reason for both of their weaknesses, the soldiers created a bond of complicity, establishing of bond of *sinankuɲa* between certain patronyms and ethnic groups (Kouyaté 2003:27-29).

Blood Pact

Sinankuɲa bonds were also instituted through blood pact between *sinanku* ancestors. This basis for joking occurs throughout West Africa, and numerous early ethnographers note this common history. Dieterlen described the origins of "*senankuya*" to be a blood pact in which two people share blood, followed by a meal while uttering an oath to never make the

other's blood run again (1986 [1951]: 104). Griaule and Paulme both recount the stories of flesh eating and blood alliances among the Dogon (Griaule 1948:252-255; Paulme 1939).

While the origins of all joking relationships are not commonly held knowledge, there is one notable exception. Multiple people mentioned the blood pact between the Bozo and the Dogon ethnic groups, describing it as much stronger than other *sinankuna* relationships. Gérard Beaudoin (1984) recounts this story:

One day a Bozo chief before setting out on a long trip, asked a Dogon to look after his son. The season before had been very bad, and a food shortage set in. The Dogon, in order to avoid the [Bozo] child starving, gave [the child] a piece of his thigh to eat. When the Bozo [chief] returned, he proclaimed in the name of his people that no one could refuse anything to a Dogon. (1984:29-30)

The prevalence of this story is indicative of the strength of this relationship. Even when the exact story was unknown, or when the informant was unclear on the details, almost every person I spoke with emphasized the importance and strength of the relationship between the Dogon and Bozo and hinted at some part of the story. People did tell me slightly different versions of the above story. In M. Coulibaly's telling, there were two brothers who had the same mother and the same father. One of the brothers gave the other brother part of his flesh to eat when there was not enough food. The two brothers then went their separate ways, one going to the cliffs, thus becoming the Dogon, and the other going to the river, hence becoming the Bozo.

While perceived to be less strong than the relationship between the Bozo and Dogon, *sinankuna* between Fulbé and *numuw*, or blacksmiths, is also seen as quite strong. M. Kanté, who is himself a *numu*, said that the reason for the relationship is a blood pact. While he does not know the story of the creation of the relationship, he said that it predated Islam. Generally, what happens when a blood pact is created is that two people go off to an isolated

place and cut a part of their body (such as the forearm) and let the blood drain into a calabash. Their blood is then mixed together, drunk by the two people along with milk, and the calabash is smashed. Afterwards, the families of the two are linked by a blood pact (Helft, et al. 1993).

The origins of *sinankuŋa* are quite numerous, and knowledge of the histories behind *sinankuŋa* relationships seems to vary greatly between individuals. Indeed, multiple people suggested that I speak with *jeliw*, or griots, as they are the people who “know about things like that.” However, individuals construct bonds of *sinankuŋa* within this common framework. Drawing upon definitions of *sinankuŋa* that are historically and culturally based, people negotiate and construct different kinds of bonds. As we will see in the next chapter, people in Bamako utilize *sinankuŋa* in multiple ways. By drawing upon their ethnic and family identities, recognized by *jamuw*, and building upon shared cultural histories, people use *sinankuŋa* as a way to connect with people and often ameliorate potentially difficult situations.

CHAPTER SEVEN: *SINANKUŊA* IN PRACTICE

“[Occasions for using sinankuŋa] are created by the situation.”

Sinankuŋa cannot be understood as a formulaic structure that is used the same way by everyone. Rather, it is a relationship that individuals use differently according to the situation. M. Traoré recounted a time when he had used *sinankuŋa* to speed up paperwork at an administrative office. Because office workers were taking a long time preparing the paper he was waiting for, he asked the patronym of the person filling out his form. Upon finding out that they were *sinankuw*, he told the worker, “You must work faster. You’re doing the work of your master.” In this situation, M. Traoré used *sinankuŋa* to his advantage. Through invoking a common joke – the master/slave relationship – he clearly established that he was joking with the office worker because of *sinankuŋa*. Yet he used joking as a means to further his agenda when he demanded that the work be done more quickly.

This chapter will examine the ways that people utilize and negotiate *sinankuŋa* depending upon the situation. As mentioned earlier, *sinankuŋa* is based on three ideological principles: *sinankuw* cannot take offense at anything a fellow *sinankuw* says, they cannot harm one another, nor can they refuse anything to a *sinanku*. I will describe the practical ways that people employ *sinankuŋa* by examining the kinds of jokes people use, how people use *sinankuŋa* as a performance to increase their social capital, the ways in which age and gender affect the practice of *sinankuŋa*, how marriages are negotiated in relation to *sinankuŋa*, and the familial, legal, social, and economic consequences of the joking relationship. As M. Traoré explained, *sinankuŋa* is an ideal relationship to invoke “when things don’t work like you want.”

KINDS OF JOKES

The most common way that people use *sinankuɲa* is joking. Because of the relationship between specific patronyms and groups, jokes that would otherwise be considered rude, inappropriate, or out of place are allowed and even expected between *sinankuw*. Anthropological work has generally not focused on what happens and what is said during joking. Rather, it has emphasized the relationship itself within the wider context of kinship, alliances, and reciprocity (Apte 1985:34). This disregard for how people invoke *sinankuɲa* daily is an example of valuing genealogical relationships over practical ones.¹⁵

Most of the people with whom I spoke said they generally joked in Bamanankan, the most common language spoken in Bamako. However, a few people did note some exceptions. M. Sissoko, who works for the government, said that he jokes in French if he is at the office, and Bamanankan if he is in the street. M. Traoré, who is in his late twenties and attended university in Bamako, said that he begins by joking with a new acquaintance in French, and if the person does not respond he then jokes in Bamanankan. If he is already acquainted with a person and knows that they are “educated,” he will joke with them in French; if a person is “not educated” he will say the same jokes in Bamanankan. Thus, the choice of language is based upon what languages the two jokers can speak, where the joking occurs, and personal preference.

¹⁵ There have been a few exceptions within the scholarly work on joking relationships in West Africa. According to Paulme, Dogon people joke openly about living and dead relatives, with the exception of the mother of the fellow joker. Because *mangu*, the joking relationship among the Dogon, is based upon an individual’s patrilineage, often the joker does not know what village the fellow joker’s mother comes from. This means they do not always know if a *mangu* relationship exists between their fellow joker’s mother and their own patrilineage or village (*mangu* among the Dogon also exists between villages) (Paulme 1939). Kaboré notes this same avoidance of mocking a joker’s mother among the “Mossé” (Mossi) of Burkina Faso (2002:37). Griaule wrote that when people who are ethnically Dogon joke with Bozo people, jokes are exchanged in a common language, often Fulani. However, Griaule also writes that because of this language barrier, both parties do not always understand jokes, and thus jokes are less enjoyed (1948:246).

Sinankuw can mock and ridicule each other immediately after finding out that they are cousins. Some jokes vary according to the specific situation and are created spontaneously. However, many jokes are more standardized and are used repeatedly and widely. These jokes are recognized by practically everyone in the society. Upon analyzing these common jokes, I have established a typology of different kinds of jokes, the majority of which combine humor with historical and cultural knowledge. These jokes commonly claim possession of a *sinanku*, mock *sinankuw*, or accuse them of bad behavior, often playing upon the stereotypes of different groups (see Figure 12).

Many of these common jokes observed in Bamako invoke ownership or possession of one individual over another. For instance, a typical joke would be for a Diarra to call a Traoré their son or daughter. They could also call them their slave or their cousin. The Diarra might also say that they created the Traoré, or that they are their master. Furthermore, ideas of ownership are also invoked by the phrase “I jamu tɔmɔna,” which roughly translated means “Your name is something I found in the street (or the lost-and-found).”

Other types of jokes that do not invoke ownership generally mock and make fun of the other *sinankuw*. For example, a *sinanku* can say that the other’s name is a name of amusement, or that they are worthless. *Sinankuw* can also call each other thieves or gluttons, as well as say that everyone with their *sinanku*’s *jamu* is stupid or bad.

People choose to use different jokes depending upon the *sinanku* they are joking with. For example, jokes about food vary depending on what the group of the *sinanku* stereotypically eats: Coulibalys eat beans, Keïtas eat peanuts, Sidibés (a Fulani patronym) drink milk. Perhaps the most commonly used joke is that one’s *sinanku* eats beans. Doumbia comments on why Malians find this joke so amusing:

Figure 12 – Typology of Kinds of Jokes

Kinds of jokes	Possession	N denmuso/ce y'i ye. I fa/ba ye n ye. <i>You are my daughter/son. I am your father/mother.</i>
		N ka jon y'i ye. <i>You are my slave.</i>
		N y'i matigi ye. <i>I am your master.</i>
		I ye <u>Diarra</u> ye. <i>You are a <u>Diarra</u>. (insert own name)</i>
		I ye balima ye. (optional: balimamusu/ce) <i>You are my cousin.</i>
		N y'i dilan, Ala ye tow dilan. <i>I made you, and God made the others.</i>
		I jamu tomona. <i>Your name is something found in the street (était ramassé).</i>
	Mocking	I jamu ye tulongejamu ye. <i>Your name is a name of amusement.</i>
		I te fosi/foyi ye. <i>You are worthless.</i>
		<u>Keita</u> be ye naloma ye. <i>All the <u>Keitas</u> are stupid. (insert their name)</i>
		<u>Kulubali</u> man pi. <i><u>Coulibaly</u> is bad. (insert their name)</i>
		I be so dun. <i>You eat beans.</i>
	Accusation	Fosi sonyata te yan, bo kenema! <i>There is nothing to steal here. Leave!</i>
		I janto i yere la, nson do be yan! I ka minenw mara! <i>Attention! A thief has come here! Guard your belongings!</i>
		Duminden do be yan! I ka datugun! <i>A glutton (gourmand) has come here. Cover your plates!</i>

Beans are a very nutritious food with a pleasant taste and are not expensive: three qualities that make this food appreciated by all Mande society. But beans have the annoying property of causing one to bloat and break wind when one abuses them. This is why everyone eats them, but no one wants anyone to know, because, among the Mande, breaking wind in public is the most unfortunate act. Each prides oneself on having good manners and accuses his *sinanku* of not having any. Thus, beans whose consumption can lead to being discourteous (in breaking wind) are not sensibly consumed by any person of quality. (2002:32)

During normal conversation, flatulence is considered extremely rude and no one would mention it out loud. However, when practicing *sinankuna*, it is a standardized, common joke. Regular behavior becomes inverted, and normal rules of behavior are turned on their head.

Jokes also change depending on what economic activity groups generally practice (trading and commerce, farmers, herdsman), their religious affiliation (Muslim or “pagan”), etc. Jokes about a group’s place within the caste system also take place (Canut 2002:180-181). This is seen particularly between *numuw*, or blacksmiths, and people who are ethnically Fulani. Thus, for Smith and others, joking alliances between two groups “confirm and reinforce their distinct existence while laying out a point of passage rendering complete impermeability between the two impossible” (2004:163). Paradoxically, the standardization of stereotypes allows for tolerance between groups.

JOKING AS PERFORMANCE

The strong, often accusatory language used between *sinankuw* creates a kind of performance atmosphere in which jokers try to out-do one another, often to the amusement of onlookers. Through this verbal playing, people become more fully socialized. Not only are they interacting with their fellow *sinanku*, the jokers also demonstrate their correct social

behavior to other people. While this may not have immediate consequences, it can translate into future social capital.

Speech and words are deeply respected in Mande society, and knowledge of social and cultural rules of language use are the basis of all verbal performances. Koné asserts, “Speech has a soul...[and] emits (dangerous) energy” (1997:10). This energy is a form of *nama*, or a force that is emitted by the soul. Because of this, *namakalaw*, particularly *jeliw* and *funew*, fulfill the social role of performing verbally, particularly in important, ritualized contexts (such as a wedding, baptism, etc.). As a result of their birth and training, these castes are seen as capable of taming the *nama* in speech. Yet all speech, even everyday conversations, has the possibility of unleashing *nama*, particularly when speech is not appropriate to the situation: “Inappropriate speech, for example, (wrong context, wrong setting, wrong timing, wrong person) unleashes more *nama* by making people angry, embarrassed or sad” (Koné 1997:10, footnote 5). Indeed, speech is seen as a source of power that some people (often *namakalaw*) have over others (Koné 1997:10, 20, 41).

Within the context of *sinankuna*, people use this power of speech to both improve their own social image, and to further socialize the *sinankuw* they joke with. As *sinankuw* try to top one another with verbal jokes, they act out important cultural beliefs and play with history, reinforcing correct behavior:

The knowledge of one’s roots, ancestral religious objects, connections with the spirits, the relationship between individual or clan and totem, the relationship between family/clan and *sanankun* (joking relative) families/clans, are various forms of self-knowledge without which a person cannot survive socially. (Koné 1997:280).

Furthermore, *sinankuɲa* is a way that these beliefs and histories are enacted on a daily basis, providing a context in which cultural knowledge is handed down from generation to generation.

The importance of how *sinankuɲa* is performed can also be seen in the actions people take as a result of the joking relationship. Canut describes an instance in which a Doumbia woman went beyond verbal jokes in practicing *sinankuɲa*:

She prepared a favorite dish of “*senanku*,” kidney beans, and she left them in an obvious place in the courtyard of her workplace during mealtime, and then went to hide. When her Sidibé colleagues found the dish, they hesitated, and then ate all of the food, unable to resist a dish they like so much. Once the meal was finished, the Doumbia woman presented herself to them and accused them of having eaten the dish all the while making fun of their attitude. Having fallen into the trap, the Sidibés were in a position of weakness and were on the one hand required to return or give back the dish, and on the other hand avenge the woman who had just proven them to be bean eaters since they could not resist! (2002:185)

Through enacting a common verbal joke, this woman performs for her coworkers – both those who are her *sinankuw* and onlookers – and improves both her own social image and that of her *sinankuw*. All involved followed correct behavior, and the relationship between the woman and her Sidibé coworkers is strengthened. Moreover, the Sidibés will return the joke at some point in the future, ensuring continued sociability of all.

This story also illustrates how no one wants to accept that the jokes their *sinankuw* say are true. It is always the other person who is the bean eater, slave, useless, etc. not them. Doumbia notes this accusatory aspect of *sinankuɲa*: “It is always the other who eats beans” (2002:32). Because much of the verbal play during joking is back-and-forth, often with both participants using the same jokes, both *sinankuw* benefit socially. Their performance allows bystanders to see them behaving correctly, thus improving their social image.

AGE AND GENDER

Not only do people try to out-joke each other, they also tailor what they say depending upon to whom they are talking. Initially, everyone with whom I spoke said that age and gender are not factors in how *sinanku* is practiced, and as a general rule, this seems to be true. For example, M. Sissoko said that he could enter the compound of a *sinanku* and say, “Today I am the head of this family,” even if his *sinanku* is much older than he is. *Sinanku* can also call a fellow *sinanku* of any age their son or daughter. Moreover, ancestors can also be joked about. Paulme notes that jokes can take a rough turn, especially in the presence of old men and women. The elderly, as well as their ancestors, can be openly mocked and teased by joking partners (Paulme 1939).

Sissao, in his book on joking relationships in Burkina Faso, notes that age does not matter in joking relationships in some ethnic groups, but it does matter in other ethnic groups. For example, among the “Moose” (Mossi), one can joke at any age: “A one-hundred-year-old elder can joke with a ten-year-old child” (2002:80). However, Sissao observes that there are restrictions to this form of joking. Among the “Moose” of Piktenga and Louda, children cannot insult the chief; only the chief’s age mates and those of the same social status can joke with him (2002:80-81). Joking in Bamako is similar to the first type described by Sissao. Children can joke with any elder *sinanku* regardless of status. Once children can understand how joking is practiced, they can joke freely with any *sinanku* they want to (Kaboré 2002:38).

While age does not appear to be a factor in who can joke with whom, it does affect what kinds of things are said. Some of the people I spoke with insisted that politeness must be followed when practicing *sinanku*. According to M. Sissoko, “There is no tactlessness

or coarseness.” Mme Keita Coulibaly also noted that she was always more polite when talking with men than with women. Sissao argues that in general, while there is not an age restriction in joking relationships, there is a right of seniority, giving the example that one cannot splash an elder with water. Yet Sissao concludes that these restrictions do not detract from the joking and playing (2002:80-81).

Upon being asked more pointed questions, the people I spoke with did note that *sinankuw* have more freedom with one another if they are near the same age. With other *sinanku*, according to M. Sissoko, “there is a limit,” and one must know when to stop. However, with people of the same age, one can say anything. For example, men of the same age could say, “You are not circumcised,” to each other but not to an older man. Shared experiences can also be invoked among people of the same age. For example, *sinankuw* could claim that they protected their *sinanku* when they were little children. Therefore, age and gender are also aspects of *sinankuɲa* that people must negotiate differently depending upon the circumstances.

MARRIAGE

Because *sinanku* recognize each other by patronyms, or *jamuw*, marriage is an important factor when considering who jokes with whom. Upon marriage, women in Mali generally take their husband’s name as their legal *jamu* and are referred to by others using this name. Yet women continue to joke with their own family’s *sinankuw*. People who are *sinankuw* with her husband’s patronym can joke with her (i.e. a *sinanku* of the Sissokos will joke with Mme Coulibaly Sissoko), and she can respond in a joking manner, but wives do not generally initiate joking with husband’s *sinankuw*. Similarly, men do not joke with their wives’ *sinankuw*, but rather continue to joke with their own. Delafosse, writing on the situation in the early part of the century, described the same situation, and noted that women

practiced the prohibitions of both their own *jamu* and their husband's *jamu*, especially while in her husband's house (1972 [1922]: v. 3 107). Thus, this aspect of the relationship seems to have remained generally unchanged for almost a century.

Whether intermarriage is allowed between *sinankuw* depends on what kind of relationship it is that creates their bond of *sinankuɲa*. Generally, marriage is permitted between *sinankuw*, and many people even see it as a benefit. If two *sinankuw* marry each other, it can avoid problems and help settle disputes quickly. As M. Coulibaly put it, "If I am happy, I call her [my wife] my cousin/*sinanku*... When I am not happy, I call her... my slave... I say that beans are their food... She says that the first time she saw beans was in the Coulibaly family." Following an interview with M. Coulibaly, I spoke with his wife Mme Coulibaly Sissoko. Her husband was nearby during the interview, and she continually mentioned that she was single in order to provoke and joke with him, saying, "Me, I'm not married."

However, intermarriage between *sinankuw* is only permitted when there is not a marriage prohibition between the two families. These prohibitions exist between different castes and also between specific ethnic groups. The most commonly cited example of a marriage prohibition among ethnic groups is between the Dogon and Bozo. Past anthropological work includes this aspect as well. Paulme wrote that any sexual relationship or marriage is prohibited between the Bozo and Dogon (1939), and Griaule noted the same to be true for *mangou* among the Dogon (1948:243).

Marriages between people of different castes were prohibited historically, and this continues to a certain extent today. Within the same ethnic group, nobles or *hɔrɔnw* are allowed to marry other *hɔrɔnw*, *namakalaw* are allowed to marry other *namakalaw*, and

jɔnw are allowed to marry other slaves. When marriages occur between ethnic groups, this hierarchy is kept in place. For example, a Bamanan *hɔrɔn* can marry a Soninké noble, but not a Soninké griot. Ideologically, these beliefs remain intact today, but in practice marriage prohibitions are enforced to a lesser extent. Many people said they knew multiple instances in which it had been broken. Writing half a century ago, Dieterlen noted that if a Bamana person married below their station, such as a noble man marrying the daughter of a blacksmith, their marriage would produce impure children who will never be entitled to all the rights their father had (1987 [1951]: 101).

An example of a marriage prohibition that exists ideologically, but is often transgressed in practice, is between the *numuw*, or blacksmiths, and Fulani. The reasoning behind the marriage prohibition relates back to the origin of the *sinankupa* that binds particular groups. M. Simaga explained the marriage ban between *numuw* and the Fulani is a result of the blood pact binding the two groups: “When one marries a young girl, when one is deflowered, there is virginal blood, and at each childbirth, there is blood. This is why people say that you must not have the two marry. But, when you make sacrifices, it works. One can kill an animal whose blood flows in the place of that, it happens.” Despite this prohibition, *numuw* and Fulani often marry each other. Many people had the general impression that this occurred more often in the city than in rural areas and that it was happening more frequently now than in the past. Yet multiple informants noted the grave results that can happen after such a marriage. M. Kanté emphasized this: “Serious consequences are always realizable.” He spoke of a case in which a Fulani and a *numu* married and they had only one child that lived. The other children died young and were born with birth defects, and the child that lived had mental abnormalities. Another informant noted a case in which a rich *numu* man married

a Fulani woman. Soon after the marriage, the husband lost all of his money and the wife became gravely ill and had to be hospitalized.

While marriage occurs between blacksmiths and Fulani even though it is prohibited, this does not happen between the Dogon and the Bozo. Because of the strength of *sinankuɲa* between the two ethnic groups, no one I spoke with had ever heard of any case in which a marriage had taken place. Indeed, they adamantly denied that this could be possible. In Helft's film *Sacrée Plaisanterie*, a young man and young woman are shown sitting beside one another. One is Dogon; the other is Bozo. The two glance shyly at each other, and they even go as far as to touch hands. However, when the Dogon man leans in to kiss the young Bozo woman, instead of her, he finds that she has been transformed into a fish, a reference to the number of Bozo people who subsist on fishing (Helft, et al. 1993).

Children are affected by the kind of relationship that exists between their parents. People believe that children can suffer, even to the point of dying, if their parents have violated a marriage prohibition. Furthermore, Dieterlen notes that children born outside of a marriage do not receive the *jamu* of their father, as is customary, and therefore cannot joke with the *sinankuw* of their father's *jamu*. However, a father can give the child his *jamu* later on if the child approaches him (1987 [1951]: 101).

The intersection of marriage and *sinankuɲa* is therefore situated within the larger cultural framework. Ethnicity, position within the caste system, and the origins of specific relationships determine whether *sinankuw* can marry each other and whether the children of the marriage will be affected.

OBLIGATIONS

Apart from major life decisions, such as marriage, *sinankuɲa* can be invoked on a daily basis to create obligations between *sinankuw*. Depending upon the situation, these obligations can include the exchange of goods or money and the avoidance of conflict, which often means circumventing the state legal system. In modern Mali, *sinankuɲa* functions outside of state institutions. Yet people continue to utilize the social practice, even when doing so has legal or monetary consequences. These obligations are largely based upon the second and third ideological principles of *sinankuɲa*: a *sinanku* cannot harm a fellow *sinanku* in any way, nor can a *sinanku* refuse a fellow joker anything. People utilize and adapt these principles according to the situation.

Historical Obligations of Sinankuw

While *sinankuɲa* continues to hold an important place in social interactions between people, the formal obligations of the relationship seem to have waned in recent decades. Based upon the work of Labouret, Paulme, Griaule, and Dieterlen, it appears that *sinankuw* formerly held a more prominent role in rituals, funerals, and purifications. However, many other aspects of *sinankuɲa* that they reported continue to hold in current-day Bamako.

Labouret stressed that *sinankuɲa* is less about alliances and more about mutual obligations, maintaining that the practice of reciprocal assistance was determined by one's place within a kind of hierarchy of *sinankuɲa* (1941:1). He described some *sinankuw* as superior to other *sinankuw*, the difference being a history of slavery. Inferior *sinankuw* acted as intermediaries for their superior allies in certain circumstances, including negotiating a marriage, affirming rights, or claiming payment from another person. After a death, a *sinanku* washed the body and clothes of the deceased in exchange for some *pagnes*, or pieces

of cloth. Labouret also noted that *sinankuw* exchanged services, including agricultural and domestic work (1934:103). Dieterlen made similar observations, and noted that “*senankou*” had an absolute obligation to never make an attempt on the life of their fellow joking partner (1987 [1951]: 104).

According to Paulme’s description of Dogon joking relationships, strangers were immediately invited to share the house and food of their joking ally, and often did not even wait for an invitation. *Mangu* alliances also included funeral obligations, and if someone violated a *tana* or totem prohibition, only a *mangu* could perform the rite of purification for the person (Paulme 1939). Griaule mentioned the same aspects of Dogon joking relationships, and also noted that *mangou* could intervene in a quarrel on behalf of their fellow joking ally, particularly in spousal disputes (1948:243, 248).

Current Obligations of Sinankuw

While many of the aspects of *sinankuɲa* mentioned in these historical works hold true today, some obligations have ceased or become less important. The majority of people I talked with did not mention *tana* or totems in relation to *sinankuɲa*, and this aspect of the relationship seems less salient today. No one mentioned any sort of purification rite performed by *sinankuw* or a special role for *sinanku* during funerals¹⁶, but M. Kanté did note that *sinankuw* play a role during wedding ceremonies. Additionally, people do not differentiate between kinds of *sinankuw* as Labouret does. While hierarchy is present in *sinankuɲa* because of the backdrop of the caste system, there does not seem to be superior and inferior *sinankuw* as Labouret suggests.

¹⁶ Kaboré does note the occurrence of joking during funerals (2002 :38).

Despite the waning of some of these obligations, *sinanku* continues to be utilized in other ways by people in Bamako today. Rather than using *sinanku* in formulaic or rigid ways, people vary how they practice *sinanku* depending on the situation and people involved. For example, legal situations can be affected by *sinanku* when *sinanku* are obliged to avoid harming each other. M. Simaga explained that if a judge is a Dogon he could not preside over a case in which a Bozo is involved and vice versa, in order to avoid harming one's *sinanku*. M. Coulibaly also knew of a similar situation in which a soldier who was a "grand patron," or big boss, of the gendarmerie took extra steps to make sure he did not harm any *sinanku*. As a part of his job, he had to deal with criminal cases and make decisions relating to their sentences. Whenever he came across a paper of a criminal who was his *sinanku*, he refused to handle the case. In order to avoid doing his *sinanku* any harm, he gave the case to his vice-patron to make a decision. Brand cites another example of *sinanku* affecting a legal situation that she read about in a Bamako newspaper. A Dogon woman, after being raped, decided to press legal charges against her attacker. Upon learning that the rapist was a Bozo, she dropped the charges, in order to avoid harming her *sinanku* (2001:20).

One of the more evocative stories I heard was about an event that happened personally to M. Simaga. While driving in his new car, M. Simaga was rear ended by another driver. The two men stopped their cars and got out. The other driver immediately offered to pay for all the damages done to M. Simaga's car and gave him his card. Upon looking at the card, M. Simaga saw that the other driver's *jamu* was Sanogo, his *sinanku*. Reluctantly, knowing what was going to happen, he gave his own card to M. Sanogo. Once the other man found out that they were *sinankuw*, he laughed, and revoked his offer to pay for the damages

to M. Simaga's car. Instead, M. Sanogo joked with him a little and then left. M. Simaga was therefore obliged to pay for all the repair work on his own car. Yet, M. Sanogo, according to his card, was the director of a bank, and therefore had more than enough means to take care of it. However, because of *sinankuɲa*, M. Simaga was obliged to laugh off the expensive incident. In the long run, M. Simaga was very glad that he did this, because three years later his children were driving in that same car on the way to another town when they were in a second car accident. This accident was much more serious, and the car rolled over a couple times. However, none of his children were hurt in the accident. M. Simaga believes that if he had forced his *sinanku*, M. Sanogo, to pay for the repairs of the initial wreck, harm would have come to his children three years later. Because he honored the *sinankuɲa* relationship, they were spared.

M. Simaga's story incorporates two aspects of *sinankuɲa*: do no harm to a *sinanku* and never refuse a *sinanku* anything. The other man revoked his offer to pay for the car damage, and M. Simaga could not refuse. This characteristic of *sinankuɲa* can also be seen through more mundane interactions as well. *Sinankuw* are required to give their fellow joking partners whatever they demand, including food, shelter, money, or gifts. M. Kanté, who has a *numu* or blacksmith patronym, recounted a story about an interaction with the police involving *sinankuɲa*:

The other day, there was a police officer who stopped me with my car, but he is Sidibé. He took my [identification]. He looked at it and said: "Look at me, you old bastard. You know that you're cruising around with a [burnt out] headlight?" I said: "But, you little bastard, what did you say to me?" He says: "You're cruising with [out] a headlight," but I said, "It's not true." I got out, but I found that I had a burnt out turn signal. Me, I didn't know, but the police officer, he is Peulh [Fulani]. I say: "Ah, give me the cost of the bulb, the bulb that is burnt out. It's you who saw it. You must pay me the price of the bulb." Voila, me, I'm Kanté. He is my *cousin*, but he is young. I said: "Give me the

price.” He says: “Eh! If I had known, I would not have whistled at you [to pull you over].”

The police officer then gave M. Kanté 2500 FCFA (roughly US \$5), more than the price of a new bulb. Thus, because of the *sinankuɲa* bond between *numu* or blacksmiths, which includes the Kantés, and the Fulani, M. Kanté emerged from what could have been a situation in which he took an economic loss, that of replacing his light bulb, into one of economic gain.

These stories demonstrate how individuals use *sinankuɲa* to their own advantage. Because of the joking bond, both M. Kanté and the police officer were able to joke about the situation, but it was because of M. Kanté’s seniority in age and his ability to use *sinankuɲa* effectively that he benefited from the situation and not the police officer. Conversely, if the police officer had pulled over someone else who was his *sinanku*, but who was younger or less adept at joking than M. Kanté, the situation could have played out very differently. Through M. Kanté’s situational use of *sinankuɲa*, he was able to use the social practice for practical ends.

Indeed, many people recounted stories in which *sinankuɲa* was used for one’s own economic advantage. M. Traoré recalled an interaction between himself and his sister’s fiancé, who is a Diarra. Whenever the two meet, they usually joke a little, and M. Diarra often calls M. Traoré his son. One day, M. Traoré decided to give his *sinanku* what he wanted:

I said to him, “Good, OK. Like you said, I’m your son. Therefore, a papa must do everything for his son. Can you take care of me? If I accept to be your son, can you take care of me?” ...He said, “Yes, yes, yes.” It’s good to hear that.... I said, “OK, you will buy me a motorbike...you are my master, [and I need] the gasoline for the motorbike, and you will buy clothes for me...and you will give me pocket money.” ...Then, he said, “There is no problem.” So, I see that he is

incapable of [giving me these things]. I say, then, “Leave [forget] the motorbike and everything. But I need 10.000 francs now. You must give me that.”

M. Diarra gave M. Traoré 10.000 FCFA (about US \$20), and the interaction was finished. M. Traoré utilized *sinankuɲa* in a very different way than normal. Instead of verbally denying his inferiority, he admitted to it upon the condition that M. Diarra give him what he wanted. This is an example of using *sinankuɲa* in a personalized, practical way.

M. Coulibaly also described a time in which the invocation of *sinankuɲa* resulted in his own economic gain. During his work as a tax collector, M. Coulibaly ran into a situation in which a business refused to pay its taxes. He went to discuss the situation with the business owner personally, and discovered that they were *sinankuw*. M. Coulibaly then told the proprietor that he was obliged to pay whether he wanted to or not. The business owner then gave M. Coulibaly the money for the taxes plus the price of kola nuts. In this situation, *sinankuɲa* did more than work for the economic gain and professional benefit of M. Coulibaly. Because of his adeptness at invoking the joking relationship, M. Coulibaly was able to avoid conflict in a situation that otherwise would have been forced into the legal system.

In her article on women who make their living through commerce along the railroad between Dakar and Bamako, Agnès Lambert (1993) cites how *sinankuɲa* has been used by some of these women to strengthen their business. During Moussa Traoré’s presidency, one woman invoked the *sinankuɲa* bond between the Traorés and her family, the Diarras, in order to keep customs officials from seizing the goods she sold along the railroad. Thus, through appealing to the bond of *sinankuɲa*, this woman was able to continue commerce along the railroad, demonstrating how *sinankuɲa* can be invoked even in the absence of an actual joking partner (1993:57-58).

When Malians speak of *sinankuɲa*, the most often cited benefit is that it “keeps the peace.” *Sinankuɲa* does promote social cohesion in many circumstances, particularly in familial disputes. Multiple people explained that a neighbor who is a *sinanku* could be called into a household when there is a conflict in the family, whether it is between a wife and a husband, or between children and parents. The *sinanku* will resolve the conflict, and those involved are obliged to act according to whatever the *sinanku* decides (Mme Coulibaly Sissoko and Mme Koné Coulibaly). Brand notes an example in which a father disowned his daughter because she became pregnant before she was married. He chased her away and refused all attempts at reconciliation until his *sinanku* intervened. Only then, at the *sinanku*’s request, did the father allow the daughter to return home. Brand maintains that because of the shared cultural knowledge that one cannot refuse a request made by a *sinanku*, the father was allowed to save face and keep his reputation intact, while still permitting his daughter to return home (2001:221). Through tailoring *sinankuɲa* to the circumstances, people are able to mediate conflicts that would otherwise escalate.

Canut describes this role of social mediation as “indisputable,” demonstrating the centrality of its position in current daily life (2002:188). M. Sissoko described a situation in which two Dogons were having a dispute over land. In order to settle the situation, they went to a tribunal. However, the presiding judge was a Bozo. Once they were at court, the two Dogons began speaking against each other, but the judge stopped the discussion. He called the two Dogons imbeciles and told them to get going. After that, the dispute was settled between the two Dogons. Through invoking his joking relationship with the Dogon ethnic group, the Bozo judge was able to dismiss the case without going through a trial. In M. Sissoko’s words, “It isn’t the law that regulated it, but *sinankuɲa*.”

Many people cited historic instances in which *sinankuɲa* helped prevent war. M. Simaga recounted a situation in the nineteenth century when the king of Ségou, Bamba Da Monson Diarra, was in a conflict with another king whose *jamu* was Dambélé. Because of the relationship of *sinankuɲa*, they did not want to harm each other, and thus avoided going to war.

The power of *sinankuɲa* in ending conflicts cannot be overstated. Mark Davidheiser (2004, 2005, 2006), in an article on West African forms of conflict mediation, contends: “Joking relationships are arguably the most effective institution used by mediators [in many circumstances]” (2005). As a means of conflict resolution, Davidheiser argues that joking relationships are particularly helpful because of their ability to resolve long-standing disputes in which other interventions have failed. He goes on to note that joking opens up a liminal space in which joking partners, referred to by him as mediators, have greater “behavioral latitude” than others, allowing them to act in ways remarkably different than normal (2005). This state of liminality then allows for “attitudinal shifts and conflict transformation” in ways remarkably different than in non-*sinanku* relations (2004:155).

However, Davidheiser’s interpretation of *sinankuɲa* results in viewing the social practice as something with definite rules and regulations that can simply be inserted in situations of conflict. In reality, *sinankuɲa* is a variable and changeable relationship that people modify according to the circumstances. Furthermore, some individuals use *sinankuɲa* more frequently than others and in different ways.

From exchanging common jokes, to avoiding conflict, to demanding economic or social obligations, *sinankuɲa* is negotiated by people for practical purposes. Yet it is based upon shared cultural beliefs and histories, and those who follow its ideological principles

ensure the well-being of themselves and their descendants. According to Brand, “Joking relations [*sinankupa*] are not just folkloristic remnants of what people refer to as ‘tradition’, but a functional element of social relations in Bamako today” (2001:231). These obligations both create responsibility and form networks of support that can be called upon when in need or simply when the opportunity arises.

CHAPTER EIGHT: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

“Sinankuṇa has always retained its worth.”
“Now, as time evolves...sinankuṇa has the tendency to evolve as well.”

Within Bamako’s urban environment, people use *sinankuṇa* during interactions with police officers, government workers, tax collectors, and judges, as well as in countless other circumstances. These particular situations would not have occurred hundreds of years ago when *sinankuṇa* was first practiced, yet over time people have adapted the joking relationship for their own practical purposes.

One of the most practical aspects of a joking relationship such as *sinankuṇa* in an urban environment is its ability to create an immediate link between people who were previously strangers. Directly after recognizing the patronym of a *sinanku*, *sinankuw* can begin to joke with each other, providing them with a way to both increase their social capital and create obligations. The centrality of *sinankuṇa* is evidenced in the way that Malians give Malian names to non-Malian visitors so they can interact with them in this socially intimate manner. Upon receiving a Malian *togo*, or first name, and *jamu*, or patronym, I was incorporated into the practice of *sinankuṇa* and given a social identity. Many other foreign researchers working in Mali have noted the social changes that occur once they bear a *jamu* (see Mann 2002 and Brand 2001). Because people in Bamako continually make new acquaintances in a way that people living in a rural environment do not, this benefit of *sinankuṇa* becomes more important in the city, providing people with a practical way in which to negotiate social interactions.

Thus, *sinankuṇa* has a larger role in society than simply jokes between individuals. This joking relationship can translate into practical ends such as economic gain and social cohesion, and ensure the wellbeing of those who follow its principles. It is a social practice

based upon shared histories and cultural beliefs, including the caste system, the origins of ethnic groups, and patronyms. Through providing people with a way in which to acknowledge their identities, connect with strangers, and call upon others to fulfill obligations, *sinankuna* provides people in Bamako with a way to create a social support system. In the words of my informants, “it creates a kind of warmth between people.” As a social practice that people use and negotiate within a culturally established framework, *sinankuna* provides people with an important way in which to connect with others socially within an unstable and potentially dangerous urban context.

RITUALIZED JOKING

When people invoke *sinankuna* they create a liminal space in which normal rules of behavior are reversed, and language and actions that would not be allowed outside of the relationship are permitted and even expected. It is practiced in certain, culturally recognized ways and is a ritualized event. Moore and Myerhoff (1977) indicate that there are six key properties of rituals, all of which describe *sinankuna*. The first is the property of repetition, which is certainly the case with *sinankuna*. Not only do people continue to joke with their *sinankuw* after initial meetings, they use the same few jokes repeatedly. In fact, a joke is often rephrased in response to virtually the same joke. A second property of ritual is the element of acting. It is not a spontaneous activity, but rather a self-conscious performance. People know how to act towards a *sinanku*, and they know how this is different from the way they can act towards others; they play their part. A third aspect of ritual is that of “special” behavior or stylization, wherein the actions or symbols used are extraordinary, or are ordinary but are used in a specific and different way. When people are greeting each other, their behavior changes drastically if they discover that they are *sinankuw*. They act in

“special” ways that would not be appropriate towards a non-*sinanku*. A fourth principle of ritual is order, which is seen in the back-and-forth joking of *sinankuw*. Joking is always a give-and-take process; one *sinanku* jokes, and then the other responds. Ritual has an “evocative presentational style” in which collective activities generate attention among people and often a commitment of some kind. The performance of joking allows individuals to improvise actions within an already structured framework. This is seen in the way that individuals negotiate *sinankupa* depending on the situation and people involved. The final principle of ritual, according to Moore and Myerhoff, is its “collective dimension,” which means that collective rituals hold social messages (1977:7-8). *Sinankupa* is embedded in social meanings, such as stories linking *sinankuw* and other collective histories. The quotidian practice of joking provides a way for history to be made explicit, reminding both the jokers and spectators of correct social behavior and the histories that form its basis. *Sinankupa* is a ritual that it is practiced within a conventionalized framework, yet it is enacted by individual agents that tailor jokes to the situation.

LIMINAL JOKING SPACES

The ritualized practice of *sinankupa* is enacted in a liminal space in which people can say things and act in ways that are the opposite of normal behavior. Victor Turner (1969), building upon the ideas of Arnold van Gennep, used the concept of liminality to refer to people whose position in society is ambiguous. For Turner, liminality is either a phase, such as a rite of passage, or a social role:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (1969:95)

In its original sense, then, liminality is a socially sanctioned position or stage that allows people to act in ways different or opposite normal behavior. *Sinankuɲa* is practiced in a liminal space. People can joke at any time in their life following childhood, and there are not certain people who play the role of a joker in Malian society. Instead, everyone in Mali who bears a *jamuw* can joke because they have *sinankuw*. Joking occurs within a liminal space in which behavior is expected that would otherwise not be tolerated.

To complement his concept of liminality, Turner used the concept of *communitas*. Liminality allows disparate qualities to blend. Things and actions that are considered sacred are combined with those that are considered “low,” turning the world temporarily upside down. Through this inversion, a “general social bond” is recognized by all involved. Turner argues that by acknowledging the social order the links that bind people are revealed: “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (1969:97). Thus, the invocation and recognition of social order and hierarchy are key aspects of liminality. When joking, *sinankuw* often make references to the caste system in the Mande society. From jokes about slavery and nobles, to those about *namakalaw*, people cite ideas of social hierarchies.

In the liminal joking space of *sinankuɲa*, people not only invoke structural differences in social positions, but also economic differences. If *sinankuw* know that their current joking partner is much better off financially than they are, they are free to demand goods, money, or services from the *sinanku*. Yet if a *sinanku* knows that the person they are joking with cannot afford gifts such as these, demands are usually not made and people only exchange verbal jokes. The majority of Malians are economically vulnerable, and practicing

sinankuɲa is a socially accepted way of making demands upon wealthier individuals. Thus, Turner's "lows" have a chance to make demands upon their social and/or economic "highs."

The final and perhaps most compelling way in which *sinankuɲa* opens up a liminal space where normal rules of social behavior do not apply is with regard to age and gender. *Sinankuɲa* allows people to say and do things to elders and those of the opposite gender while joking that would never happen outside of *sinankuɲa*. For example, M. Kanté said that even though he is an old man, a very young *sinanku* could come and demand his bubu, or robe: "Even if you are small...I am obliged to give it to you."

Turner sees liminality as a kind of "release" for people, where they are allowed to temporarily go outside of the social order. Yet in doing so, they strengthen their adherence to it (1969:201). This is true for the liminal joking space of *sinankuɲa*. Even while *sinankuw* joke and tease about differential societal positions, they actually reinforce the social order itself.

DIFFERENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

One aspect of *sinankuɲa* in particular and "cultural" knowledge in general that continued to surprise me during my fieldwork was the differing amounts of knowledge people possessed about the practice. When talking to people, some individuals would know numerous *sinankuɲa* relationships that their *jamu* or ethnic group had, as well as the origins of the relationships. Only two or three people ever mentioned the existence of *tana*, which are animals that are taboo and sacred. So I was very surprised when, upon my return to the United States, I found that the vast majority of written works on joking relationships in West Africa include a discussion of *tana*.

Roger Keesing (2006) introduces the idea of differential knowledge, calling for an approach to knowledge that views it as an entity that is distributed and controlled. In his critique of interpretive anthropology, he contends that when cultures are seen as collective creations that are formed by all its members, cultures become reified into texts. This reification allows the culture, now a text, to be looked upon objectively. Keesing argues that this disguises and mystifies the uses and variability of knowledge: “Cultures are webs of mystification as well as signification. We need to ask who *creates* and *defines* cultural meanings, and to what ends” (2006:259, author’s emphasis). In order to achieve this, he calls for contextualizing cultures historically, politically, and economically (2006:258-259).

I find Keesing’s ideas of differential knowledge helpful in exploring *sinankuna*. He describes experts in societies as people who have both more knowledge and deeper knowledge than the average person. These experts have sought this knowledge out, memorized it, and thought about it (Keesing 2006:260). In Mande culture, there are two main groups that fulfill this role: elderly people and *jeliw*, or people who are part of a *jamakala* caste of oral historians and praise singers.¹⁷ When I would ask questions about the history or origins of something, people would usually tell me to speak to these groups of people. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I did talk with more elderly people because they seem to know more than younger people about the history and origins of *sinankuna*. Yet even they would suggest that I speak to a *jeli*. Currently, many *jeliw* make a living from performing at baptisms, weddings, and other special events, as well as being successful musicians. These people fulfill the role of Keesing’s “experts” in that they hold specialized knowledge. *Jeliw*

¹⁷ Another groups that seem to be increasingly taking on the role of Keesing’s “experts” are scholars and academics. During my interviews with Malian scholars, I was continually struck with the vast amounts of historical and cultural knowledge they held in comparison to their non-scholar agemates. It will be interesting to see the role scholars play in the future if these forms of specialized knowledge become even more differentially distributed.

retain and regularly recite what Bourdieu calls “genealogical kinship,” or the kinship links that are the “official representation of the social structure” (1990:167). When they sing people’s praises at a wedding, *jeliw* talk about their ancestors’ great accomplishments and their relationships to other families. Keesing argues that such experts hold power within a society through possessing extensive knowledge. For him, culture, or “global schemes of symbolic structure...are maintained, comprehended, progressively created, elaborated, changed mainly by the experts in each generation” (2006:262). Could the role of experts be influencing the relative lack of knowledge many people have of the history and specifics of *sinankuɲa* in current Malian society? Some people do choose to learn more about cultural practices with detailed histories, such as *sinankuɲa* or secret societies. Why are others not attracted to these topics?

While there are likely many factors that influence people’s decision to pursue or not pursue this specialized knowledge, it seems that questions about the utility of this knowledge may play a large role in younger people’s lack of motivation to seek out these detailed histories. Even if a younger Malian knows that a new acquaintance is their *sinanku* because of a less-well-known relationship, this knowledge does not really help if the other person does not share this knowledge. When I asked M. Traoré about the *sinankuw* with whom he jokes, he listed three patronyms, and then said: “I only joke with these. There could be others, but I don’t know them.”

Sinankuɲa as a practice rests upon shared knowledge. People bring their own historical and cultural identities to a *sinankuɲa* relationship, but only those aspects of their identities that are recognized by the *sinanku* they are currently joking with can be invoked or joked about. For example, if one *sinanku* does not realize that a particular *jamu* is that of a

garanké, or leatherworker, no jokes can be made about it. Therefore, it seems possible that in an urban setting generalized joking based on readily apparent characteristics (patronym or ethnic group) is more useful and practical. Unlike in a rural context, where people often know the histories behind neighboring families and therefore know whether or not they are *sinanku* through a more obscure connection (*tana*, for example), urbanites often are not familiar with the history of an entire lineage. Instead, they must rely on an individual's *jamu* or ethnic group to create relationships. Specialized knowledge is therefore less likely to help people in the city establish a *sinanku* bond.

The efficacy of generalized knowledge can also be seen in the way people account for the origins of *sinanku*. Many people credit Sunjata with the creation of the joking relationship. Yet other informants, particularly elderly experts, recount detailed stories predating Sunjata, as well as other kinds of relationships between families outside of *sinanku*.

Additionally, slavery is the basis of one of the most commonly used jokes, yet it is rarely mentioned outside of the context of *sinanku*. Even when people joke about slavery while practicing *sinanku*, they do not truly mean that the person they are joking with has a slave past. To say such a thing would be a profound insult and is only socially permitted in the liminal joking space of *sinanku*. While there has been scholarly work done on the history of slavery in the region (Klein [1983, 1993, 1998], Meillassoux [1991], Conrad [1981]), not enough has been done on what people know and think about its historical legacy. The history of slavery is not accessible on a daily basis in current Malian society and seems to be deeply submerged in people's memories.

According to Adame Ba Konaré, the wife of the former Malian president, history is not only a thing of the past for Malians:

Events are never entirely forgotten. Rather they are placed somewhere in memory and come to the surface in certain circumstances. They are not detached from the present and are never completely buried. One can pretend to forget but in fact one forgets nothing and wishes to forget nothing....
(2000:21)

Sinankuɲa provides people with a way in which to play with history, tailoring it to particular situations and people. While slavery is not commonly talked about and the importance of structural differences within the caste system is diminishing, these historical features of Mande life continue to be central to *sinankuɲa*. More work is needed on these aspects of *sinankuɲa* in particular and historical knowledge in general to illuminate how history is negotiated and constructed through the daily enacting of *sinankuɲa*.

JOKING FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSES

While many people in Bamako do not seem to have in-depth historical knowledge about the social practice of *sinankuɲa*, almost everyone does know enough to joke on a daily basis. Each person who bears a patronym, or *jamu*, has *sinankuw* that they can identify by *jamu* or ethnic group. Exceptions to this include people who are non-Mande and are not from other, historically present ethnic groups and expatriates. While the particular origins of these relationships are often not known, they are practiced in specific ways that are informed by what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*. Defined as a “community of dispositions” (1990: 170), or “embodied history,” (1990:56), the *habitus* “produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history” (2006b:412). Social beliefs and cultural histories are therefore organized and informed by the *habitus*.

When combined with Brand's principles of social interactions, *habitus* becomes a way of understanding *sinankuɲa* within the context of Mande life. The principles of hierarchy, complementarity, and reversibility of hierarchy underlie social interactions in Bamako (2001:21-22). While hierarchy is present in all interpersonal relations, and is established by age, gender, kinship, and social position, *sinankuɲa* is a way of reversing these hierarchies. The *habitus* that informs daily life in Bamako is based on ideas of inequality, and people can use *sinankuɲa* to reverse these relationships.

This reversal is always done within the culturally recognized framework of *sinankuɲa*. People use established kinds of relationships – between two patronyms, two ethnic groups, or an ethnic group and a caste – when invoking *sinankuɲa*. The joking bond cannot be established haphazardly with anyone. Bourdieu notes this aspect of kin relations in general: "...one cannot call on absolutely *anyone* for *any occasion*" (1990:168). *Sinankuɲa*'s structure therefore acts as a means of organizing information about social life. In Bourdieu's words: "The structures of kinship fulfill a political function...in so far as they are used as means of knowledge and construction of the social world" (1990:170), and in Mme Koné Coulibaly's words: "*Sinankuɲa* arranges all the little histories...it arranges everything." People practice *sinankuɲa* within these established structures.

Individuals invoke these relationships in practical ways, suited for their own individual needs. According to Bourdieu, these structures are official representations of social structures, or all the social possibilities available to an individual. People decide which relationships to "keep in working order" because of physical proximity and social influence (1990:167-168). Applied to *sinankuɲa*, these ideas help clarify why people use different joking behaviors in different circumstances. Depending upon the situation, people choose

from a variety of ways of invoking *sinankunya*: making quick jokes or extended back-and-forth ritualistic jokes, demanding obligations, or mediating conflict. According to M. Traoré, these lengthier *sinankunya* exchanges can be utilized “when things don’t work like you want.”

Life is lived differently in the urban context of Bamako than in smaller towns and villages outside of the city. Brand writes that, even though there are numerous links between rural and urban locations, the economies of the two places differ greatly: “Whereas male Mandé farmers are commonly employed and provided for by their extended families, urban economic activity is generally individual, and salaries are meant to maintain little more (or rather: less) than a nuclear family” (2001:302). This setup is a legacy of colonialism, and during the post-independence era the economy has generally declined, causing income to further decrease.

Because of this economically strained situation, people utilize any and all support systems available to them in times of need. Friends and neighbors become more important than relatives in many ways in Bamako, partly because they are often in closer proximity than kin relations. Brand notes that among co-tenants and neighbors, small gifts, such as cash and food, are regularly exchanged, and social gatherings often happen among people who live near each other (2001:305). These practical relationships that are established among neighbors reflect Bourdieu’s ideas of helpful people being “spatially close” and “socially influential” (1990:167).

Sinankunya is another example of how people use “practical kin” relationships. During interactions that could potentially lead to conflict, such as those with state officials, people use *sinankunya* to ameliorate the situation. Yet individuals are only able to do this

when the option is available to them, when there is an established relationship they can invoke. Craig Tower (2005) recently observed how people practice “senankuya” on a local FM radio station in Koutiala, a large village in southeastern Mali. He writes that announcers limited their use of *sinankuya* to situations in which the recognized structure of *sinankuya* remains intact. Only if there is a joking bond between a host and a live or call-in guest will *sinankuya* be invoked. Furthermore, announcers will only do this during an actual on-air conversation, and only briefly during introductions. Tower explains that their hesitancy to use *sinankuya* more frequently and in less structured ways is because of the specificity of the relationship:

...“senankuya” is a one-on-one interactional genre based on relative rather than absolute social position, therefore an announcer cannot engage in such an interaction simultaneously with an audience which may consist simultaneously of joking cousins, family members, people of allied patronyms, and so forth. (2005:15)

Therefore, even when people adapt *sinankuya* for use within other contexts, such as a radio show, they do so within the established framework.

Denis Douyon (2006) has also recently described how politicians negotiate the joking bond of *sinankuya*. Politicians, according to Douyon, no longer hesitate to use all possible combinations of *sinankuya* in their favor, and all the presidents of Mali have utilized it. Douyon includes a story that was mentioned to me numerous times by Malians involving the longtime president Moussa Traoré. Upon visiting a small village, the president was offered a plate of beans by his *sinankuw*, the Konés, Coulibalys, and Diarras. This occurred at the height of his military regime, and many people thought that the joke would displease the president and have negative consequences for the villagers. However, Traoré thanked his *sinankuw* for their generosity. Many Malians interpreted this act as an example of Traoré

being a leader who was “close to the people,” and brought him the sympathy of many Malians. Traoré was able to more fully humanize himself in the eyes of his constituents using *sinankuɲa* (Douyon 2006:895).

However, Douyon goes on to note ways in which politicians have utilized *sinankuɲa* in more deceitful ways. From changing one’s patronym during an election, to confusing joking in the name of *sinankuɲa* with criticisms of one’s opponent in an election, Douyon argues that politicians “manipulate” the social practice for their own ends. Furthermore, he notes that people have a tendency to vote for their *sinankuw* in elections, believing that if problems occur their elected *sinanku* will be more likely to intervene for a member of their family because of the joking bond. Douyon maintains that, “In an urban context, the discourse of joking cousins slips progressively from diplomacy to demagoguery” (2006:902), arguing that politicians use *sinankuɲa* for their own ends during elections, and play upon people’s emotions rather than their reason. According to Douyon, *sinankuɲa* is becoming a way in which the powerful can retain their power (2006:894-902).

These examples highlight a key aspect of *sinankuɲa*. Despite its efficacy and power, it does not negate all other power relationships, but rather is practiced within this context. Amselle warns that understanding *sinankuɲa* as an outward demonstration of a social contract or institution conceals the underlying forces behind the relationship. He calls for an understanding of *sinankuɲa* that is derived from a complex and changing relation of forces that allow it to continue (1998: 37). While people might use *sinankuɲa* for their own political advantage, this does not mean that others will be equally capable of calling upon them in times of need. It provides people with a way to overcome some differences in social and economic position, but only to a certain degree.

While *sinankupa* is being practiced – that is, while people are interacting verbally – the two jokers are on equal ground. The person who jokes better or has the more convincing accusation is the one who can demand obligations or material goods. Yet this does not mean that everyone necessarily has the means to do so. Mme Coulibaly Sissoko touched upon this point: “If a *sinanku* asks me to give them money, if you refuse, it is not good...If you have the money, you give it to them.”

While there is no doubt some validity to Douyon’s arguments within the context of political elections, his reasoning does not seem to apply to the everyday lives of people in Bamako. *Sinankupa*, as a part of “la vie quotidienne,” is a way of equalizing and connecting people, providing them a way in which to become more fully socialized and negotiate mutual support. Wealth and power stratification in Bamako is striking. Any sort of connection that can be operationalized to improve one’s situation in life is critical in this economically insecure environment. While a *sinanku* is often not the first person an individual in need will call upon, if the opportunity arises to invoke *sinankupa*, it becomes an ideal way of demanding material and social support. People use this social practice and the beliefs associated with it for practical purposes.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

The research for this paper was conducted between February and May of 2006 in Bamako, Mali. During this time, I lived with a family in Bamako where I daily observed and participated in *sinanku* joking. I did irregular observations of joking and asked informal questions, so that by the time I began a month-long study of *sinanku*, I was already familiar with the basics of joking and how to participate.

In the final weeks of my time in Bamako, I conducted a month-long study that focused specifically on *sinanku*. I went for daily walks (totaling about 30 walks) throughout the *quartier* where I lived. Along these routes people who were a *sinanku* to my patronym – Traoré – came to recognize me and would joke with me. They would also often informally explain parts of the relationship to me. During this time, I did systematic observations of *sinanku* joking in a second *quartier* for 10 half-days, and in a third and fourth *quartier* for one half-day each. During these visits, I observed specific interactions between Fulani and Malinké *sinankuw*, as well as between Dogon and Bozo *sinankuw*. All of these observations were either conducted in residences or in the street outside of compounds. I also spent one half-day observing *sinanku* in a workplace environment. Finally, I also observed *sinanku* in the Grand Marché in Centre Ville during 12 visits, as well as 2 visits to the area around the large mosque in Centre Ville. Another place where I regularly observed joking (whether I was looking for it or not) was during the numerous *soutrama* rides that I took daily. *Soutramas* are large privately owned vans used for public transportation, and they are often packed with people who are usually strangers. This creates an ideal environment for *sinankuw* to meet and joke with each other, often to the amusement of the other passengers. In addition to participant observation, I also conducted interviews with Malian scholars and academics (see bibliography).

I conducted 8 formal ethnographic interviews on the subject of *sinanku*. I chose the people who I interviewed because I already knew them or because a teacher or friend recommended them to me. As a result of suggestions from teachers and scholars who I spoke with, I began to include elderly people¹⁸ as interviewees. I also chose two married couples because they were each others' *sinankuw*. The informants included: one unmarried man, one widowed woman, and two married men whose spouses were not their *sinankuw*. The interviews lasted as long as the informants continued to talk with me, and they ranged in length from less than ten minutes to almost forty minutes. The number of *sinankuw* an individual named was in response to the question, "Who are the *sinankuw* that you joke with?"

¹⁸ It is important to note that many Malians do not know their exact age, and many informants responded to the question, "How old are you?" with an approximate guess.

Informants for Ethnographic Interviews

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of Informants</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Median Age</i>
Women	3	34-70	50.3
Men	5	55-75	64

<i>Length of Interviews</i>	<i>Range of Length</i>	<i>Mean Length</i>
	9:19 min.-38:45 min.	27:24 min.

<i>Number of Sinankuw</i>	<i>Range of Number of Sinankuw</i>	<i>Mean Number of Sinankuw</i>
	3-23	7.125

Below is a list of questions I used with informants. The interviews, while all based on these questions, varied depending upon the informant, mostly in terms of the order of questions asked and the phrasing of the questions. I often asked questions by giving examples. For instance, I would ask question six by saying to a woman informant, “If you joke with a man that’s older than you, do you say different things than if he were younger than you?” Also, following the advice of Prof. Moussa Traoré, my academic advisor for the independent study project, I added additional questions for the final three interviews. Unless otherwise noted, I asked the questions in French and informants generally responded in French with some Bamanankan interspersed.

1. What is your last name? *I jamu?*
2. Are you married?
 - a. If yes: What’s the last name of your spouse?
3. How old are you?
4. Who are the *sinankuw* that you joke with?
 - a. If married: Do you joke with the *sinankuw* of your spouse?
5. When you make the acquaintance of a *sinanku*, what do you say?
 - a. How do you say that in Bamanankan?
6. Does what you say when you joke depend on who you joke with?
 - a. Does it vary with age?
 - b. Gender?
7. When else do you joke or interact with *sinankuw*?
8. Where do you joke?
9. What language do you joke in?
 - a. If more than one: When do you joke in this language? When not?
10. What’s an example of a time in your life when *sinankuna* worked really well?
11. What’s an example of a time in your life when *sinankuna* did not work well?

Questions added later:

12. What ethnicity are you?
13. Where were you born?
14. Your family comes from what region of the country?

APPENDIX 2: GLOSSARY OF BAMANANKAN TERMS

Bamana: ethnic group, also known as Bambara

Bamanankan: language of the Bamana people, also known as Bambara

dugukɔnɔ: Centre Ville (City Center) in Bamako

funɛ (*fina* or *fine*): *ɲamakala* group, “talkers” not accompanied by a musical instrument

garanké: *ɲamakala* group, leatherworkers

grin: informal age group, especially young men in Bamako who regularly spend time together

hɔrɔn: noble group, free people

jamu: patronym or last name

jeli (*jali*): *ɲamakala* group, also known as griots or bards

jɔn: slave group

lawbé: *ɲamakala* group, woodworkers

kanimetulon: joking relationship between cross-cousins (among non-Mandé groups)

kulé: *ɲamakala* group, woodworkers

maabo: *ɲamakala* group, weavers

maabuube: *ɲamakala* group, weavers

mɔdentulon (*mòdenya*): joking relationship between grandchildren and grandparents

Mande: region of West Africa, includes many different ethnic groups (Bamana, Jula, Malinké, etc.)

nimùgùnintulon (*nimògòya*): joking relationship between brothers- and sisters-in-law

numu: *ɲamakala* group, blacksmiths, women of these families are often potters

ɲamakala: hereditary professional groups

san-jɔn: purchased slaves

sinanku: individual who jokes in *sinankuɲa* relationship, “cousin/cousine” in French

sinankuɲa: joking relationship between families, ethnic groups, or ethnic group and caste

soutrama: large green vans that are the most common means of transportation in Bamako

togo: first name

tɔn-jɔn: slave soldiers, e.g. Biton Mamari Kulubali’s group of soldiers

tubabu: white person

woloso: slave born in the house

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