

Soninke Values: Responsibility, Work, Respect and Shame

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1. Introduction

The Soninke are a large Muslim people group located primarily in Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. Their population presently numbers over one million. They are sedentary farmers who have turned to financial sources outside their traditional homelands to supplement their farming activities. Because of the pressure of a climate changing due to desertification, a large percentage of adult males work for wages somewhere else (Congo, Gabon, France, USA, Japan, etc.) which they send back home to help their families and villages. In spite of increased exposure to the western world on the part of a large percentage of the men, the Soninke of Mali are committed to maintaining their traditional life style and values.

The purpose of this essay is to present some core values that are basic to Soninke world view and to illustrate how shame functions to reinforce and maintain adherence to those values. The majority of my data comes from three and half years of language and culture study in the Soninke homeland of Western Mali. The data included in this paper came from participant observation, informal interviews and conversations with my Soninke friends. I also refer to some published Soninke literature.

2. Values

The following poem has a lot to say about Soninke values.

The Soninke Tradition

Sooninkara Danbe¹

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| 1. My sister, I greet you. | 1. <i>N maarenyaxare, n da an kuɲi.</i> |
| 2. I greet you for the work you have done. | 2. <i>N da an kuɲi do an gollidababarinton ŋa.</i> |
| 3. I greet you for the work you have done in your child bearing. | 3. <i>N da an kuɲi do an sunpu solli gollun ŋa.</i> |
| 4. I greet you for the daily responsibilities you fulfill in your family. | 4. <i>N da an kuɲi do an siginda koren noxon ŋa.</i> |
| 5. Womanness is not an empty thing. | 5. <i>Yaxaraaxu feti fo duuro.</i> |
| 6. For the woman who respects her husband, her children will not be left behind. | 6. <i>Yaxare be ga na i kiina daro, ken lenmun nta toxxo falle.</i> |
| 7. There is no tradition for a woman if not for marriage. | 7. <i>Danbe su nta yaxare yi, yaxu ga fe.</i> |
| 8. A man is not better than a women, each one has their responsibilities. | 8. <i>Yugu nta fasu yaxare yi, be su do i sigindan ya ni.</i> |
| 9. Certain people have said: "If there is not a woman in every household, it is the chickens who scratch there for their food. | 9. <i>Sefaanon ti "yaxare ga nta ka su, selinjun yan jegne non ŋa".</i> |

¹ Xibaare #54, p. 4, September 1993, author unknown.

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| 10. It is to women that the secret of the night fire ² belongs. | 10. <i>Sunka yinben gundo na yaxarun ya maxa.</i> |
| 11. It is for the young men and women that the full moon comes out. | 11. <i>Xasun xullen bakka yaxarun do yaxanbaanun ya da.</i> |
| 12. Since we have let ourselves forget the old ways, a lot of things have been lost. Where are the distaff for spinning, the stone for removing cotton seeds and the hand-made woven cloth? | 12. <i>Gelli o ga da mungundi do gannin ŋa, fo gabe bono, mojollu, gurusigidu, kirinyiraamin, ku su na minna?</i> |
| 13. If we analyze these things, we will return to the things of the past so that the shrinking boundaries of respect that are even now between people will not be ruined. | 13. <i>O nta faayini o nan saage do fiini yogoni ya, ma harisa dango lamaane be ga toxi soron naxa, ken xa nan maxa bono.</i> |
| 14. You must not belittle yourself, my brother. | 14. <i>Maxa nexu du yi, n maarenyugo.</i> |
| 15. You must not be afraid because you have not come from a frightened people. To be Soninke is good. | 15. <i>Maxa kanu, baawo an ma bogu xaaxanto yi, sooninkaaxun lije.</i> |
| 16. The meaning of Soninkeness is to be responsible, to work hard, to be generous and respectful, and to have proper shame. | 16. <i>Sooninkaaxun wure ni: butte, golle gacce a do yaagu.</i> |
| 17. If a person does not live this way, he cannot say that he is a Soninke. | 17. <i>Ku ga nta sere su yi, ke ra nta tini i ke ni sooninken ya yi.</i> |
| 18. A Soninke does not lie, he does not cheat, he does not steal. All of these things ruin the tradition of a good man. | 18. <i>Sooninke nta gaarana, a nta nanbara tu, a nta fayini. Ke baananbe su na yuguxooren danben ya bonondini.</i> |
| 19. If you are in the search of something and no one is in front of you, another man will not pass you if you study and worship God. | 19. <i>A ga do fu muruyen ya yi, sere nta an kaane, yugo xa ma an kaane kita xaranŋen do batiyen ŋa.</i> |
| 20. The Soninke tradition began in Wagadu and continues to the edge of the ocean. | 20. <i>A danbe da a wutu gelli Agadu nan daga a wara geejin xanne.</i> |
| 21. Stay on the road of the old ways and you will stay free. | 21. <i>Toxi an gannin killun kanma, ^an hooraaxun na tange.</i> |

Early in my language studies, I came across this poem in the Soninke monthly magazine, **Xibaare**. As I worked through it with my teacher, I was able to understand all the words but much of the real meaning of the poem was a mystery to me. As I recently ran across it again in my anthropology data base, I realized that what it's really all about is values; those things that are the foundation of Soninke society, the glue, if you will, that binds it together into a unique sensible whole for its members.

In line 16 of the preceding poem, it says that "The meaning of Soninkeness is to be responsible (*butte*), to work hard (*golle*), to be generous and respectful (*gacce*) and to have proper shame (*yaagu*)." It is these four themes that I would like to explore in this paper. I will start the discussion with *yaagu* as it is fundamental to the understanding of the other three.

2.1 Yaagu

Yaagu as noun means "shame", as a verb, it means "to be ashamed". Having *yaagu* is a positive quality. It means the person knows how to act, he³ respects others in an appropriate way, lives up to his responsibilities, is honest and is careful in his speech. Such a person will feel ashamed over not doing or acting as he should and for doing things or acting in ways that he shouldn't. Having proper shame is one of the most fundamental values of Soninke society. It's the mechanism that encourages people

² The secret of conceiving children.

³ Throughout this paper, the singular pronouns "he" and "his" will be used when referring to non-gender specific third persons.

to stay within the established norms. Stepping outside these norms leads to sanctions which shame the offender. When someone steps out of the norms that society has set, he is supposed to feel *yaagu*. Attributing little or no *yaagu* (*yaagun roxeye*) to someone is **the worst thing** you can say about anyone.

There's a Soninke proverb which says "Death is better than shame"⁴. People are very careful to avoid being shamed or shaming others. This notion of shame is instilled into people from early on in childhood. It is heavily used in child-raising to get children to act properly. It is common to hear a child being scolded with "you have no shame" ("*yaagu nta an ŋa*" or "*an nta yaagunu*") or being called "one of little shame" (*yaagadunloxe*). It seems to be an effective strategy as it produces adults who generally fit into the norms established by the society.

In researching values, I found that being caught in theft⁵ to have the most potential for shame. A thief who is caught will leave his home village forever because he cannot live with the shame. No one will ever forget what he has done.

Lying⁶ is another area where the potential for shame is very great. Lying in the Soninke context is defined fairly broadly as saying something that is not true or may not be true in the future. For this reason people are very careful about what they say. Once words are spoken, they can never be unspoken. If you say you are going to definitely do something, then don't do it, it is very shameful. There's a proverb in Soninke which says "One's speech and one's actions are not the same"⁷. In other words, saying one thing and doing another is common but not good. In planning a visit to his in-laws in Abidjan, a Soninke man called them from Bouaké to greet them and let them know he was coming to visit the next day. He, however, never said anywhere in the conversation that he was coming, or what day. Somehow in this communication his in-laws knew he would be coming without it ever being explicitly said. He explained to us that if he had said that he was definitely coming and what day he expected to be there, and then, something stopped him from arriving there like planned, it would be like he lied. This would have been extremely shameful for him, especially so as it has to do with his in-laws to whom he must show great respect.

If someone intends to do something, he won't say, for example "I am going to buy a horse", he will say "I'm planning to but a horse" or "I'd like to buy a horse, if God wills it". Now he may have a horse all picked out and have the price negotiated and even have the money, but he still will leave himself an out in case the plans are messed up. A person who is prudent and careful in his speech is respected.

The power of shame is such, that people will literally commit suicide to escape living with its consequences. I was told of a woman who had been made crazy by spirits for about a year. She would yell at people and just generally acted crazy. After being cured by a marabou, she was so ashamed by the memory of her previous behavior when she was under the control of spirits that she went home and hung herself. My informant said that "shame killed her."⁸

Trying to avoid shame can push people to extreme behaviors. A particular woman in the village where we live became pregnant while her husband was in France. He had been gone more than two years so everyone knew that she had obviously committed adultery in order to get pregnant. When her labor got to the point that she knew she would have the child, she went in her bathroom, had the child, strangled it and threw it in the long-drop toilet. That was her solution to the shame of having a child that obviously wasn't sired by her husband. The infant would have been a living reminder to everyone of what she had done. Everyone one in the village knew about and talked about it, but no immediate sanctions went into effect. My friends said she did it because of shame. Though they could

⁴ "*Kallen yan fasa yaagu.*"

⁵ See line 18 of *Soninkara Danbe*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "*Sefe do ŋangolle, i nta baana.*"

⁸ "*Yaagu yan da a kari.*"

understand why she did it, they said it was very bad.

In light of the above discussion, I'd like to propose that for the Soninke, it is an in-built socialized sense of *yaagu* coupled with the pressure of public opinion which encourages people in most cases to live within the accepted bounds of the values of the society.

2.2 *Butte*

Butte literally means liver. It is also associated with anger and the will. *Butte* is a cultural value concerning doing the things expected of you such as providing food for your family and doing your field work. Having *butte* means working hard, meeting one's responsibilities, pulling one's weight, and not giving into tiredness until after the task is done. In a sense it's the mind over the body, the will forcing or driving the physical. Having little or no *butte* (*butteran loxeye*) means that a person is not doing his work at all or not doing it like he should. He is letting his body dictate his actions rather than his will. Such a person is not meeting his responsibilities. This is very shameful. To be considered as one having small *butte* is very bad. It's just like saying someone is lazy, which is a highly insulting and shameful thing to infer in Soninke society.

For example, during group workdays, it is common for a drummer and some teenage girls to come and play and sing to encourage the workers to keep at the work and work hard until it's done. Their job is to get the *butte* of the men stirred up and going. It would be shameful to give into to tiredness in this context. In fact, it usually results in informal contests among the workers of who can work harder and faster. They essentially get each other going. In the past, a similar practice was used to prepare men for battle.

I was out planting peanuts with a friend of mine and her mother one day when they both grabbed a hoe and stood by side and started to sing a work song. For about ten minutes they hoed as fast and as hard as they could in synch to their song. They did an incredible amount of work in those 10 minutes. Their song helped get their *butte* going.

Keeping the Ramadan fast is good example of something that requires *butte*. Abstaining from food and drink from before dawn until after dusk while continuing with one's daily work requires that one ignore the demands of the physical body.

I suspect that it is this value along with the pressures of a marginalized environment that push so many of the Soninke to go elsewhere looking for work even though it means being a foreigner somewhere else and living in extremely straitened conditions. Going to another country to work is referred to as going to the bush (*gunne*). According to one writer, a person goes to the "bush" and "... endures hunger and thirst ..." for years at a time. One must endure what it takes to meet one's responsibilities. Having *butte* is what makes it possible.

2.3 *Golle*

Golle is work. The Soninke have a highly developed work ethic. Everyone has their work and it is assumed that each one does theirs, and in the doing, it ultimately benefits everyone in the community. This is nicely illustrated when people come back from working in the bush, or in gardens or from traveling. Everyone they meet will greet them by saying "*Naawari, an do tampiye*". This translated dynamically means "Thank you for working for the good of us all, I acknowledge your fatigue." In this one verb, *naawari*, is contained the basic work ethic of the Soninke. Laziness is, then, not just a sin against one's family but against the entire community. The Soninke have a myriad of euphemisms to refer to a lazy person:

- ◆ *Lenbure* - a bad child.
- ◆ *Fuutuyinkanbaana* - a muncher of couscous balls, i.e., someone who sits around the cooking fire with the woman and munches on steamed couscous balls destined for the children.
- ◆ *Lanpunte* - a weakling

⁹ *Xibaare* #74, p. 1, June 1995, "...daga dullen do daxxun myni..."

- ◆ *Battaralenme* - a good for nothing.
- ◆ *Xafu* - a zero.

They also have a set of reduplicated nominalized verbs referring to way lazy people walk.

- ◆ *Tiritaarante, firifaarante, kirikaarante, yiriyaarante, siirisaarante, niirinaarante, fuurifaarante, kuurukaarante, miirimaarante, suxusaaxante, kuutankuutante* – all of these refer to a person who ambles or saunters around aimlessly without destination or objective.

In a word, laziness is a major social sin. Lazy people are referred to with disdain. No one wants to be considered lazy, it's too shameful. In the village where we live, there is a tradition that one does not do fieldwork on Mondays. Some believe that if you work in your fields on Monday, the rains won't come. This tradition, however, is being lost because a good portion of people think that if you don't go to the fields every day, even if it is Monday, it's laziness. This is probably a result, as well, of the effects of desertification. As the environment becomes more marginal for farming, people must spend every available minute in their fields during the growing season in order to produce a harvest.

This work ethic is instilled into children at an early age. Toddlers are encouraged to fetch and carry and praised for it when they are successful. Once a child can execute such tasks routinely, he is expected to begin to help with daily work according to their capabilities. Generally there is little praise but lots of correction using scolding meant to shame the child so he will perform correctly. Little girls help their mothers and learn a woman's work. A girl can be married as early as fourteen years old so her training begins early. For little boys, once they're more independent, about 6 or 7 years old, they only come home for meals, bathing and sleeping, spending the day-time hours hanging out with the men learning to work and playing. A child learns early that a person who works hard is respected and that laziness is despised and shameful.

2.4 Gacce

Gacce is a value which causes a person to feel shame (*yaagu*) over not having done something that is considered good and honoring to others though it may not be obligatory. This includes things such as bringing gifts back from a trip or sharing food or possessions within the family as well with people beyond your immediate circle. It extends also into strictly social obligations like going to greet or give condolences. One does it to honor and acknowledge others. *Gacce* is something that one guards or keeps (*gacce tangaye*). Someone who has small *gacce* (*gacce loxeye*) is seen as selfish, tight-fisted and disrespectful of others. It may be perceived that this person doesn't need other people so he doesn't bother to maintain relationships like he should. A person who doesn't maintain *gacce* should normally feel shame (*yaagu*) for not doing so! Keeping *gacce* means including or honoring, in a culturally appropriate manner, those around you. It also means maintaining the proper boundaries in one's relationships. It's a mechanism that reinforces and maintains the sense of group or community (*marenmaaxu*).

The notion of keeping or maintaining *gacce* permeates Soninke society. One sees it in all of everyday life as well as in life's important events (the naming of children, marriage, funerals, reunions after long absences, etc.). An extremely common example of keeping *gacce* has to do with eating. If people are eating, whether a main meal or just a handful of fried plantain, they will invite you to eat or to take some, this includes people that one has never met in one's life and will probably never see again. You cannot not invite someone to share some; it would be just too shameful.

Another example of keeping *gacce* in a more formal context has to do with the return of a close friend of our host to the village after many years in France. One evening, the woman where I live said we (women) should all go and greet this friend of their husband.¹⁰ In our preparations to leave, each of the three women put a bucket of water on her head to take with them. When we arrived at our destination, they gave the water to the women of the returnee's household and then went and greeted him. This was not an obligatory act but one to show welcome and to honor this person and his family. It also acknowledged the fact that this man had been gone for years working (ultimately

¹⁰ It was a rather interesting event because our host is a noble while this friend is of the slave caste. Other than friendship there is no noble/slave alliance between the two families.

for the good of the group¹¹). Its practical benefit was to ease the work load of the women who were taking care of all the visitors who'd come to stay for the occasion.

A domain in which maintaining proper *gacce* is obligatory has to do with relationships. For the Soninke every relationship has its particular *dango*,¹² a boundary which one respects and does not cross. For example, the one between friends of the same age, class and sex is quite informal not easily encroached upon. The one between a husband and wife is very formal and codified. It is based on mutual respect and duty¹³. One is not friends with one's spouse; one does not tease or joke with one's spouse. This would be way over the line of accepted behavior as I found out when teasing my husband one day.

A clear example of this has to do with a divorce case that came to Kayes recently. A Soninke woman got into a fight with her mother-in-law while her husband was in France. The lady lost her temper and said some things to her mother-in-law that were way out of line. She had in essence ignored that *dango* between herself and her mother-in-law which requires that she respect and obey her. The mother-in-law contacted her son and had him come home giving the ultimatum that he choose between her or his wife. In the meantime, the wife humbly went and made a public confession that what she had done was wrong and asked for forgiveness. The mother-in-law, however, refused to accept the apology (a case of once words are said they can never be taken back). When the son came home, he went to court and got the divorce. Because of the *dango* between him and his mother which requires filial devotion, he had to choose her over his wife, whether he really wanted to or not, in order to maintain proper *gacce*.

How someone maintains *gacce* is defined by his relationship with the other person. Ethnicity, age, social class, sex and kinship all contribute to the different standards of *dango* between a given pair of people. The thing that makes this system of relationships and obligations work is *yaagu*, both that which is part of a person's socialization (the innate sense of proper shame everyone should possess) and the negative aspects of shame used to put pressure on offenders through public opinion.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to describe some important core values of the Soninke world view. The ideals of being responsible (*butte*), working hard (*golle*), being properly respectful (*gacce*) and having a proper sense of shame (*yaagu*) are integral to Soninke society. As the unknown author of *Soninkara Danbe*, says, "If a person does not live this way, he cannot say he is a Soninke."

¹¹ See the section on *golle* for a discussion of how all work is ultimately for the good of the entire group.

¹² See line 13 of *Soninkara Danbe*.

¹³ See line 6 of *Soninkara Danbe*.